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# Policy Watch

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**NISSA, The National Social Registry:  
The Past, the Present, and the Future**

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite years of progress, around half of Basotho live in monetary poverty.
- National Information System for Social Assistance (NISSA) was created as a single social registry and currently contains data of around 90% of the households.
- Integration of the social assistance programmes is the key to realizing the life cycle approach envisioned in the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS).
- The integration and enhancement of social protection system should be done through common targeting and common operational systems, NISSA and MISSA, as well as linking with mobile and digital payment solutions.
- NISSA is also a unique platform to be linked with other sectors, such as health and education to strengthen human development results.
- NISSA is also a rich source of population data that should be readily accessible to be analysed for decision making.

## BACKGROUND

Lesotho is a small, mountainous, landlocked country located within Southern Africa with a population of 2.1 million. Despite strides made in reducing poverty and improving human condition, Lesotho still has around half of its population living in poverty. Lesotho also scores low on the 2020 Human Development Index, ranking 165 out of 189 countries and territories<sup>i</sup>. The HIV prevalence for those 15 and older in Lesotho is at 22.7%<sup>ii</sup>, one of the highest in the world and unemployment rate at 24.7%<sup>iii</sup>.

Children's situation is also dire. 44.8% are monetarily poor and 45.5% of children are found to be multidimensionally poor<sup>iv,v</sup>. This affects younger children more, with 68.8% and 44.2% of those between 0 – 24 months and 25 – 59 months multidimensionally poor

respectively. Geographical disparities also exist, with those in the rural areas being more likely to be deprived than those in the urban areas<sup>vi</sup>. As deprivation experienced during childhood may leave a permanent negative impact on the person, poverty including child poverty and child multidimensional poverty needs to be tackled to ensure children have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

### What are we doing about it now:

The government of Lesotho has been expanding its social protection programmes and strengthening the social protection systems with support from development partners and UN agencies. Compared to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Lesotho's investment in social protection is significant, standing at 8.4% of GDP for fiscal year 2020/2021<sup>vii</sup>.

In the past years, Lesotho has designed, implemented and expanded many of its key social protection programmes, including the Child Grant Programme (CGP), Public Assis-

tance (PA), Orphan and Vulnerable Children Bursary (OVC-B), and Old Age Pension (OAP) among others. With the implementation and expansion of the Child Grant Programme, which was targeted at the most vulnerable children, the national social registry, National Information System for Social Assistance (NISSA) was created. NISSA was envisioned to be the registry where data of households and individuals is stored and can be used for targeting. To this end, the Proxy Means Test (PMT) and Community Based Categorization (CBC) was also introduced. The NISSA currently includes information of 90% of the households across the kingdom. Among the data that NISSA has, it also includes the poverty categories of each household. This is determined through a combination of looking at a range of indicators (PMT) and a validation process by the communities (CBC). This credible process minimizes inclusion and exclusion error and allows NISSA to be an effective and efficient targeting tool for social protection programmes in Lesotho. Currently, there are several programmes that use NISSA for the targeting including the CGP, OVC-B and PA programmes.

The NISSA is also an essential infrastructure for shock responsive social protection in Lesotho. NISSA allows efficient scale up of current social protection programmes to reach vulnerable population in the time of crisis. For example, in the wake of the El Nino induced drought of 2015-2016, the CGP was scaled up to provide top-up transfers to existing beneficiaries in 33 community councils with NISSA coverage. In 2021, NISSA was also used in

targeting social assistance beneficiaries in rural areas affected by COVID-19. The Disaster Management Authority (DMA) also capitalized on the NISSA database, delivering emergency interventions. Given seasonal food insecurity is a common and significant concern for Lesotho, the use by DMA of the NISSA database provides valuable lessons for future humanitarian responses.

While the NISSA has come very far, it is not without challenges and difficulties. The NISSA needs be updated so that the information in NISSA, including the poverty categorization, stays up-to-date and continue to be credible. An NISSA updating exercise has been piloted that combines both face-to-face component and a virtual component, to maximize efficiency and minimize cost and time. The delivery of the social protection benefits, currently done mainly by delivering physical cash, is costly and time-consuming. While an effort was made in linking NISSA to mobile and digital payments in the past, it has been stopped due to system issues. It is currently been re-piloted in order to overcome delay in benefit payment, reduce cost of delivery and ensure a more reliable process for payment tracking.



## POLICY WATCH

NISSA has endless potential in further supporting the integration and streamlining of the social protection system and the social sector as a whole. While some of the key social protection programmes uses NISSA, the social protection system in Lesotho still has historically fragmented elements including a range of programmes that are managed across the ministries. While currently hosted under and managed by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), the NISSA and its implementation arm, Management Information System Social Assistance (MISSA), should be the central tool for the integration of the social protection sector across ministries. MISSA manages the various stages of social assistance processes, including delivery of benefits, case management, and tracking and monitoring. The MISSA and NISSA is fully integrated, and the households or individuals selected in the NISSA to be enrolled in a programme can be managed seamlessly through MIS-

SA without having to export or manipulate household data outside of the system. The use of such common database for targeting and implementation allows a clearer view of overall social protection programme implementation also at the individual level (ie. who is receiving what support). This will ensure that a vulnerable person is able to get the support he or she needs, transitioning through different programmes, regardless of the phase of his or her life, realizing the envisioned life course approach set out in the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) launched in 2015. To support this process, an integration strategy was also developed in 2020 by the MoSD. Integration also enhances coverage, reduces exclusion and inclusion errors, improves individual programme effectiveness, and it will also further reduce administrative costs. Given the already relatively high social protection spending as a proportion of the GDP, the internal savings is essential to create fiscal space to increase coverage and benefit level.

Strengthening the system to support mobile and digital payment must also be continued. Apart from significantly reducing the unit cost of benefit delivery, digital and mobile payment also strengthen the social protection system's ability to respond to shocks through instant disbursement of benefits. This is especially true for those in hard-to-reach rural areas, who are often some of the most vulnerable. It also vastly reduces the cost of receiving the benefit from the beneficiary's side without having to wait for long hours in the cold or in the sun for their turn. With digital and mobile payments, the recipients can continue engaging in regular activities including income-generating activities and school without having to go to a pay-point. The push to own digital transaction accounts could also serve to facilitate the financial inclusion of some of the most vulnerable population, including women, in Lesotho.

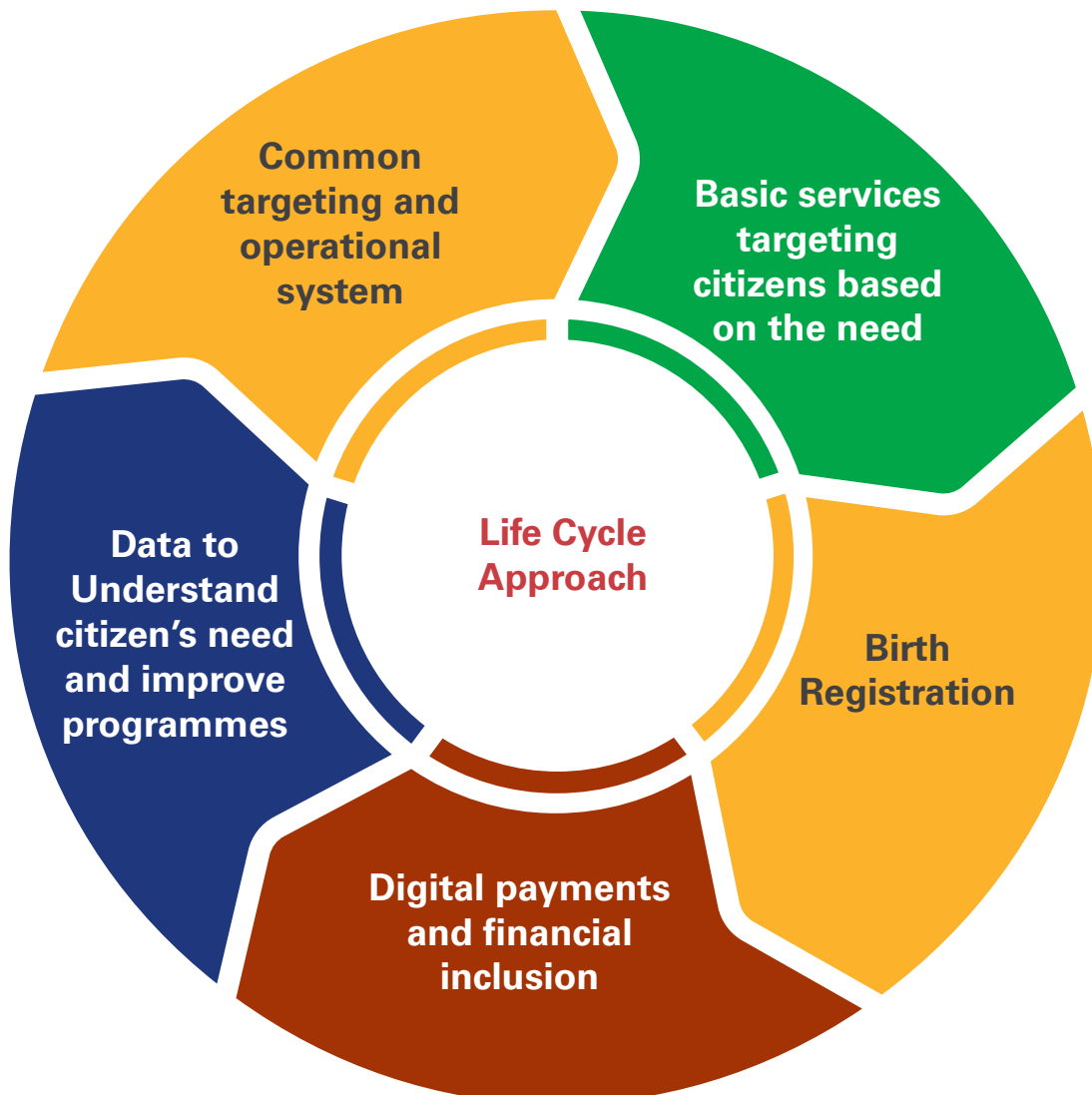
The social protection system and NISSA



also provides a unique platform to enhance human development through linking and referral to other social services. For example, birth registration should be linked to NISSA to ensure that every person included in NISSA without a birth registration is referred to Ministry of Home Affairs to be registered. Vulnerable families and children can be referred to nutrition and health services in the communities, HIV prevention programmes can outreach to households with adolescents, and alternative education programmes can outreach to children not enrolled or attending school. Through providing information on who are in need of various public services and their whereabouts, NISSA can work hand in hand with other sectors to increase access to essential services, reduce multi-dimensional poverty, and enhance human development.

NISSA also provides a vast potential for understanding the situation of people. The NISSA database, with 90% of household coverage and updated every few years, is a rich source of information on the population. Information and analysis based on NISSA data should be readily accessible for decision making, for ministries, relevant government entities, UN agencies, development partners and others. Alongside the promotion of the use of the NISSA data for situation analysis, NISSA's information security also need to be further strengthened to ensure that household and individual data are handled properly.

**Diagram 1:**



## DEVELOPMENT PARTNER COLLABORATION

The European Union (EU), the Government of Lesotho, and UNICEF entered into a partnership agreement in 2007 for the implementation of a national-level initiative to address the growing challenge of children orphaned or made vulnerable as a result of the HIV epidemic in Lesotho. At the end of the four-year period ending in March 2011, the initiated Child Grant Programme was reaching 10,000 households covering 27,000 children. Then, the programme was continued from 2012-2014 in the amount of 10 million Euros to complete the implementation and transitioning the Lesotho Child Grants Programme from EU/UNICEF to the Government. At the start of 2014, the Government took over 100% of the programme's benefit costs and 70% of its administrative costs, solidifying public ownership of the Child Grant Programme. As of February 2022, we are in Phase III of the EU-UNICEF partnership (2015 to 2022) to support the Government in building an integrated social protection system.



## CONTACT DETAILS

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This Policy in Focus brief series is produced by Government of Lesotho jointly with UNICEF. The aim of the series is to encourage deeper discussion and understanding of issues important to children and the possible policy forward. To see other issues of our editorial series, visit: <https://lesotho.un.org/en/resources/publications>



- i. Human Development Report 2020 (Lesotho): <https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/LSO.pdf>
- ii. Lesotho Population-Based HIV Impact Assessment 2020, Government of Lesotho  
Worldbank database: [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=LS&most\\_recent\\_value\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=LS&most_recent_value_desc=true)
- iii. Multidimensional Child Poverty in Lesotho, UNICEF & Bureau of Statistics, Government of Lesotho, 2021
- iv. Multidimensionally poor means that a person is deprived in at least 3 dimensions out of the dimensions assessed including housing, health, nutrition, water, sanitation, education, protection from violence, access to information.
- v. Lesotho Social Protection Budget Brief 2021, UNICEF Lesotho
- vi. For more information on the process of NISSA and poverty categorization, see issue 1 of the UNICEF “Data in Focus” editorial series, found through <https://lesotho.un.org/en/resources/publications>.
- vii. The mobile payment were piloted in 2015, and rolled out in phases until 2020 when it was discontinued due to issues with the system



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