A People's Pension

The right to social security for older persons in Uganda: lessons from Southern and Eastern Africa

ISER
Facilitating Social Justice
INITIATIVE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

RAISE
Research & Action for Income Security

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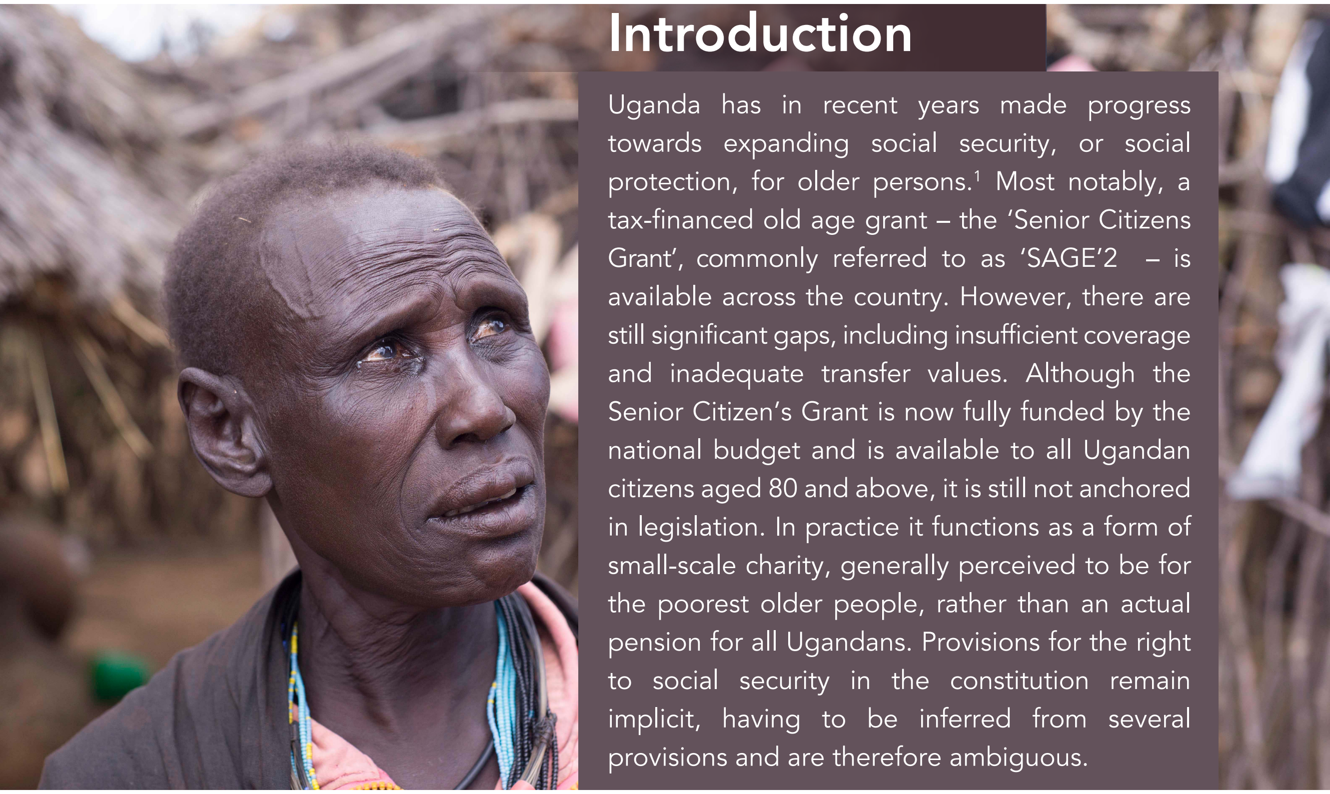

Introduction

Uganda has in recent years made progress towards expanding social security, or social protection, for older persons.[1] Most notably, a tax-financed old age grant – the 'Senior Citizens Grant', commonly referred to as 'SAGE'2 – is available across the country. However, there are still significant gaps, including insufficient coverage and inadequate transfer values. Although the Senior Citizen's Grant is now fully funded by the national budget and is available to all Ugandan citizens aged 80 and above, it is still not anchored in legislation. In practice it functions as a form of small-scale charity, generally perceived to be for the poorest older people, rather than an actual pension for all Ugandans. Provisions for the right to social security in the constitution remain implicit, having to be inferred from several provisions and are therefore ambiguous.

This Working Paper aims to bring regional and international experiences of pension reforms in other countries into the Ugandan debate. The report explores the following three questions:

a. How have other countries moved from a perception of public support for older persons as a form of charity to a justiciable right to pension over time? What general patterns can be seen in the expansion of the right to pension across different countries and time periods?

b. How have pension reforms in other countries gradually improved availability, accessibility and adequacy of social security for older people? Is there a connection between different aspects of pension reforms, including eligibility criteria, benefit levels and overall investment?

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[1] In this Paper, we generally use the term social security with the same meaning as social protection. Social security is the most widely used term in the international human rights instruments, while Uganda's policy framework uses the term social protection. Both terms include both tax-financed, non-contributory, programmes and contributory, social insurance, programmes.

[2] Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) is the name of the programme under which the Senior Citizen's Grant is so far the only scheme.

c. Is there a connection between economic development and pension reforms that has strengthened the right to social security for older people? At what level of economic development has different countries enshrined the right to pension in law?

To answer these questions, we reviewed reforms of tax-financed pensions in seven countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. In addition, we reviewed the experience of one of the European front-runners on tax-financed pensions, Denmark, in the historical period when the Danish tax-financed pension shifted from a small-scale charity-based programme to a rights-based, universal 'People's Pension'.

The Working Paper first examines what it means for social security to be a 'right'. This includes a brief introduction to the international human rights framework and a discussion of what it means for something to be a justiciable right in domestic law.

The Paper then presents cases of pension reforms in the seven case countries: recent and historical reforms in Mauritius, Lesotho, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Kenya, and historical reforms in Denmark.

In each case, we describe developments over time in tax-financed pensions, including principles of targeting and eligibility, adequacy of the benefits provided, investments and the legal basis. We also present briefly the context within which these developments happened and the main drivers of reforms.

Finally, based on the case studies, we present a comparative analysis to answer the questions above and elicit some potential lessons to inform Uganda's future journey towards a more available, adequate and accessible tax-financed pensions system.

What does it mean for social security to be a right?

This section examines what it means for social security to be a 'right'. This includes a brief introduction to the international human rights framework and a discussion of requirements for something to be a justiciable right in domestic law.

Social Security as a human right

The right to social security is recognized in numerous human rights instruments. Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security. In addition, article 25 (1) of the Declaration explicitly guarantees the right to social services and the right to security in old age.

The right to social security was further consolidated in two major human rights and labour treaties following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: International Labour Organisation (ILO) Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention of 1952 sets globally agreed minimum standards for social security, serving as a benchmark for countries to design or reform their systems; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966.

Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guarantees the right of everyone, as a member of society, to social security. States have the duty to respect, protect and fulfil this right. This right encompasses the right to both social insurance schemes (contributory) and social assistance schemes (non-contributory), with the principal aim of combating poverty, inequality and ensuring dignified lives for all. As such, not just contributory programmes, but also tax-financed programmes should be seen as fulfilling rights, and not as a form of charity.[3] The obligations of states under Article 9 are described in more detail in the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 19 (2007).

In addition, the specific contents of the right to social security are described in a body of standards developed by the ILO, most importantly the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952

3 ILO and UN-OHCHR (2025). Fact Sheet No. 39, The Right to Social Security. International Labour Organization and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

and the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012. It is also described in many regional human rights instruments, including in the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security.

The right to social security through the different stages of life should be protected and fulfilled by the states. It should include access to both social insurance and non-contributory social assistance schemes. The non-contributory systems are particularly important in contexts where most people do not have access to benefits through the contributory system.

More specifically, social security for older people should guarantee access to pensions for all older persons, according to a legally defined age. In principle, in accordance with international social security standards, the age should not be higher than 65 years. The level of pensions should be predictable and, at the very least, be sufficient to guarantee a dignified life for all older persons until their death.[4]

The following are the key elements of the right to social security:[5]

Availability: The right to social security has to be guaranteed in domestic legal systems, ideally based on a constitutional guarantee of the right to social security.

Adequacy: Benefits, whether in cash or in kind, must be sufficient in quantity and duration so that everyone may realize his or her rights to family protection and assistance, a reasonable standard of living and access to health care.

Accessibility: A social security system should cover all people, especially those belonging to the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups, without discrimination. Benefits should also be physically accessible. Eligibility criteria and conditions must be reasonable, proportionate and transparent.

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4 Convention No. 102, art. 26; Convention No. 128, art. 15; Recommendation No. 131, paras. 6–7. 29 Convention No. 102, arts. 65–66; Convention No. 128, art. 29; Recommendation No. 202, para. 8.

5 ILO and UNOHCHR (2025). Fact Sheet No. 39, The Right to Social Security. International Labour Organization and Office of the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner.

To summarize, the right to social security, including specifically for older persons, is described in detail in several international human rights instruments, making it clear that it *should* be considered a basic human right. However, that does not mean that it is considered a right in practice in domestic law. We therefore now turn to the question of what it means for social security to be a right in practice.

Social Security as a justiciable right in domestic law

The concept of justiciability is central for understanding what makes something a right in practice. Justiciability means that when a right is violated, the right-holder can take his or her claim before an independent and impartial body, and if the claim is upheld, be granted a remedy, which can be enforced. When a right is justiciable, the court can ensure that the state is held accountable for its actions, in accordance with international, regional and domestic human rights obligations. This means that citizens are guaranteed access to their rights, but also that citizens and their organisations can be more effective in campaigning, advocating, and mobilizing for accountability and change.

Based on the above human rights principles, we can describe what is needed for states to guarantee a justiciable right to social security in practice. This includes *procedural requirements,* including:

1 **First,** the right to social security must be recognized in the domestic legal framework. This should ideally be anchored in a constitutional right to social security. A constitutional guarantee of the right to social security raises the importance of the right and lays a foundation for subsequent implementing legislation. Such a guarantee also provides a basis for the right to be enforced in the courts.[6]

2 **Second,** the enabling laws need to clearly describe the content of the right. This includes in particular transparent and easily understood eligibility criteria, as well as the nature and level of benefits.

3 **Third,** the state needs to ensure that citizens are aware of their rights, and that courts are accessible in practice for those seeking recourse from exclusion from the right to social security.

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[6] ILO and UNOHCHR (2025). Fact Sheet No. 39, The Right to Social Security. International Labour Organization and Office of the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner.
ILO, The right to social security in the Constitutions of the world: Broadening the moral and legal space for social justice. ILO Global Study, vol. 1: Europe, Geneva; ILO,

Furthermore, the *content* of the laws setting out the right to social security should comply with the human rights standards described above. This includes the above mentioned aspects of:

Coverage, ensuring that all persons have access to income security across the life cycle.

Adequacy, ensuring that the benefits provided are adequate to realise the right to a reasonable standard of living.

Accessibility, ensuring that people are able to access benefits in practice, without discrimination or other barriers to registration, enrolment and payments.

In the next section, we look at how different countries have gradually moved from perceiving income support for older persons as a form of charity to a social security system that guarantees a justiciable right to pension for all older persons.

Expanding access to the right to social security for older persons in practice

This section presents the cases of pension reforms in seven countries: Denmark, South Africa, Mauritius, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Kenya.

In each case, we describe developments over time in access to tax-financed pensions, including a) the legal basis, b) coverage, including principles of targeting and eligibility, and c) adequacy of the benefits provided. We also present briefly the context within which these developments happened and the main drivers of reforms.

Denmark

Denmark is a representative of what is sometimes called the 'Nordic Model' of welfare state development.[7] It was one of the front-runners in the introduction of a tax-financed, non-contributory pension. However, the development from a system based on charity, or 'poor relief' for the so-called 'deserving' poor to a right-based pension system took place gradually over a period of more than 60 years, between 1891 and 1956.

Prior to 1891, Denmark had no specific tax-financed social security for older persons. The only income support consisted of general poor relief programmes, which were not rights-based, but rather provided based on the discretion of local authorities. This changed in 1891, with the introduction of a new old age allowance, which for the first time provided a legal basis for income support specifically for older persons.

With the new law, Denmark explicitly rejected the German contributory model which only covered salaried workers, since this was considered meaningless in a Danish economy that at this time was still predominantly agricultural, with a work force consisting of mainly small-scale farmers and informal sector workers (similarly to many low-income countries today). The purpose of the law was to improve rural livelihoods and put a break on ongoing mass-migration from rural areas to cities.

However, the new benefit was still only provided to those deemed to be 'deserving', based on a discretionary

[7] For a description of what characterizes the Nordic Welfare State model, see for example Greve (2007). What Characterise the Nordic Welfare State Model.

decision by local authorities. Even though the law was a step towards a more rights-based system, it did therefore not provide a justiciable right to support.

Furthermore, both coverage and adequacy remained limited.

The next step came in 1922 with the introduction of the so-called 'Aldersrente', or Old Age Grant, which for the first time provided a justiciable right to a non-contributory grant for older persons. While coverage expanded, the new grant was still only available to those with incomes and wealth below a certain threshold.

Comprehensive social reforms in the 1930s caused a general shift in the Danish social system from charity to social rights anchored in law. In 1956 this finally resulted in the adoption of the 'People's Pension', a universal, tax-financed social pension which has since formed a cornerstone in the Danish welfare state. This finally provided a justiciable right to pension for all citizens aged 67 and above, regardless of wealth, income or previous employment. The right to pension is described in a specific law on social pension.

South Africa[8]

South Africa is today one of the African countries with the most comprehensive social protection systems. However, the current system is also in this case the result of developments over many decades and marked by South Africa's history of apartheid. South Africa was the first country in Africa to implement a non-contributory grant for older persons with the Older Persons Grant in 1928. This was an income-tested scheme for white men aged 65 and women aged 60 and above. It was only 16 years later, in 1944, that the grant was expanded to also cover the majority black population. However, the benefit provided was lower for the black population, and as such the grant was still discriminatory. This difference in benefit levels was gradually lowered in the years leading up to the abolishment of apartheid.

The next major reforms happened in connection with the end of apartheid in 1994 and the adoption of the new constitution in 1996, which contains strong guarantees of the right to social security. Section 27 of the South African constitution provides that everyone has the right to access to social security, including appropriate social assistance for those who are unable

[8] Based on ILO South Africa: Older Pension's Grant (2016)

to support themselves and their dependents. It states that the social security system should be expanded gradually depending on what is affordable. As such, the constitution provides a basis for legislation guaranteeing the right to social security and has provided an important basis for expanding coverage to the entire population. Based on these constitutional guarantees, civil society and the courts have for example succeeded in lowering the age of eligibility for men to provide equal access for men and women at the age of 60 and to provide access for residents and refugees, not just citizens.[9]

Mauritius[10]

Along with South Africa, Mauritius was one of the first African countries to introduce a universal, tax-financed, non-contributory pension. Already in 1950, earlier than Denmark, the government enacted the 'Old Age Pension Act', establishing a flat-rate pension for all citizens aged 65 and above, regardless of employment history, but means-tested. Though originally intended as a stopgap until a contributory social insurance scheme could be implemented, the pension rapidly became a popular and permanent feature of Mauritius's evolving welfare system.

The push for old age social security in Mauritius started already during British colonial rule. In the 1940s, concerns had emerged about the breakdown of traditional family-based care for the elderly and the rising demand for state support. In 1940, the colonial administration appointed a Social Insurance Committee, which recommended the introduction of a contributory pension scheme. However, due to financial and administrative constraints, the scheme was never implemented.

In 1958, the pension was transformed into a universal benefit, eliminating the means test and making it available to all residents over the age of 65. This marked a decisive shift towards a rights-based approach to income security in old age and positioned Mauritius as a leader in universal social protection. In 1965, the qualifying age was lowered from 65 to 60 years, and while a mild income test was briefly reintroduced, it was abolished again in 1976 as part of a wider reform package. The National Pensions Act of 1976 introduced a mandatory contributory scheme while at the same time significantly raising the benefit level of the non-contributory pension and removing the remaining eligibility restrictions. From 1977 onwards, coverage became effectively universal.

9 Based on GroundUp (2023). Here's how South Africa's social grant system has changed since 1994.
10 Based on Wilmore (2003). Universal pensions in Mauritius: lessons for the rest of us, Government of the Republic of Mauritius.

Over the years, Mauritius has renamed and expanded the old age pension to better reflect its role as a basic income guarantee for older citizens, with the benefit now known as the 'Basic Retirement Pension' (BRP).

60 - 89 years
Rs. 15,000

90+ years
Rs. 22,710

Basic Retirement Pension per month

Today, the BRP provides up to Rs. 15,000 (approximately USD 330) per month for older persons aged 60-89 and Rs. 22,710 (approximately USD 500) for older persons aged 90 and above. The BRP continues to play a central role in Mauritius's inclusive welfare system and has contributed significantly to poverty reduction, income security, and social cohesion in later life.[11]

Botswana[12]

Botswana introduced a universal, non-contributory old age pension in 1996 through the Old Age Pension Scheme, providing a tax-financed monthly cash transfer to all citizens aged 65 and above. From the outset, the pension was universal and not subject to means testing.

The introduction of the scheme was shaped by several intersecting trends in the decades following Botswana's independence in 1966. As the country transformed from one of the poorest nations in the world into an upper middle-income country—largely driven by prudent governance and revenue from diamond exports—expectations for inclusive development and social redistribution grew. Despite strong economic growth, inequality remained a persistent concern, and a significant share of the population, particularly the elderly in rural areas, remained outside formal employment structures and lacked access to retirement savings or contributory schemes.

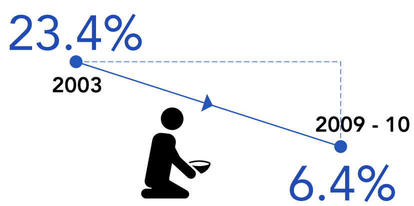
In this context, the old age pension was introduced as part of a broader nation-building agenda aimed at reducing poverty, strengthening national identity, and reinforcing state legitimacy. The move also reflected a broader consensus on the importance of building a

11 Soto, Thakoor & Petri (2015). Pension Reforms in Mauritius; IOPS Country Profiles (2020). Mauritius.
12 Based on ILO (2016). Universal Social Protection. Universal old-age pensions in Botswana

protective welfare floor, especially for vulnerable populations not reached by existing social assistance or contributory schemes.

Though the monthly benefit approximately USD 30 is modest, it has been periodically adjusted to reflect inflation, such as in 2012–13 when payments rose by 15%. While the benefit represents just over a third of the food poverty line, it provides an essential income floor in a country where formal retirement savings remain limited, particularly in rural areas.

Botswana's broader social protection system is among the most extensive in Africa, yet remains under-recognized due to its small population, limited donor involvement, and reliance on national funding.

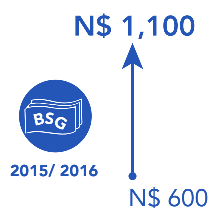


The universal pension, alongside other social protection programmes, has played a key role in reducing extreme poverty from 23.4% in 2003 to 6.4% in 2009–10 and in maintaining social harmony. Today, the pension continues to serve as a cornerstone of Botswana's social contract.

Namibia[13]

Namibia introduced a universal, non-contributory old age pension in 1990, immediately after gaining independence from South Africa. The reform was part of broader efforts to redress the deep social inequalities inherited from the apartheid system and to establish a more inclusive and equitable social protection system. The newly independent government saw social protection as a key tool in promoting social justice and national cohesion.

The pension, renamed the Basic Social Grant (BSG) in 1998, guarantees a monthly unconditional allowance to all residents aged 60 and above, regardless of income or previous contributions. It is financed entirely from general tax revenues. The benefit is paid to individuals without any means testing, and coverage is extensive, with estimates suggesting that over 90 percent of eligible residents receive the pension.



As of 2015/2016, the value of the BSG was significantly increased from N$ 600 to N$ 1,100 (approx. USD 78), a level that lifts lifts recipients above the national poverty line. The increase was motivated by strong evidence of the pension's positive impact in reducing poverty among older persons

[13] Based on IOPS (2020). Country Profile Namibia.

and improving household welfare. While the grant is paid to the individual, it often benefits extended families, helping to support grandchildren and other dependents. The pension remains one of Namibia's most successful and impactful social programmes. Ongoing political commitment has ensured its continuity and gradual enhancement, and further benefit increases are planned.

Lesotho[14]

Lesotho introduced a universal, non- contributory 'Old Age Pension' (OAP) in 2004 for all citizens aged 70 and above. The benefit is tax-financed and provided on an individual basis without means testing. The legal foundation for the scheme is the Old Age Pension Act of 2005. Initially set at LSL 550 (approximately USD 40), the benefit has been periodically adjusted, though its adequacy in relation to the cost of living remains a concern.

The pension emerged in the context of deep rural poverty, limited formal employment opportunities, and political reform following democratization in the late 1990s. The introduction of the pension reflected growing awareness within the political leadership of the importance of social protection in securing dignity and basic livelihoods for older citizens.

Despite constrained fiscal resources, the OAP has been fully funded by the national government from the outset. It quickly became a cornerstone of Lesotho's social protection system, credited with reducing extreme poverty among older persons and improving household welfare, especially in rural areas. The scheme's popularity was underscored in the 2007 election, where many voters cited its introduction as a key reason for supporting the incumbent government — illustrating how universal pensions can carry strong developmental and political significance.

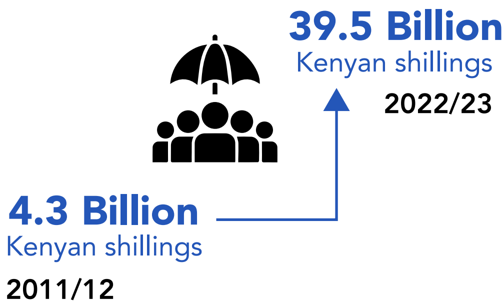
Kenya

Kenya introduced a non-contributory benefit for older persons in 2007 with the 'Older Persons Cash Transfer' (OPCT). The programme was restricted to households categorized as 'poor' with citizens aged 65 and above, reaching around 23 percent of households. Because of the way these households were categorized using a so-called proxy means test, the eligibility criteria were not transparent to citizens and coverage was limited.

[14] Based on ILO (2016). Lesotho: Universal Old Age Pension

23%
Households
Aged 65 and above categorized as poor

Article 43 of Kenya's new Constitution, promulgated in 2010, guarantees economic, social and cultural rights. It recognizes the right for every person to social security and binds the State to provide appropriate social security to persons who are unable to support themselves and their dependents. In 2018, Kenya took a significant step towards a more rights-based social security system with the introduction of the Inua Jamii programme which brought together four different non-contributory programmes, including the OPCT. As part of the reform, the non-contributory pension was made nearly universally available to all Kenyan citizens aged 70 and above (excluding those receiving a pension from the contributory system) and shifted from a household benefit to an individual benefit. As such, the Inua Jamii represents Kenya's first universal social protection programme, guaranteeing a minimum pension to all older persons aged 70 years or above. It represents a significant step towards the government's progressive realisation of the right to social security, as enshrined in the Constitution. The improved access to pension has been a part of a general increase in investment in social protection from 4.3 billion Kenyan shillings in 2011/12 (0.1 per cent of GDP) to 39.5 billion shillings in 2022/23 (0.3 percent of GDP).[15]



While Kenya has made progress towards ensuring better access to the right to social security for older persons, the Inua Jamii Senior Citizens' Scheme is not yet anchored in a legal framework, making it vulnerable to shifting political priorities. This may change soon with the recent passing by the Kenyan National Assembly of a Social Protection Bill which comprehensively describes the right of all Kenyans to social protection. If adopted, the proposed Act will replace the 2013 Social Assistance Act, which provides for targeted social assistance benefits for older persons and thereby represent another step towards the right to pension for all Kenyans.

[15] ILO 2022: Kenya: Inua Jamii Senior Citizens' Scheme

Rights-based social protection reforms: lessons for Uganda

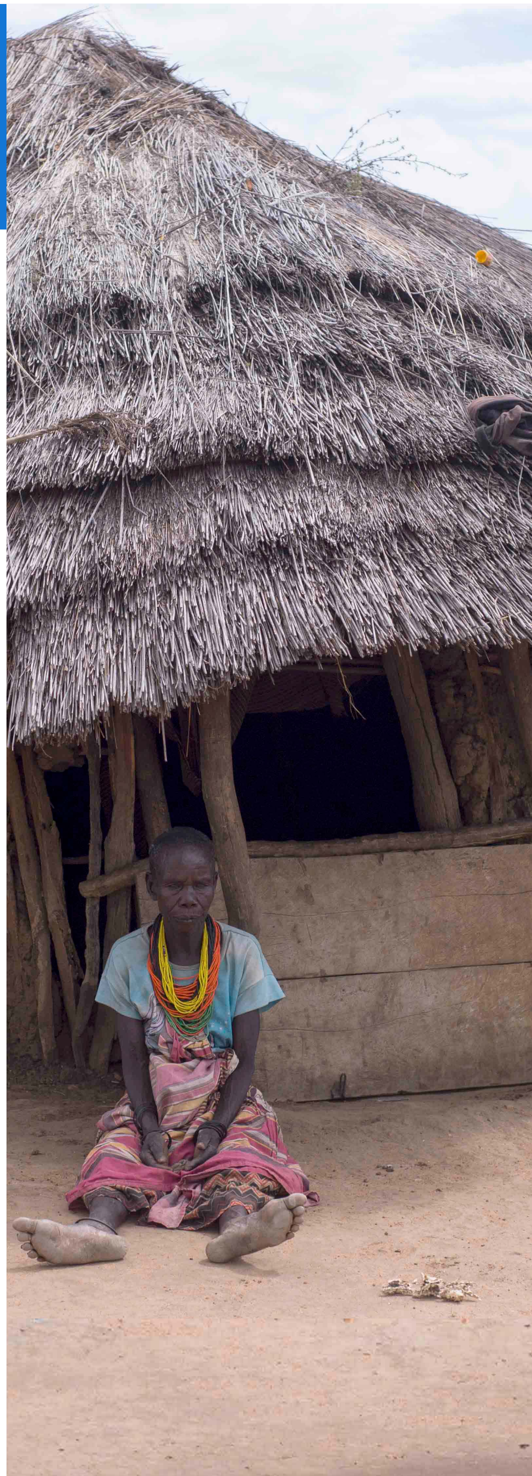
From a charity approach to justiciable rights

Availability, adequacy, and accessibility in pension reforms

Even though improvements in the access to pensions in the different cases have happened in very different contexts and with different causes, there is a clear common trend of a gradual movement from a charity approach to a rights-based approach.

In many of the countries, non-contributory pensions have initially been restricted to a limited target group, whether based on race, as in South Africa, income, or an evaluation of 'deservingness' as in the Danish case.

As economies grow and there is more recognition of the importance of non-contributory pensions for ensuring income security in old age, programmes are expanded to provide protection for the entire population above the defined age of eligibility. While some countries historically spent many decades before introducing their universal social pensions, others, such as Mauritius introduced its universal pension very early and quickly.

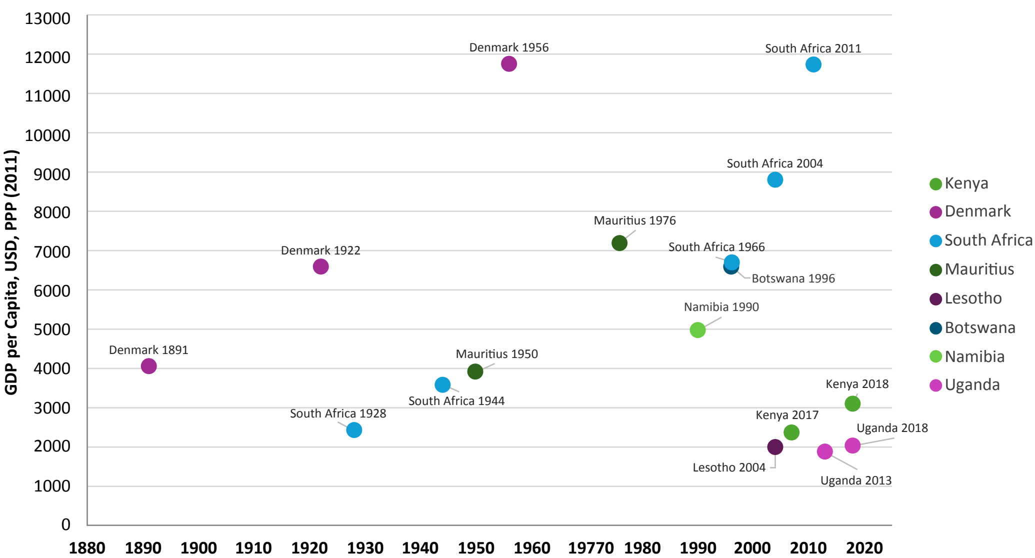


Social security for older persons as part of national development

Looking across the cases of reforms of social protection for older persons, there is a clear pattern of a gradual expansion of access to the right to social protection across countries. Improving access to social security, including for older persons, are for most countries part of the process of modernisation and economic development. As such it plays a key role in nation building and ensuring social coherence in the face of the structural changes of modernisation, including for example changing family patterns and large-scale shifts in populations from rural areas to cities.

The Figure and Table below shows the major reforms that have expanded access to social security for older persons in the case countries, by GDP per capita and year. The recent expansion of social pensions in countries such as Kenya, Uganda and Lesotho comes at a time when these countries are at a level of GDP per capita lower than most of the other cases, but comparable to that of South Africa when it first introduced its pension in 1928.

Figure 1: Cases of significant pension reforms in Denmark and Eastern and Southern African countries[16]



[16] Real GDP per capita in 2011 USD from Maddison Project Database (MDP) 2023

Table 1: Overview of cases of non-contributory pension reforms

Country	Year	Real GDP per capita (2011$)[17]	Reform
Denmark	1891 1922 1956	4,073 6,641 11,858	First law-based right to social security for older persons ‘Old Age Grant’ expanded coverage and adequacy ‘People’s Pension’, universal social pension
South Africa	1928 1944 1996 2004 2011	2,444 3,610 6,726 8,878 11,838	Older Persons Grant for whites Expansion to include the black population Social Assistance Act 1992 Social Assistance Act 2004 Eligibility threshold at 60 for man and women
Mauritius	1950 1976	3,942 7,264	Basic Retirement Pension The National Pension Scheme
Botswana	1996	6,648	Old Age Pension Scheme
Namibia	1990	5,007	Old Age Grant
Lesotho	2004	2,004	Old Age Pension Act
Kenya	2007 2018	2,381 3,120	Older Persons Cash Transfer, poverty targeted grant Inua Jamii, universal social pension
Uganda	2013 2018	1,895 2,036	Start of pilot of the Senior Citizen’s Grant National roll out to all aged 80 and above, still inadequate benefit level.

[17] Real GDP per capita in 2011 USD from Maddison Project Database (MDP) 2023

The way forward for Uganda: a 2040 vision for a People's Pension

Expanding access to the Senior Citizen's Grant towards 2040

Uganda has already taken the initial steps towards creating a social pension for all older people in the country. However, to ensure income security for all older persons, the Senior Citizens' Grant should be expanded to reach all older persons aged 60 or 65. Our costing estimates show that this could be done immediately, if maintaining the current benefit value of UGX 25,000, at a total cost of about UGX 830 Billion. This would enable the programme to reach all older persons aged 60 and above already from the next financial year. The cost corresponds to about 1.1 percent of GDP, which is affordable.

Current Benefit
UGX 25,000
at a total cost of about

UGX 830 Billion

However, there is also a need to increase the value of the benefit provided, as UGX 25,000 per month is not sufficient to provide income security. In addition, based on the above experiences of other countries, expanding the right to pension is usually a gradual process. This has also been the case in Uganda, where the Senior Citizens' Grant was gradually expanded from a donor-funded pilot project to a tax-financed social pension with national coverage.

As such, the Government of Uganda should put in place a clear plan for expanding access to the Senior Citizens' Grant gradually, as part of national development towards 2040. Figure 2 shows a potential plan for expanding the coverage and adequacy of the programme over time.

Figure 2: Cost and number of recipients when gradually expanding access to the Senior Citizens' Grant 2025-40

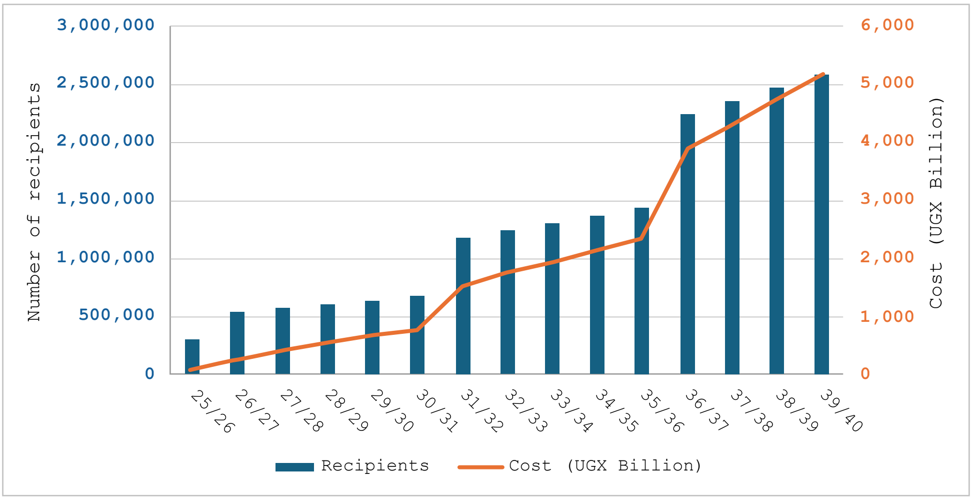


Figure 2 shows a model of gradually increasing coverage from the current situation of reaching about 300,000 people aged 80 and above, to about 2.6 million people aged 65 and above by 2040. If the transfer value is also gradually increased from the current UGX 25,000 to UGX 140,000 by 2040, the total cost in 2040 will be approximately UGX 5,175 Billion. However, because of the expected economic growth, this would still only amount to about 1.1 percent of GDP.

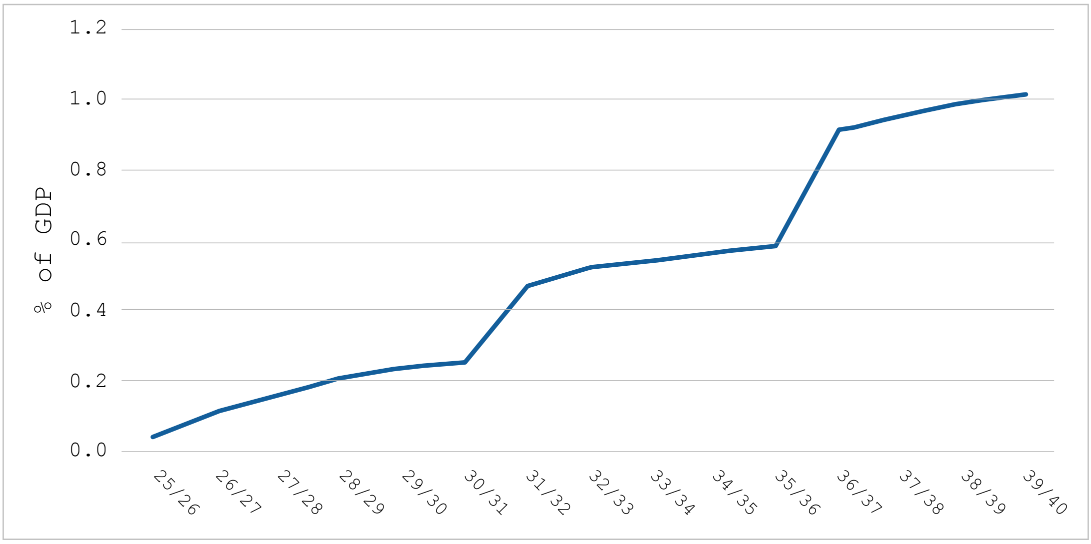
Table 2 shows the gradual expansion of the programme both in terms of the number of recipients covered and the adequacy of the benefit provided.

Table 2: A potential plan for gradually expanding the Senior Citizens' Grant

FY	Age group	Estimated number of recipients	Benefit per month	Total cost (UGX Billion)	Total cost (% of GDP)
25/26	80+	306,556	UGX 25,000	109	0.05
26/27	75+	317,201	UGX 35,000	272	0.11
31/32	70+	1,178,321	UGX 90,000	1,515	0.47
36/37	65+	2,244,829	UGX 122,000	3,912	0.92
39/40	65+	2,587,338	UGX 140,000	5,175	1.02

This gradual expansion model would be affordable, as the economy is expected to grow in the same period. Figure 3 below shows the cost as a percentage of GDP over the 2015-40 period. As the Figure shows, even by 2040, when reaching more than 2.5 million older persons, the cost of the programme is only expected to amount to about 1 percent of GDP.

Figure 3: Cost of expanding the Senior Citizens' Grant, 2015-40 (% of GDP)

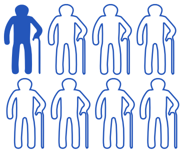


Towards income security for older persons in Uganda

While Uganda's Senior Citizen's Grant (SAGE) represents a major step towards ensuring income security for older persons in the country, the support remains inadequate and inaccessible to many senior citizens. SAGE is still only available to older persons aged 80 and above and has a coverage of only 306,556[18] individuals out of an estimated current population above 60 of about 2.3 million.[19] Even including the pension for public servants

[18] 2023/24 Ministerial Policy Statement for the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development. page 1
[19] National Housing and Population Census 2024 Final Report

and the contributory National Social Security Fund, more than a million persons above the age of 60 are left without any income support from the state.[20]



306,556 individuals out of an estimated current population above **60** of about **2.3 million**

The results are clear from data on poverty in Uganda: older persons are more likely than others to live in poverty, and nearly half of those above 65, 48 percent[21], are living in multidimensional poverty. Many older persons are unable to cover their essential needs, including food and medication. Older persons traditionally rely on their children to support them, but this traditional form of social protection is increasingly strained, as more people of working age migrate from rural to urban areas in search of work, leaving older persons alone in the villages.

[20] Based on the author's calculations, which encompass a deduction of 62,387 current beneficiaries under the public service pension scheme and an additional deduction of 306,556 beneficiaries receiving the senior citizens grant.

[21] Uganda's [Multidimensional poverty profile](), page 9

More specifically, the following gaps remain to be addressed as Uganda continues the shift from a charity to a rights-based approach to social security.

First, the lack of a legal framework that enshrines social protection for older persons as a right and an obligation of the state. There is currently no law that commits the state to provide adequate financial support to all senior citizens.

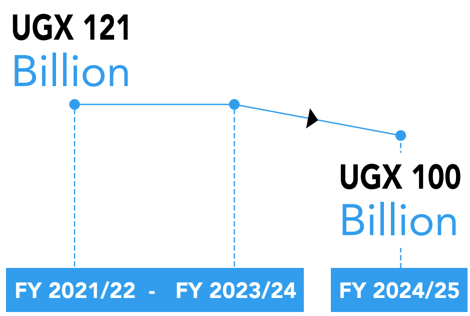
The government has publicly committed to ratifying the AU Protocol on the Right to Social Security and Social Protection, which has strong provisions on the rights of older persons to social protection, including their access to direct income support through pensions or cash assistance. However, it has not done so yet, and once it has been ratified these rights would also have to be domesticated in national legislation.

The lack of a legal basis leaves the government with no significant obligation to ensure the implementation and effectiveness of the policies governing the social security programmes. For example, the National Social Protection Policy states that all those over 60 are eligible for cash assistance, but the government continues to maintain a cutoff age of 80. The impact of this gap is that implementation has been somewhat haphazard and that older persons do not have a justiciable right to social protection.

Second, low coverage and adequacy: SAGE provides only UGX 25,000 (US$ 6.4 USD) per month, which is not enough to meet the basic needs of the recipients.

UGX 53,000 in 2022
According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, the average average monthly expenditure on food alone per person in Uganda was UGX 53,000 in 2022, more than double the amount of the grant.

Third, the weak funding for SAGE and general lack of investment in the social security system, which is the underlying reason the programme has not improved its coverage and adequacy.



For the 2024-25 financial year, the SAGE program faced a budget reduction, dropping from UGX 121 billion in 2023/24 to UGX 100 billion. This was after it had stagnated at UGX 121 billion for 3 consecutive financial years (FY 2021/22 - FY 2023/24)[22]. So, contrary to continuing to make progress in ensuring the right to social security for older persons, the Government of Uganda has backtracked.

A consequence of the recent cuts to the SAGE budget is that the program has only been able to reach a small fraction of the eligible population. Data from the Expanding Social Protection Programme shows that in 2024/25 FY, only 197,000 older persons (65% of those supported in the previous years) will be paid their quarter four entitlements. The rest, totaling 109,000, who are already enrolled on the program will not be paid in the last quarter of this financial year (April-June 2025).

4.6 Billion
Unpaid Grants for 270,203 older persons

There are also arrears of 4.6 billion for grants that were not paid to 270,203 older persons in the 4th quarter of the years 2020/21.[23]

Fourth, issues related to accessibility as a result of the requirement of a national ID for accessing social protection programs. The national digital ID system in Uganda has long been plagued by mass exclusion, leaving around a third of the adult population unregistered. The national ID requirement has, as a result, continued to block many from accessing government social assistance. Older persons and people living in extreme poverty are among the groups who are disproportionately affected by administrative inefficiencies and biometric exclusions.[24]

Figure 4 below shows how the creation of a comprehensive, rights-based, pension system that has a universal, tax-financed, social pension as its basis should form part of Uganda's Vision 2040. This system would re-make SAGE into a truly universal old age pension that would provide all older persons in Uganda with a guaranteed minimum income. On this foundation would then come additional income from mandatory social insurance for those employed in the formal sector, which could be complemented by further voluntary savings schemes and personal savings for the wealthier part of the population.

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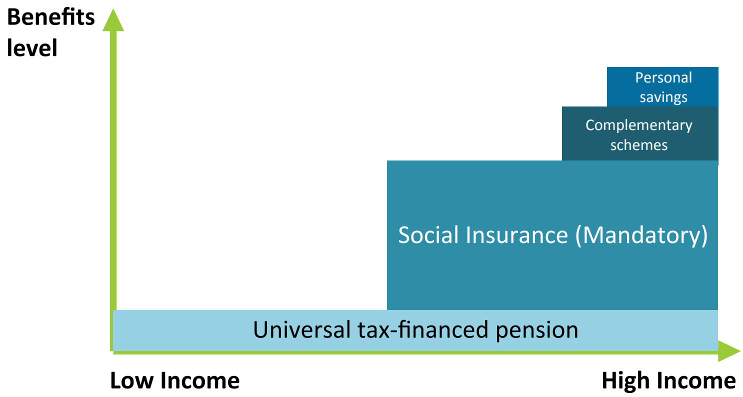
22 ISER Statement on the World Day of Social Justice 2025

23 ISER: Enhancing Social Protection for Older Persons in Uganda: Key Considerations for Uganda's 2025/26 National Budget.

24 ISER (2023). You Do Not Qualify: Experiences of Older Persons Access to Social Protection in Uganda; ISER, Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice New York University, Unwanted Witness (2021). Chased Away and Left to Die: How a National Security Approach to Uganda's Digital ID has Led to Wholesale Exclusion of Women and Older Persons.

Figure 4: Vision for a rights-based social security system providing income security for all Ugandans in old age.



In summary, Uganda today is at a point in its development where it has taken the first steps towards ensuring income security in old age. However, the journey is far from over. The next steps should include increasing coverage of the SAGE programme to include all Ugandans aged 60 or 65 and above, increasing the value of the benefit to cover basic needs and – perhaps most importantly - enshrining the non-contributory pension in law to make it a justiciable right.

This does not have to happen all at once, but there is a clear need for a legal framework that can form the basis for expanding access to social rights for older persons over time.

Annex: Costing the SCG expansion

We estimate the cost of expanding the Senior Citizen Grant using the following assumptions:

Population data: the 2024 census data provide the baseline for the population within each of the relevant age groups between 60 and 80+. This is then projected for the 2015-40 period using expected population growth rates for each age group from the UNDESA World Population Prospect projections for Uganda.

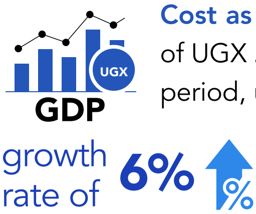
Cost of transfers: the benefit values are gradually adjusted over time to improve adequacy. The total cost of transfers is estimated number of recipients multiplied with the annual benefit per person.

Administrative costs: In the 2023/24 financial year, the Ugandan government released **UGX 121,218,964,000** for SCG and paid out **UGX 101,418,834,300** in Benefits.

16.33%
Administrative costs

The difference (UGX 19,800,129,700) went to administrative and operational expenses. That means about 16.33% of total spending covered administrative costs. We assume any budget that was not paid out as benefits was used for administration.

Cost as percentage of GDP: The calculations take 2024/25 expected GDP of UGX 225,000 Billion as the starting point and projects this for the 2015-40 period, using an expected annual GDP growth rate of 6%.



The Table shows the detailed plan for gradually expanding the SCG in the 2025-2040 period.

FY	Age group	Number of recipients	Transfer value (UGX)	Cost of transfer (UGX Billion)	Admin cost, 16% of total (UGX Billion)	Total cost (UGX Billion)	Total cost (% of GDP)
25/26	80+	306,556	25,000	92	18	109	0.05
26/27	75+	543,993	35,000	228	44	272	0.11
27/28	75+	573,113	50,000	344	65	409	0.16
28/29	75+	604,542	65,000	472	90	561	0.21
29/30	75+	638,614	75,000	575	109	684	0.24
30/31	75+	674,477	80,000	647	123	771	0.26
31/32	70+	1,178,321	90,000	1,273	242	1,515	0.47
32/33	70+	1,237,471	100,000	1,485	283	1,768	0.52
33/34	70+	1,299,668	105,000	1,638	312	1,950	0.54
34/35	70+	1,365,255	110,000	1,802	343	2,145	0.56
35/36	70+	1,434,749	115,000	1,980	377	2,357	0.58
36/37	65+	2,244,829	122,000	3,286	626	3,912	0.92
37/38	65+	2,356,448	128,000	3,620	689	4,309	0.95
38/39	65+	2,470,868	135,000	4,003	762	4,765	0.99
39/40	65+	2,587,338	140,000	4,347	828	5,175	1.02

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