



African Journal of Social Work
 Afri. j. soc. work
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Autor(s)
 ISSN Print 1563-3934
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier's abstract and citation database) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work Network (ASWNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO

Perspectives on integrating indigenous and formal social protection systems in Uganda: Experiences of older widows

Deborah ATWINE and Tanusha RANIGA

ABSTRACT

Globally, social protection systems are crucial at preventing and reducing poverty. In Uganda, social protection is provided by both the African Indigenous Social Protection system (AISPS) and Formal Social Protection Systems (FSPS). However, majority of Ugandans benefit from AISPS because FSPS is limited in coverage, scope and adequacy. Despite the noble role played by AISPS, they are underdeveloped and ignored by government. This study used qualitative case study to understand AISPS utilised by older widows and their perspectives on the integration of AISPS and FSPS in Kamuli district, Uganda. The findings revealed that AISPS utilised by older widows are extended family and kinship ties, neighbourhood and community arrangements and religious and faith based organisations. Findings also revealed that these AISPS and FSPS are interlinked and reinforce each other and harnessing an integration between the two can improve service delivery. There is need therefore, to incorporate AISPS in the design of social protection policy, improve their capacity to address local risks and also provide a conducive environment under which AISPS and FSPS can complement and support each other for improved policy and service delivery.

KEY TERMS: African indigenous social protection systems; formal social protection systems; policy; integration; Kamuli district; Uganda

KEY DATES

Received: October 2021

Revised: April 2022

Accepted: September 2022

Published: October 2022

Funding: Kyambogo University provided partial financial assistance that aided data collection

Conflict of Interest: None

Permission: None

Ethics approval: Not applicable

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Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/>



How to reference using ASWNet style:

Atwine D. and Raniga T. (2022). Perspectives on integrating indigenous and formal social protection systems in Uganda: Experiences of older widows. *African Journal of Social Work*, 12(5), 267-276.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, social protection systems are crucial at preventing and reducing poverty. A number of countries in both Global North and South have put in place social protection systems to mitigate vulnerability and income insecurity for citizens. While all efforts by governments and development partners have focused on increasing Formal Social Protection (FSP), little or no support has been given to African Indigenous Social Protection System (AISPS). Yet Formal Social Protection Systems (FSPS) remain limited in coverage, scope and adequacy. The objective of this study is to understand AISPS utilised by older widows and their perspectives on the integration of AISPS and FSPS in Kamuli district, Uganda. Majority of Ugandans largely survive on AISPS strongly rooted in African values of solidarity, collective responsibility, compassion, equality, unity, self-determination, human respect and dignity among individuals. Despite the positive and enormous contribution that indigenous social protection systems play in providing safety nets to the majority of the vulnerable people in Uganda, they remain underdeveloped and silent in terms of policy, legislation, financial assistance, and intervention strategies. All the attention and financial assistance is given to FSP which is biased towards the formally employed people. Underpinned by the Afrocentric theory, the study used qualitative case study design to collect and analyse data. The findings revealed that AISPS utilised by older widows were extended family and kinship ties, neighbourhood and community arrangements and religious and faith based organisations. Findings further revealed that these AISPS and FSPS are interlinked and reinforce each other and harnessing an integration between the two can improve service delivery. The findings can assist policy makers, legislators, social workers, governments, ministries, civil society organisations and other stake holders to design relevant social protection policies and programmes that are responsive to peoples' needs. Findings of this study call for a conducive environment under which AISPS and the formal SAGE programme can independently work together for improved service delivery. This article begins with introduction, discusses Uganda's social protection dynamics, outlines the methodology, followed by the presentation and discussion of findings, ends with conclusion and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Ugandan social protection dynamics

In Uganda, social protection is provided by both (AISPS) and Formal Social Protection Systems (FSPS). Uganda inherited a FSP system that was established by British colonial administration in the early 1920s (Barya, 2011). The purpose was to cater for formally employed workers in both the public and private sectors. This narrow conceptualisation was based on the assumption that those who were not catered for by the formal state social protection system would rely on AISPS (Bukuluki & Mubiru 2014). For this reason, there still remains limited coverage of formal social protection in Uganda (Kidd, 2017). According to Kidd (2017), limited coverage of the FSPS is largely due to policy decisions related to budgetary coverage, challenges borne out of scheme design and implementation, structural factors such as poor roads, weak banking system, poor communication, natural calamities, and unemployment.

Although, the FSPS has been generally accepted to have an important role in tackling poverty and vulnerability (Barrientos, Hulme & Shepherd, 2005), its coverage is still limited in most Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the coverage of the FSPS in Uganda is approximately 5.7% (National Population Council Uganda, 2019). Moreover, there is limited knowledge on how AISPS can be integrated with the FSPS for improved livelihood, policy and social work practice (Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2013; Shange, 2014). Yet, AISPS remain primary sources of social protection (Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2013). This article therefore aims to fill this research gap by documenting the perspectives of older widows in Kamuli district, Uganda, on integrating the AISPS and FSPS in order to improve the quality of life. Our main contribution to the field of social protection is that this article contributes to on-going debates on social protection policy and indigenisation of social work research, theory, and practice.

Kamuli district was preferred because it is the coordinating centre for the formal Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE) programme in the eastern region (Kamuli District Local Government, 2021). The formal SAGE social protection programme was formally launched in Uganda in 2010 by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in partnership with the British Department for International Development (DFID), Irish Aid and UNICEF to provide social protection and assistance to the vulnerable and poorest individuals in order to reduce chronic poverty (Oxford Policy Management, Economic Policy Research Centre and Department of Anthropology and Sociology Makerere University, 2015). SAGE programme is a direct income support scheme that targets the older and vulnerable households with the goal of reducing chronic poverty and vulnerability (Ibrahim & Namuddu, 2014). The beneficiaries of SAGE programme receive UGX 25,000 (USD 6.7) unconditional cash payment per month, which is paid out quarterly. This article focuses on older widows because they are likely to be vulnerable and poor (Hungerford 2001; Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). There are many formal social protection schemes in Uganda, but in this article, we draw on the SAGE programme because it is the only programme utilised by older widows. Thus, the phrases "formal SAGE" or the "FSPS" will be used in

this article interchangeably to mean the same thing.. The findings from this study will shed light on possible ways of increasing coverage, scope and adequacy in the provision of social protection to the vulnerable populations such as the older widows.

Afrocentric theory

This study draws on the Afrocentric theory to provide a lens through which to view the needs of participants and communities (Mkabela, 2005). The Afrocentric perspective espouses using a research approach that is culturally appropriate, non-oppressive, liberating and should generate research that is not opposed to African people's conscious struggle for liberation (Mazama, 2001). This article argues that social protection in Uganda must be understood from the African standpoint by putting African knowledge, interests, values, perspectives and experiences at the fore of any analysis (Asante, 2017).

The Afrocentric theory applicability to this study is because it recognises the uniqueness of African cultural values, norms and practices that shape ways of life of Africans (Pellebon, 2007). The Afrocentric theory calls for using an indigenous lens in the entire research process and the aim should be to influence actions that promote social change (Keikelame & Swartz 2019). Therefore, this article uses the Afrocentric paradigm to explore social protection from the perspective of older widows, the different AISPS they utilised and suggestion for integration of AISPS and formal SAGE social protection programme. The Afrocentric theory aligns well with the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, as put forward by the International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council on Social Welfare, and International Federation of Social Worker (IASSW, ICSW & IFSW) that recognises fostering active participation of all voices especially the marginalised and upholding indigenous knowledge (IASSW, ICSW, & IFSW, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Kamuli district in eastern Uganda and adopted a qualitative case study design because it was suitable for tapping in-depth meaning of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2014; Thomas, 2021). The qualitative design well aligns with the Afrocentric methodology that is derived from the Afrocentric paradigm (Mabvurira & Makhubele, 2018). The Afrocentric methodology addresses the question of African identity from the perspective of African people and was appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to explore and understand the lived experiences of elder widows from their cultural perspective and interpretation (Mkabela, 2005; Pellerin, 2012). The researcher applied the Afrocentric principles by paying attention to the culture of the participants, considering their social life, and what motivated them to open up and express themselves without any reservation or fear of being judged. Two methods of data collection were used: in-depth face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Six key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with officials from MGLSD, local council leaders, and social workers to establish the links between AISPS and FSPS. Two FGDs, one from each sub-county were conducted with older widows. Thematic data analysis guided by a five-step model of analysis suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) was used. Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee (REC-01-109-2019). The researcher assigned pseudo-names during data collection and analysis to ensure privacy of participants. Participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. Guided by the Afrocentric principles, the research process was participatory, encouraged active participation of respondents, which enhanced a sense of empowerment and social change which aligns well with qualitative methodology.

FINDINGS

The analysis of data from interviews with elderly widows and key informants yielded three main themes as illustrated in table 1.0. Under each of these main themes, relevant sub-themes will be discussed. The linkages between AISPS and FSPS were also discussed and two themes emerged out of data as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key themes arising from the interviews and FGDs with elderly widows and key informants

Theme	Topic
One	Extended family and kinship ties
Two	Neighbourhood and Community support systems
Three	Spirituality and faith-based organisations

Extended family and kinship ties

All study participants reported getting social protection support from extended family members and kin although the level of support differed from one participant to another. Participants explained the meaning of a family commonly known as 'amaka' in Busoga cultural context. As a wide network of relatives and in-laws that originate from a common ancestor. This was illustrated by this narrative:

I live with my family members. My first born over there (pointed at the son) has two wives. His two sons also stay with us and their wives and children. My elder daughter also stays here with her daughter she returned with from her failed marriage. Two of my grandsons also stay with us and live with me in my house. The rest of my children and grandchildren do not live here but they come often to visit and or send money when they fail to come. My co-wife and her grandchildren over there (pointed at their house) and other relatives who help us with farming.

Findings indicate that kinship was deeply embedded in an extended family with no clear distinction that separates the two. For example, kinship ties based on clan commonly known as 'ekika' are regarded as important as blood relationship. Participants reported that someone from one's clan is as good as a brother or sister and people from the same clan cannot marry each other even if there is no blood relationship. Similarly, friendship was mentioned as important as blood relationship and a close friend may not be differentiated from a brother or sister and may be referred to as sister or brother.

All respondents noted the importance of friendship and good relationship with others for social protection. Participants reported that the level of intensity of friendship determines how reliable the relationship is. Traditionally, in Busoga, very deep friendship commonly known as 'omukago' was sealed by a covenant between two friends and was strengthened by exchanging their blood. The blood pact involved ceremonial exchange of blood between two friends who entered the pact and implied reciprocal obligations of mutual aid and hospitality, whose breach would result in death of the guilty party, further explained by the narrative below:

'Omukago' was special "blood friendship" between two people who sealed a blood convent. If we are close friends we swear to be there for each other and that commitment sealed by our special friendship. By piercing each other's finger, lick each other's blood which signified sisterhood or brotherhood, and was considered covenant that should never be broken because it would lead to death .

.....A friend of your friend is your friend. If you are my close friend, we share sorrows and happiness. If my friend gets a problem, for example you lose a friend, you are saddened but I share the sadness with you. I had many friends in this village, we were a knit family, unfortunately, God called most of them, but the few who are still alive, and we share the little that we have.

Findings of this study reveal that one's biological children shouldered a bigger responsibility for direct social support for older widows. The extended family support has weakened it was attributed to poverty, migration of relatives to distant places, and death of younger and resourceful people in the family due to HIV and AIDS. Hence, the wellbeing of an older widow was largely dependent on how resourceful her biological or adopted children were.

Neighbourhood and community support mechanisms

Research participants reported getting support from their neighbours and community in times of adversity such as death, sickness, scarcity of food and good times such as celebration of marriage. Burial communities commonly known as 'kantu' were a common denominator for all participants and everyone was mandated to be a member. Research participants argued that death affects everyone and the dead cannot bury themselves, yet a burial ceremony is important as a rite of passage to the next world. The narrative below illustrates:

I belong to a community burial association. As a woman, when someone dies in our community, I must contribute the following to the burial ceremony: food, water, firewood, and should be physically present to cook and serve the food. I plan to ask for retirement from the group because I am now weak and old.

I belong to 'kantu' burial community group. However, I was given leave not to participate in its activities due to old age. But I enjoy all the benefits. I applied for retirement and it was granted to me

because I have been a very committed member and I served diligently. I never defaulted at all. When I fell sick, I was unable to participate but I continue to enjoy all the benefits.

Another important finding from the study is that the older people are not mere recipients of community support but active contributors to society. The older played a big role in caring for grandchildren, sick relatives, mentorship of young generation, source of traditional medicine and share their rich knowledge of culture and tradition with the community.

Spirituality and faith based organisations

Study participants mentioned faith based organisations as helpful in providing material, spiritual and psychosocial support as illustrated by the narrative below:

My pastor and church members have been there for me. At times they even give me food. The other day I was almost dying in the house alone, my church members mobilised funds and bought me medication and food. My pastor is a man of God, even today I know he may pass by to check on me.

We have a group of women in my church. We contribute 1000 (USD 0.27) Uganda shillings in case a member loses a relative. Then we contribute another 1000 Uganda shillings to our fund/pool and it is managed by the pastor's wife, we are yet to determine how to spend it.

Interviews with a social worker key informant suggested that the religious organisations such as churches offer social protection in the form of religious principles, values, teachings, activities, and structures and mentioned that:

Religious institutions are indigenous, because they naturally spring up and are built on local resources and initiatives and based on community ethic of sharing, helping each other, and respect for one another. They are indigenous system because what is indigenous does not necessarily mean what is traditional, it is what people really find meaning in, and value as being meaningful to them for that particular time, as a community. Religious institutions, they resolve conflicts (Marital problems), people believe in their priests than they would believe in a social worker.

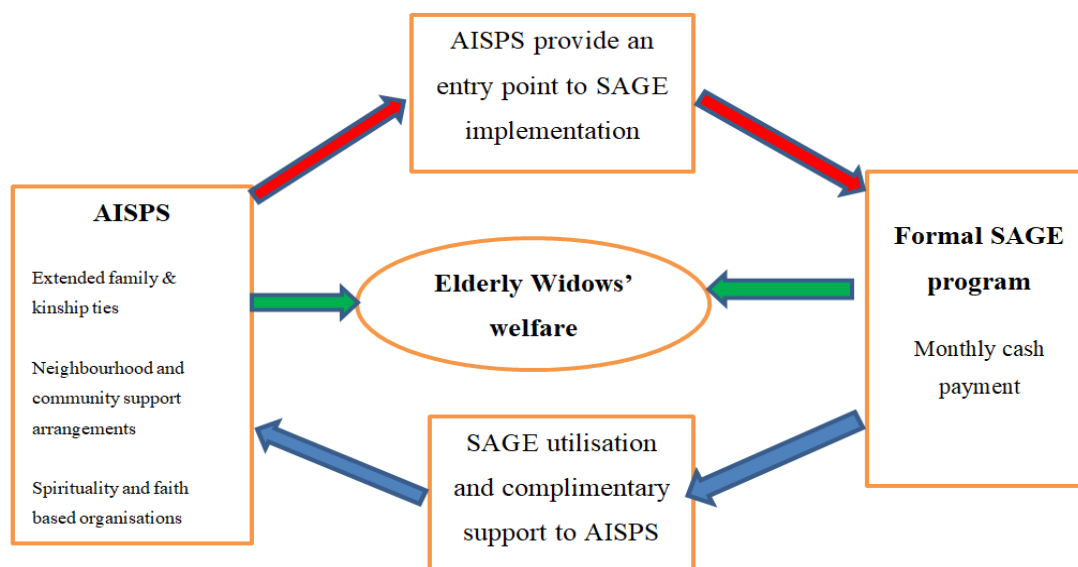
Older widow's faith in God's protection and providence was a source of their resilience and hope for a better future. The values that hold together indigenous systems, are in line with Afrocentric values of living harmoniously which will align with spiritual values of respect and love and care for one another

The link between AISPS and formal SAGE social protection programme in providing social protection in Uganda

The study gathered older widow's and key informants perspectives on how AISPS and the formal SAGE system can be integrated and complement each other. Two themes emerged out of analysis of data, and these were:

- a) Older widows utilise SAGE grant to support AISPS
- b) AISPS provide an entry point for SAGE implementation

Figure 2: Linkages between AISPS and formal SAGE social protection programme



Beneficiaries utilise SAGE to support to AISPS

Findings from this study reveal that SAGE compliments AISPS through; supporting reciprocal social networks such as mutual aid groups; complementing AISPS such as extended family in meeting needs of the older widows and their households; and enhancing their capacity to save and invest to reduce their vulnerability and improve their household income as illustrated by blue arrows in figure 1.0. The SAGE cash payment supports and compliments AISPS by providing monetary support to the existing AISPS moreover in the contemporary monetised lifestyle. The monetary support is not only utilised by the beneficiary, but benefits the entire household and extended family and enables beneficiaries to participate in community support arrangements, maintain their social networks, and remain relevant in the community. A key informant commented:

This money for the older people has restored their respect and dignity in society. When they get paid, they also go back home and contribute to family expenses. So, they are not seen as just dependants but also add value to the wellbeing of the family. Ever since this programme began, we have witnessed children competing to take care of their parents because they know when they get paid, they all benefit.

A government official from MGLSD: Some people especially opposition politicians argue that the twenty-five thousand shilling per month is too little to do anything. But for us we have seen it transform the lives of the older people in the absence of any other source of income. These old women can meet some of their household needs, but most importantly they are able to borrow food and other household needs and pay back when they get payment. They are more trusted by the community because they know there is a reliable and regular source of income.

Findings from this study further reveal that older widows were able to bridge the income gap through borrowing and strengthen their social networks and community cohesion that hold AISPS together. The grant payment supported AISPS such as extended family and kinship, neighbourhood community as illustrated by narratives from older widows:

When I get my payment, it benefits the entire family. I contribute to farming by paying for labour and buy my medication. This relieves my children from the burden of buying my medication. At times I feel I am a big burden to them because of my constant sickness.

When I receive my SAGE payment, I save part of it in our women savings group or at times use it to pay back the debts I have borrowed from the group. I am now able to borrow because members are assured that I cannot fail to pay back because I receive SAGE cash.

The narratives from older widows and key informants demonstrated that beneficiaries of SAGE utilise the grant in the context of AISPS, rather than meeting their personal needs. Noteworthy, helping their extended family

members and other social networks, may not necessarily mean that they have enough to meet their personal needs, but they attach more importance to collective living than individual wellbeing.

AISPS as an entry point for SAGE implementation

Findings show that AISPS provide an entry point for SAGE programme into the community. The AISPS determine how the SAGE grant is utilised as illustrated by red arrows in Figure 1. The implementation of formal SAGE would have been cumbersome without useful local resources that are rendered by AISPS such as community leaders, reliable and kind neighbours and members of extended family and kinship. For example, community leaders such as leaders of burial societies, religious leaders and clan leaders, identify beneficiary of SAGE, pass on important information from the SAGE programme authorities to beneficiaries and vice versa. The extended family and kinship ties entirely take on the responsibility of assisting the older people to pick payment from the payment centres. All participants reported their families being instrumental in linking them to the SAGE grant by ensuring they get access to the payment centre and receive the right amount of money:

I cannot go alone to the payment centre, because if I board taxi, I do not know where to stop. And when I reach the payment centre, they call my name, I cannot hear, so I must go with someone. And I give him some little money to encourage him to take me back even the next time.

I registered next of kin to pick money for me. My last born brings the money for me. They cautioned us to register someone we cannot make it, I registered my son. He has picked my money almost 3 times. This is good because I do not bother anyone any more.

The narratives above illustrated the importance of AISPS in implementation of SAGE programme. Particularly, the extended family, provide the physical care and emotional support which may not be provided by SAGE. While SAGE provides resources in form of cash to support the extended family in looking after the older people, the extended family completes the cycle of care by giving physical and emotional support as illustrated by the next narrative:

When you are almost blind and deaf, what do you use the money for? You need people and around you because money cannot cook and care for you. What can that little money do, it will not even feed you for a week. So the family remains very important, and money alone is not enough even if they increased the pay. But my complaint to government authorities is that families are not targeted yet they are our strength for us old people. At least if they were to give us a cow, the whole family would benefit.

The above narrative indicates that despite the extended family being crucial in providing social protection for the older people, it is not targeted by SAGE grant or any formal social protection programme. It is important to note that the government relies on the AISPS to implement SAGE programme but no deliberate strategy to integrate them into policy formulation and planning.

DISCUSSION

The study provides evidence of the different forms of African indigenous social protection systems (AISPS) utilised by elderly widows in Kamuli District in Uganda. The AISPS included extended family and kinship ties, neighbourhood and community support arrangements, and spirituality and faith based organisations. Findings demonstrate interconnectedness and fluidity of AISPS bound by the same principles of solidarity, reciprocity and social cohesion, which form the core values entrenched in the Afrocentric theory. Evidence from the study reveals that although extended family is resourceful in the provision of social protection to family members, it is steadily weakening due to structural poverty and economic globalisation tendencies that promote individualism. This concurs with other studies (Evans & Eckenrode; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Pearce et al., 2013) that attribute the weakening role of extended family to provide support to structural poverty. Nevertheless, the declining support from extended family does not render it insignificant. The extended family support remains the primary source of social protection in Africa, anchored on the ubuntu values of sharing, respect for one another, reciprocity and collective responsibility.

Community support was reported as very resourceful during times of adversity especially during death of a loved one. Everyone was mandated to be a member of a burial community because death is not a mere loss of a loved one but an important cultural ceremony. Support from neighbourhood and community is underpinned by

the Ubuntu African philosophy of collective responsibility, sharing and concern for welfare of others rather than individual welfare (Mungai, 2013; Mabasa, 2020). This is not unique to Uganda, other studies (De Coninck & Drani, 2009; Foster, 2007; Masoga & Kaya, 2008; Mogomme Alpheus Masoga & Shokane, 2019; Ruparanganda et al., 2017; Shokane & Masoga, Mogomme, 2018) reveal the importance of community solidarity as a useful source of social protection in Africa. The African Ubuntu values of 'I am because we are' has not only influenced African ways of living, but is also central to Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development – that calls for fostering social solidarity and global connectedness.

This study explored the links that exist between the FSP system and the AISPS. The findings presented in this article demonstrate interdependence between the SAGE grant and AISPS. Findings reveal that AISPS are a proactive entity in the implementation and management of SAGE programme. For example, through the AISPS, the SAGE grant programme can get contact for the participants. Moreover, findings in this paper reveal that while the SAGE grant tries to fill the monetary gap, the AISPS provides emotional, psychological and social support needed by the elderly widows. Such actions act as evidence of how formal SAGE programme enhances AISPS and vice versa (Tirivayi, Knowles & Davis 2016; Kidd 2017; Stavropoulou, Holmes & Jones, 2017; Nalwanga & Lund 2018). Previous research (Vindevogel, Wessells, De Schryver et al. 2012) has demonstrated that community-based informal structures such as community leaders and social networks for instance mutual aid groups are used by formal programmes such as SAGE as mobilisation agents and entry points to the community (Verpoorten and Verschraegen 2008). While AISPS promote the coordination of SAGE, the autonomy of AISPS should not be compromised by the FSPS. The integration process should consider autonomy of each system, (AISPS and FSP systems) as an independent player, provider and equal entity in the provision of social protection. This argument is in line with previous research (Olivier, Kaseke & Mpedi, 2008) who advise that the process of linking and integrating indigenous and formal systems should promote and preserve the core values of AISPS.

This paper demonstrates that working towards synergies between formal social protection and existing AISPS provides an entry point to addressing poverty among vulnerable populations. The different vulnerabilities are clearly profiled but strategies to address them should not focus on one strategy (FSPS) but multiple strategies (synergy between FSPS and AISPS) and most importantly, utilising local resources. This aligns with the observation by Mathebane and Sekudu (2018) who posit that culture is a cornerstone for any response to societal problems as opposed to the Eurocentric values that are not universally binding, lack knowledge about the lived experiences of people in Africa, and therefore cannot entirely be relied upon. Thus, this paper demonstrates that integrating the two systems (FSP system and AISPS) can be a better strategy to solving the needs of the vulnerable in low-resource settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, we recommend for a systematic involvement of AISPS in the design of the formal SAGE programme, being cognisant of the important contributions each of the social protection systems offers. Considering AISPS in the design of the formal SAGE programme can help AISPS to be in a better position to identify their needs but find their own solutions that are based on cultural norms and values. Further, there is need to encourage partnership of different AISPS in order to forge a good bargaining power for better and improved service and practice. Further, the government of Uganda can undertake a comprehensive profile including roles, strengths, weaknesses and links with FSPS of AISPS to provide a basis for integration.

As a methodological recommendation, future research can take advantage of views of caretakers of the elderly widows since they are beneficiaries of the formal SAGE programme. Incorporating different views in the analysis of data provides a holistic picture regarding policy revision, formulation and design, tailored to the needs of elder widows. Finally, future research should aim at a deeper cultural understanding of how AISPS operate. Such a study would focus on all regions of Uganda since the country is multifaceted in terms of socio-cultural and economic setting.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an account of social protection utilized by elderly widows in Kamuli district, Uganda. The results presented in this paper add clarity to the existing large body of evidence highlighted in the literature relating to social protection. First, this paper has provided evidence of the different types of indigenous social protection utilized by elderly widows in Kamuli district in Uganda. Second, the paper has also provided justification for integration of the formal SAGE programme and AISPS as a way of increasing coverage and adequacy. The results presented in this paper call for the need to incorporate AISPS in the design of social protection, but also provide a conducive environment under which AISPS and the formal SAGE programme can independently compliment and work together.

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