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# **Understanding elite commitment to social protection**

Rwanda's Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the political economy of Rwanda’s Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme, concluding that strong government commitment to the programme has been shaped by the specific characteristics of the political settlement that was established around 2000. For the Rwandan government, the programme has never been just about social transfer, but a key part of the development strategy that aims to promote social stability and the legitimacy of the ruling coalition through rapid socioeconomic development. In particular, the programme originated in an emerging distributional crisis in the mid-2000s in which rapid economic growth alongside low rates of poverty reduction threatened the government narrative of inclusive development. While donor social protection ideas have also been influential, these are purposefully adapted by government with a view to meeting its developmental and political goals.

**Keywords:** Rwanda, social protection, policy transfer, ideas, political settlements

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## 1 Introduction

The Rwandan government introduced the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP) with donor support in 2008. The VUP comprises: public works; unconditional direct support for those unable to work; and a financial services component that promotes financial literacy and provides credit. The programme was gradually rolled out from an initial 30 pilot sectors.<sup>1</sup> By June 2014 public works were operating in 180 of 416 sectors and providing support to 104,310 households, while direct support reached 61,948 households in 330 sectors. At this point, total programme coverage was roughly 6 per cent of the Rwandan population and the equivalent of 13 per cent of those living below the national poverty line.<sup>2</sup> This paper analyses the political economy dynamics influencing the adoption and evolution of the VUP. To do so, the paper employs the ‘adapted political settlements framework’ described in the introductory paper to this special issue and in Lavers and Hickey (2016). This framework proposes that elite commitment to social protection emerges from the interaction between the political settlement, the distributional regime, ideational influences, and policy coalitions advocating for policy change.

The paper employs a process tracing methodology (George and Bennett 2004) to reconstruct the policy-making process based on semi-structured, key informant interviews with senior politicians and technical staff within government (eleven interviews); representatives of donors and international organizations (nine interviews); and foreign consultants (seven interviews). These respondents are detailed in the Appendix and constitute the majority of the key actors, past and present, involved in design and programme administration. These interviews were conducted during fieldwork in Rwanda in May 2015, and before and after this fieldwork by Skype with key people who had subsequently left the country. The aim of the analysis is to link this policy-making process to underlying political settlement dynamics and policy context. For this purpose the paper draws on the existing academic literature on Rwandan politics, official policy documents, and statistics.

The paper finds that strong elite commitment to the VUP has been shaped by the specific characteristics of the political settlement. The VUP is a direct response to distributional problems—high rates of poverty and inequality—that were perceived in government to pose a threat to the political settlement. While the objectives and framing of the VUP have shifted over time, the government has never viewed the VUP solely as a social transfer programme, but as an integral part of the government’s development strategy. Within this context, the government has actively sought to learn from outside expertise, including the social protection ideas promoted by development partners. However, these transnational ideas are purposefully reinterpreted and adapted by the government to fit existing policy ideas and framings with a view to meeting its overall developmental and political goals.

The paper begins by analysing Rwanda’s political settlement and the broader distributional regime within which the VUP operates. The analysis then turns to the VUP itself focusing on the original adoption of the programme and its evolution over time. The final section concludes.

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<sup>1</sup> Administratively Rwanda is divided into (from largest to smallest): districts, sectors (s. umurenge/ pl. imirenge), cells, and villages.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s calculations based on the average household size in the latest Rwandan census.

## 2 The political settlement under the RPF

Rwanda's current political settlement can be traced to the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)'s military victory in 1994 that ended the genocide and civil war. Following a period of post-conflict reconstruction, around 2000 there was a series of departures from the ruling coalition that led to a high degree of cohesion.

### 2.1 From post-conflict reconstruction to the current political settlement

Following victory in 1994, the RPF faced little in the way of elite opposition in the country. The RPF was undoubtedly the dominant force in the Government of National Unity (1994–2000); however, there were clear attempts to present an image of power sharing between the political parties, as well as ethnic balance, with the new President, Pasteur Bizimungu, being a Hutu from the RPF. Nonetheless, the RPF could not count on widespread support across Rwanda. The new government was ruling over a majority Hutu population that had been subject to extensive propaganda demonizing the RPF (Golooba-Mutebi 2008), while a significant proportion of the population had taken part in massacres of Tutsis during the genocide. Furthermore, with government structures and infrastructure all but destroyed during the conflict, and opposition troops making regular incursions into Rwanda from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a direct threat to the ruling coalition remained. As such, the new government relied heavily on the military and security forces to achieve a quick restoration of social order and rebuilding of state capacity (Golooba-Mutebi 2008; Reyntjens 2013).

Arguably, the current political settlement was forged in the period between the late 1990s and the 2003 Constitution. At this time there was a wave of resignations, expulsions, and defections from the ruling coalition, including the Prime Minister, President and Speaker of the National Assembly, while the Mouvement Démocratique Républicain, the second largest party, was banned for promoting sectarianism. Although the government continued to rule as a coalition, these changes strengthened the RPF's position. Meanwhile, Paul Kagame—previously vice-president—became president in 2000 and comfortably won elections in 2003 and 2010.

As with so much in Rwandan politics, these events are subject to wildly diverging interpretations. For critics, the expulsions and defections constituted the centralization of power by the RPF and President Kagame in particular (Reyntjens 2013). In contrast, analysts more favourable to the regime argue that many of these expulsions can be traced to a lack of commitment by certain individuals and factions to core ideas of the ruling coalition (discussed below) (Golooba-Mutebi and Booth 2013). Either way, the result is that there is no significant elite competition to the RPF-led coalition within Rwanda, with opponents limited to an often vocal Rwandan diaspora and remnants of opposition forces in the DRC.

President Kagame is widely acknowledged to be enormously powerful and central to all key government decisions. This power derives in part from his strong support both within the RPF and in the military. Indeed, the military remains key to state power in Rwanda (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2011; Jowell 2014). Beyond the Ministry of Defence (MINADEF), probably the two most important ministries are the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MINECOFIN) and the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC). MINALOC's prominent position results from the radical decentralization reforms undertaken since 2000, with the result that all sectoral activities are supposed to be coordinated through MINALOC. Analyses of Rwanda's political settlement have also pointed to the prominent position of state, party, and military-owned business conglomerates and the important role they play in financing the party, reducing the need to finance politics through corruption (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2011; Behuria 2015).

The RPF coalition received relatively little donor support immediately after the genocide (Pottier 2002; Golooba-Mutebi 2008). Since the late 1990s, however, the Department for International Development (DFID), the United States, the World Bank (WB), and the European Union (EU) have provided large amounts of aid, constituting as much as 50 per cent of government budget in 2010, though declining to approximately 30 per cent by 2014 (IMF 2015: 17). As such, foreign donors are themselves a key component of the political settlement, providing resources that are used to sustain the ruling coalition. Nevertheless, the government views donors as unreliable due to the failure of foreign governments to stop the genocide, the limited provision of support afterwards, and repeated conflicts with donors over human rights and Rwandan military intervention in the DRC (Hayman 2009). Indeed, donors play a dual role within the political settlement, supporting the ruling coalition with resources, but also periodically challenging it. Meanwhile, the government is frequently vocal about the need to move beyond aid dependence in the long term and has shown itself willing to set terms for donor engagement and to protect its policy of autonomy in the short term (Hayman 2009).

Not only is Rwanda's political settlement characterized by relatively elite cohesion and centralization of power around the president, but the political elite has also established a governance system which enables domination over lower level factions. Despite ostensibly constituting a means of enhancing local participation, the ambitious political, administrative, and financial decentralization implemented since 2000 is frequently noted as having enhanced central control over local administrations (Ingelaere 2011; Chemouni 2014). One of the main influences on implementation is the performance appraisal system established in 2006. *Imihigo*—a form of performance contract—detail specific targets to be met in the coming year by government officials. In principle, *imihigo* combine national priorities and community objectives. In practice, however, research concludes that national priorities dominate and that *imihigo* enhance accountability of local government officials upwards to the national government (Chemouni 2014). *Imihigo* provide strong incentives for officials to deliver on their targets as a result of the formal signing ceremonies held with the resident and the use of *imihigo* as the basis for promotion and dismissal.

## 2.2 Developmental ambitions and the role of ideas in the political settlement

Analyses have pointed to the RPF's 'systemic vulnerability'<sup>3</sup> as an explanation for the RPF's developmental outlook (Chemouni 2014; Mann and Berry 2016). From this perspective the need to broaden the ruling coalition—which continues to be associated with a Tutsi minority (Ansoms 2009), alongside resource constraints and ongoing security threats provides the ruling elite with little option but to establish a 'developmental state'. However, the interests of the ruling elite cannot be neatly separated from the paradigmatic ideas regarding Rwandan society and the role of the state that are the subject of consensus within the ruling coalition and which form that basis of a strategy to maintain the coalition going forward. Arguably, the changes in the ruling coalition around 2000 helped forge a more cohesive ruling coalition, with consensus on a set of key paradigmatic ideas (Golooba-Mutebi and Booth 2013). These ideas can be traced directly to the 1998 Urugwiro process—a series of discussions on the future of Rwanda—and more broadly to the RPF's Eight Point Programme outlined in 1994. These ideas are core to the political settlement in that there is no space either within or outside the ruling coalition to contest them, while they all constitute important influences on policy, as the paper will subsequently argue. Indeed, one rare area of relative agreement between opposing camps in the debate on contemporary Rwandan politics concerns the severely limited space for political mobilization

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<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Doner et al.'s (2005) concept, used to analyse the origins of East Asian developmental states.

that contests these ideas or the dominance of the RPF (Golooba-Mutebi and Booth 2013; Reyntjens 2013).

The first paradigmatic idea is the need to move beyond the ethnic and regional divisions that dominated colonial and post-colonial administrations. According to the RPF, ethnicity is a purely colonial construction that introduced previously non-existent divisions into Rwandan society (Pottier 2002). The government's aim is to promote a unified national identity in place of ethnic and regional self-identification and thereby return to the supposed harmony of the pre-colonial era. This rationale translates into the rejection of ethnicity or region as the basis for policy choices (Golooba-Mutebi and Booth 2013); an appeal to shared 'traditions' that dates from this harmonious era through the promotion of revitalized customary institutions; and a complete intolerance for ethno-political mobilization or even ethnic identification.

The second idea concerns the need to deliver rapid and inclusive socioeconomic development that gives all sections of the population a stake in the political settlement (Golooba-Mutebi and Booth 2013). Not only is rapid development seen as an essential means of transcending past divisions, but the ruling coalition is also convinced that development partners and other external actors cannot be depended upon and, as such, rapid economic growth is essential to ensure national independence and autonomy (Hayman 2009; Chemouni forthcoming). The reference point for all government strategies since 2000 and an expression of the political settlement forged at that time is Vision 2020. Vision 2020 sets the targets of making Rwanda a middle-income country and eliminating extreme poverty by 2020. These targets reflect an acknowledgement that poverty, land shortages, and population pressure were among the causes of the genocide and, consequently, that resolving these problems is key to ensuring it never happens again. As aptly summed up by former Minister of Local Government, Protais Musoni,

The thinking in Vision 2020 and back to 1997 was that we believe we need a unified nation to achieve development and provide services to people. But singing about unity is not enough, we still need the cement that is an equitable distribution for everybody in order to cement the sense and pride of a nation ... With poverty, people can say 'we have a nation that is unified, but what is in it for me?' (int. respondent RG2)

The government's concern is therefore that the persistence of poverty and inequality in Rwanda—an undeniable feature of the current political settlement—could provide the motivation for those that lose out to return to divisionism and conflict. As such, poverty and inequality are seen by the government to pose a direct threat to its post-ethnic vision and, by implication, the legitimacy of the ruling coalition.

The third foundational idea is the need to avoid political clientelism, which threatens to undermine developmental efforts and could lead to the resurgence of ethno-political mobilization (Golooba-Mutebi and Booth 2013; Chemouni 2014). From this perspective, electoral competition provides incentives for government officials to resort to clientelism and corruption as means of securing elected office. Consequently, party competition in local government elections is prohibited and during the last 20 years the RPF has pursued a zero tolerance approach to corruption that has limited patronage politics.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These ideas leave the coalition open to criticism, at least some of it justifiable. Critics argue that the restriction of ethno-political mobilization has been used to cover up the domination of an ethnic minority (Pottier 2002; Ansoms 2009; Reyntjens 2013), while developmental progress conceals political repression and papers over the divisions that contributed to the genocide (Straus and Waldorf 2011).

As such, the post-ethnic and developmental vision of the ruling coalition and its political legitimacy are closely intertwined. The possibility of resurgent sectarian divisions constitutes an existential threat for a regime that continues to be associated with an ethnic minority, while a combination of rapid development and poverty reduction, alongside the suppression of ethnicity, regionalism, and clientelism, is seen as the means to transcend these divisions.

### **3 Vision 2020 Umurenge within the distributional regime**

State social protection in Rwanda dates back to the establishment of a pension scheme in 1962 in the late colonial era. However, social insurance only reached employees in the small formal sector. For the most part, under previous governments, support for the rural population took the form of agricultural subsidies, as well as health and educational provision rather than social assistance. The Government of National Unity introduced programmes, including elements of social protection, to respond to specific issues arising from the post-conflict context, including: the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) in 1997 to reintegrate demobilized soldiers, including through the provision of short-term cash transfers; and the Genocide Survivors Support and Assistance Fund (FARG) in 1998 to provide financial support and advocacy for genocide survivors.

One of the most politically important challenges facing the ruling coalition in the 1990s was how to accommodate large numbers of return migrants to Rwanda. For the RPF, the right of return for those displaced in 1959 was the key motivation for the civil war, while accommodation of those displaced during the civil war was central to claims of promoting national unity. A programme of *umudugudu* or villagization was conducted in the mid- to late 1990s to relocate scattered dwellings into consolidated settlements in the expectation that this would make more efficient use of scarce land. However, the government's ambitions soon expanded from reintegrating migrants to relocating the entire rural population into planned settlements (Hilhorst and Leeuwen 2000).

#### **3.1 Beyond reconstruction: Vision 2020**

Vision 2020 outlined the overarching objectives that guided subsequent policies and strategies. However, the document is short on clear policy prescriptions. The first strategy to act on this Vision was the 2002 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which focused on the need to raise agricultural productivity and investment in infrastructure. The PRSP noted plans to develop a Social Protection Policy, but contained no discussion on social protection. Meanwhile, in the early 2000s, different government ministries launched a range of largely uncoordinated initiatives related to social protection, although many were not originally framed as such.

From 1999, the Ministry of Health piloted and then rolled out the Mutuelles de Santé, a community-based health insurance scheme for rural and informal sectors (Chemouni forthcoming), as well as formal sector health insurance schemes. Then, *Ubudebe* was launched as part of the 2002 PRSP and is one of several programmes that seek to revitalize 'customary' practices to address contemporary problems. *Ubudebe* involves identification of needs through community discussion and assignment of households to six wealth categories. The aim is to encourage communities to work together to achieve their goals, with the support of a €1,000 grant funded by the EU. The programme has subsequently been framed as a form of social protection.

In 2003, MINALOC initiated the Labour-Intensive Local Development Programme (PDL-HIMO) with technical assistance from the International Labour Organization (ILO), building on

public works projects going back to 1978. Although it was not initially framed as social protection, PDL-HIMO constitutes a direct precursor to the VUP and, as discussed below, a programme with significant overlap given its objective of combining employment creation with infrastructure development. Despite enormous ambitions, the programme suffered from insufficient donor funding and a lack of technical expertise and was limited to relatively small pilots. Labour-intensive public works have, nonetheless, been taken up by several other ministries.

In 2005, MINALOC produced the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP). This policy was advocated by the WB (int. respondent RG2) and closely followed its Social Risk Management framework. However, the policy was weak on detail and, though it listed *Ubudebe*, HIMO, and health insurance as part of social protection, it was not well integrated with other government policies. According to former Minister Protais Musoni, MINALOC lacked expertise in social protection at the time and by 2007, ‘we were struggling with the ideas and the VUP came and took over’ (int. respondent RG2).

### **3.2 Stalled progress and renewed efforts to meet Vision 2020**

Following the devastation of the genocide, economic growth was strong in the 1990s and steady in the first half of the 2000s. However, it became increasingly evident that growth was leading to rising inequality and making little contribution to poverty reduction. The government’s 2007 PRSP review raised major concerns. Comparison of the first two rounds of the Integrated Household Survey on Living Conditions (EICV) showed that despite average economic growth of 6.4 per cent per year between 2000/01 and 2005/06 (MINECOFIN 2007: 5), the poverty rate reduced by just 3.5 per cent (NISR 2007). Furthermore, due to population growth, the poverty headcount actually increased, while inequality increased from an already high Gini coefficient of 0.47 in 2000/01 to 0.51 in 2005/06 (NISR 2007). EICV results also highlighted regional inequalities, with a significant reduction in poverty in the Eastern Province, moderate progress in the north and west, but an increase in the poverty headcount in the south.

The result of these discussions was the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction (EDPRS) strategy (2008–13), which introduced the VUP. The EDPRS aimed to reduce the costs of doing business through public infrastructure investment, to address low levels of ‘human capital’ through education, and to improve governance. Evaluation of the EDPRS was in stark contrast to the first PRSP. The government hailed the achievement of a ‘perfect developmental “hat trick” of sustained economic growth (8% average), poverty reduction (12% points) and a reduction in income inequality’ (MINECOFIN 2013: ix). These results appear to constitute a remarkable success, although inequality remained extremely high. Rapid poverty reduction is attributed to growth in agricultural productivity, diversification into off-farm activities, and reduced fertility, though the impact of the VUP itself is unclear (WB 2015). These apparent successes led to renewed optimism in government and even more ambitious targets for future progress. A revised version of Vision 2020 in 2012 set targets of 11.5 per cent growth per year and a reduction of extreme poverty from 24 per cent to less than 10 per cent during the EDPRS2 period (2013–18). Initial EICV4 results for 2010/11–2013/14 show continued progress, with strong economic growth, and further reductions in poverty and inequality (NISR 2015).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The EICV4 has provoked controversy, with claims that calculation of the poverty line was manipulated to give the false impression of progress (Reyntjens 2015). If correct, this would raise questions about the accuracy of official statistics more broadly.



## 4 The adoption and evolution of the VUP

The VUP policy process can be loosely disaggregated into three phases, addressed in the following sections: the drafting of the original programme document during 2007; the detailed design phase and piloting in 2008; and the programme's evolution during rollout and discussions on the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) from 2009.

### 4.1 Initial policy development

The VUP originated in the annual government leadership retreat in February 2007. The Minister of Finance, James Musoni, presented results of the EICV2 and the Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis (CFSVA) to assess progress and plan for EDPRS1. Slow rates of poverty reduction and rising inequality clearly demonstrated a failing of the government strategy. The leadership decided that something needed to be done, with several observers pointing specifically to President Kagame himself, who demanded swift action (int. respondents RG1, RG3).

Government respondents denied that the VUP was a response to specific demands made by interest groups or electoral pressures, and, unlike the situation prevailing in most of the other countries covered in this special issue, interviews suggest that there was no concerted push from donors to promote social assistance in Rwanda before 2007.<sup>6</sup> Instead, persistent high poverty rates represented an emerging political problem that threatened to undermine the government's narrative of building national unity through socioeconomic progress. Meanwhile the high and rising rates of inequality, in particular interprovincial inequality, challenged the idea that the government was delivering inclusive development. Continuing Protais Musoni's earlier analogy, the lack of progress threatened to erode the 'cement' that held together the government's strategy and even the political settlement itself.

The outcome of the retreat was the formation of a committee comprising members of MINALOC and MINECOFIN, with the Minister of Local Government, Protais Musoni, given responsibility for developing a programme within six months to address the problems. Despite having no policy proposals at that stage, the president launched the initiative at the site of the Millennium Villages Project in March 2007 (int. respondent RG1). From the very beginning, the programme was conceived as one of three core pillars of the EDPRS, with the goal of ensuring 'that economic growth rapidly translates into poverty reduction' (MINECOFIN 2007: 75). As such, the responsibility came with considerable political pressure to deliver an ambitious programme in a very short time frame (int. respondent RG11).

In the following months, Protais Musoni held discussions with an advisor seconded from MINECOFIN, representatives of the WB and DFID, and MINALOC staff. While the original impulse for the VUP originated in an emerging threat to the political settlement, it was through the discussions with donors within this policy coalition that the design of the VUP took shape. The WB and DFID proposed looking at Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) and paid for State Ministers for the Economy and Local Government to undertake a study tour during 2007 (int. respondents RG1, RG2, RD4). The State Minister for Local Government also visited Zambia's Kalomo cash transfer pilot with donor support and the MINALOC team reviewed literature on other programmes. However, the PSNP and the Food Security

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<sup>6</sup> The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but appear to be linked to turnover of social development advisors in DFID Rwanda and the absence of senior, in-country social protection staff at the WB during the period.

Programme (FSP) of which it is a part was the main foreign policy model that influenced the Rwandan government (int. respondents RG2, RG9).<sup>7</sup>

In the following months, the economic advisor seconded to MINALOC drafted the VUP programme document in close discussion with Protais Musoni, drawing heavily on the PSNP/FSP model. Ethiopia's FSP at that time comprised: the PSNP, including public works for households with an able-bodied adult and direct support for households without; a credit and extension programme; and a resettlement programme. The VUP has three main components; public works, direct support, and financial services, which includes credit for programme participants. The VUP was also originally intended to implement large-scale villagization.

Among the reasons why the PSNP/FSP was attractive to the Rwandan government was that the model enabled them to build on existing policies and ideas. The State Minister of Finance who took part in the study tour reported that the PSNP was attractive because Ethiopia, like Rwanda, had already launched far reaching decentralization (int. respondent RG11). As such, the VUP was seen as a means of deepening the decentralization started in 2000, also under Protais Musoni. The Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme, as the name suggests, was intended to build the capacities of each umurenge (sector). Furthermore, the public works component built on MINALOC's experience with PDL-HIMO. As Protais Musoni put it 'the VUP was not starting from nowhere, we knew exactly how to do HIMO' (int. respondent RG2). Likewise, the VUP was integrated with *Ubudebe*, using its poverty classification to target VUP participants and building on the experience of the *Ubudebe* community transfers, in which Minister Protais saw a precedent for direct support (int. respondents RG2, RG10).

In addition, many of the paradigmatic ideas that influenced the Ethiopian government regarding the PSNP resonated strongly with the paradigmatic ideas within Rwanda's ruling coalition. Principally, both governments worry about creating 'welfare dependency' among the poor (int. respondent RG11; Lavers under review). In Rwanda, this concern relates not only to individual work incentives but also key paradigmatic ideas within the ruling coalition regarding the need for rapid development to limit national dependence on foreign aid. The result is the VUP's emphasis on ensuring that all recipients who are able to work should do so rather than being given 'handouts' and a need to provide clear paths to 'graduation' for programme participants.

Furthermore, despite the donor framing of the VUP as a social protection programme, for Protais Musoni and his team the VUP was never seen merely in those terms. Instead, for the Rwandan government the VUP was an integrated 'Local Development Program' that aimed at a broader process of agrarian and societal transformation in line with the prioritization of rapid socioeconomic development within the ruling coalition. The original programme document reserved the phrase *social protection* for direct support for 'the neediest people who are landless and unable to work', excluding public works which was instead intended to 'revive' the previously underfunded PDL-HIMO programme (GoR 2007: 22). As such, right from the start the VUP was expected not just to reduce poverty, but also to contribute to another key EDPRS priority; rural infrastructure. In doing so, the programme design raises important definitional questions regarding the grey area between public works as a form of social protection and as an infrastructure development programme (McCord 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> Respondents consistently pointed to donor facilitation of this policy transfer. However, ruling parties in Rwanda and Ethiopia are widely acknowledged to have close links and so direct intergovernmental links may also have been influential.

The VUP, as originally conceived, was also intended to contribute to ‘umudugudu-ization’ or villagization (GoR 2007). Protais Musoni’s visit to the Millennium Villages project in Mayange several years earlier had been influential in his thinking, but he had remained unsure as to how to scale up the Millennium Villages approach (int. respondent RG2). The influence of the Millennium Villages is evident in the VUP programme document that envisages using public works to construct planned ‘model umudugudu’ with improved access to services (GoR 2007). Attempting to learn from problems with the original villagization programme, which tended towards coercion in its implementation and faced resistance from local populations (Hilhorst and Leeuwen 2000; Newbury 2011), the VUP aimed to pursue an ‘incentive-based’ villagization, creating infrastructure and services first to encourage people to relocate (int. respondent RG5; GoR 2007).

The importance political elites placed on the VUP translated into strong pressure on the team designing the programme regarding the pace of the roll-out and expected impact of the programme. VUP targets were derived from the gap between Vision 2020 targets and the slow progress by 2007 (GoR 2007: 6), rather than a realistic assessment of what the programme might be able to achieve. The plan was for an exponential expansion from 30 pilot sectors to nationwide coverage within five years. The expectation was that after involvement in the programme for just six months, all participants, potentially including direct support beneficiaries, would be ready for graduation (int. respondents RD1, RC2, RC4).

The VUP is also notable for relative consensus between the WB and DFID rather than an attempt to advocate competing social protection models, as in some other countries. This may reflect the attitude of individual organizational representatives. One donor respondent explicitly noted that she had tried to learn from past experiences in other countries where donors had been in competition (int. respondent RD1). It is also clear that with strong government ownership of the policy agenda, space for donor influence is limited in Rwanda (int. respondents RD2, RD6). However, it may also be that the PSNP/FSP model aided consensus between the WB and DFID. These two are also the main PSNP donors and the model already constituted a hard-fought and ready-made compromise that would have been familiar and acceptable to each (Lavers under review). Furthermore, there is a clear contrast between donor support for the VUP and indifference regarding PDL-HIMO, despite the strong similarities between the two programmes. In part, the VUP’s success reflects changing donor fashions and the rise of social protection on the global development agenda (int. respondent RG2). The VUP was a programme that fitted a specific moment, in contrast to the limited funding available for public employment programmes.

#### **4.2 From huge ambitions to designing a social protection programme**

Following cabinet approval in August 2007, a programme coordinator was hired and the VUP was placed within MINALOC’s Common Development Fund (CDF) that was used to finance community infrastructure projects. At that stage it was necessary to translate the huge ambitions and sweeping assumptions in the programme document into an implementable plan. Given the lack of technical expertise within the ministry, MINALOC sought assistance from the WB and DFID. Donor representatives from that time acknowledge that the programme document had ‘severe limitations’ from a social protection perspective (int. respondent RD1), and in early 2008, hired a team of foreign consultants, including several social protection experts, to produce programme guidelines. This design process at the level of the policy coalition introduced a greater degree of realism and strengthened the programme’s focus on social protection as a means of reducing poverty, while downplaying the links with villagization.

In selecting consultants the donors turned, in the words of one of the team, to ‘their PSNP stalwarts’ (int. respondent RC6), deliberately selecting several people who had worked on the PSNP (int. respondents RD4, RC3, RG9). The VUP coordinator described how he sat down with these consultants to examine in detail the activities conducted by Ethiopia’s regional, *wereda* (district), and *kebele* (sub-district) governments and how these responsibilities might be best distributed across Rwanda’s decentralized governance system (int. respondent RG9). At this stage discussions were focused on technical details. Nevertheless, one of the consultants was told repeatedly by Protais Musoni that he was in regular communication with ‘the boss’—President Kagame—about the design (int. respondent RC5), again highlighting the strong political importance assigned to the VUP.

During this design phase and early stages of implementation relations between donors and some government officials appear to have been somewhat strained, especially regarding the original coordinator. The main issues related to the government’s ideas about dependency and the importance of self-reliance. DFID, in particular, placed great importance on direct support for the poorest and most vulnerable. In return, the programme coordinator repeatedly criticized the negative effects of European welfare systems on work incentives, while arguing that some donors were bringing European experiences that were irrelevant to Africa (int. respondents RG9, RC4, RD1). Nevertheless, certain concessions from the government were achieved including an acknowledgement, absent from the programme document, that some of the most vulnerable households ‘will never graduate and will continue to require a level of direct financial support’ (MINALOC 2009).

Public works design also has important implications for the VUP’s contribution to poverty reduction. In Ethiopia, several donors insisted on an initial agreement regarding the ‘primacy of transfers’: that participants are entitled to payment for a certain number of workdays regardless of government capacity to organize public works (Lavers under review). No such agreement exists for the VUP, with the result that, like PDL-HIMO, the number of workdays and, consequently, the transfer of resources to the poor depend on the government’s capacity to organize projects. By design, therefore, the programme is driven by infrastructure priorities, not only social protection objectives.

MINALOC introduced public works in May 2008, direct support in January 2009, and financial services in January 2010. This rollout reflected CDF’s experience in public works, as well as a desire to manage participant expectations; for the programme coordinator it was important to introduce public works first, rather than direct support, to avoid participants viewing the programme as a government handout (int. respondent RG9). In the first year 30 sectors were selected, the poorest in each district across the country, with another two or three sectors per district to be added in each of the following years (int. respondent RG2). In hindsight, roll-out plans were entirely unrealistic given resource and capacity constraints (int. respondents RG2, RC2). The roll-out plan was adapted to add just one sector per district each year—still a significant logistical challenge—that implied a very long-term process. The selection of one sector per district also set aside clear evidence at the time that poverty, though present throughout the country, was concentrated in the Southern Province. As argued above, an important element of the current political settlement is a commitment to transcend past divisions, both ethnic and regional, through inclusive development. This translates into a rejection of regional criteria as the basis for policy-making, preventing the prioritization of the poorest province that might have maximized the impact on poverty (int. respondents RD1, RD4).

The original VUP programme coordinator left after seven months and the PDL-HIMO coordinator took over in late 2008. At the end of 2008, DFID also funded three foreign

technical assistants, including a social protection specialist, to help administer the programme, given the shortage of technical capacity in the ministry. Although the new coordinator had previously worked on PDL-HIMO, several donor representatives and consultants argued that the original coordinator did not understand the idea of social protection, as the donors saw it, and that bringing in new management who ‘got it’ was a key step (int. respondents RC5, RD1). It was therefore during 2008 through the detailed design phase carried out within a policy coalition of government and donor technocrats—but with strong oversight from key political figures within the ruling coalition—that the VUP began to resemble a social protection programme, as is understood within the development industry.

WB decentralization funds were used to hire programme staff, and CDF’s own funds were used to finance public works in the initial 30 sectors. DFID started funding the programme in 2009 and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) joined in 2010.<sup>8</sup> UNICEF also provided technical assistance and the EU provided sector budget support. However, government funding remained a large proportion of programme expenditure throughout, averaging 69 per cent over the first three and a half years (OAG 2012).

Several respondents argued that MINECOFIN and, in particular Minister James Musoni, were sceptical about the VUP in the early stages (int. respondents RC2, RC4, RC5, RD1, RD4). That said, however, there are no suggestions that MINECOFIN sought to block funding altogether. While some efforts were made to limit financial exposure, there was commitment to funding the programme. It is unclear to what extent this was the result of the president’s strong support in the face of resistance from MINECOFIN or of a basic level of cautious support from MINECOFIN.

The initial decision to adopt the VUP and the sustained level of elite commitment over time, therefore, created space for a transnationalized policy coalition to form and discuss policy options. A shortage of technical capacity in government enabled donors to shape the problem definition and policy design at the level of the policy coalition, strengthening the VUP’s credentials as a social protection programme. However, the proposals considered within the policy coalition were constrained by the perceived interests and ideas flowing from the political settlement. The nature of the political settlement strongly influenced, for example, the productive focus of the programme and the emphasis on self-reliance. As such, the VUP policy coalition differs in important respects from those in some of the other cases in this special issue. The VUP policy coalition was not bound by a shared set of ideas or the goal of advocating any particular policy proposal. Rather the coalition operated more like a technical working group, examining different policy proposals and their potential fit with the incentives and ideas flowing from the political settlement.

### **4.3 Reform and continuity within the social protection strategy**

At the end of 2009 a cabinet reshuffle replaced Protais Musoni with James Musoni as Minister of Local Government. Whatever James Musoni’s earlier concerns about the VUP, he became a strong supporter at MINALOC (int. respondents RC2, RD4). James Musoni oversaw the expansion and consolidation of the VUP and attempts to integrate it into a coherent NSPS.

By 2008 the 2005 NSPP was already seen as out of date and surpassed by the VUP. As such there was a need to bring together the VUP, as the new centrepiece of the NSPS, with FARG, RDRC, *Ubudehe*, and social insurance into one integrated approach (int. respondent RG6). A

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<sup>8</sup> Until 2012, when it cut funding based on allegations of Rwandan support for M23 in the DRC.

consultation process was held involving different levels of government, development partners, and other interest groups. This NSPS process followed ratification of the 2008 African Union Social Policy Framework (AUSPF). While the AUSPF is noted in the NSPS, however, it was not discussed at all during Rwandan policy discussions (int. respondent RD4) and was not mentioned by any respondents as an influence. Instead, the NSPS was solely attributed to the need for domestic policy coherence.

The consultation process contrasted with the consensus between key donors during VUP design. The government's decision to invite discussion and the apparent uncertainty within government opened up space for advocacy. UNICEF, Save the Children, and HelpAge advocated a lifecycle approach with specific grants targeting children and the elderly, drawing in part on the Social Protection Floor concept, while the WB opposed such an approach, preferring to build on the VUP (int. respondent RG6). In addition, UNICEF, the WB, and the ILO paid for government officials to attend training courses advocating their favoured types of social protection.

An initial draft strategy drew on the Social Protection Floor's lifecycle approach, advocating the replacement of VUP's direct support with categorical cash transfers for children, the elderly, and disabled. The public works component, meanwhile, would be transformed into an Employment Guarantee Scheme, providing a guaranteed number of workdays to participants. While the foreign consultant drafting the strategy apparently gained the support of the State Minister for this change, it was dismissed in pre-cabinet discussions for being too expensive and a poor fit for Rwanda. In particular, Protais Musoni, now Minister for Cabinet Affairs with responsibility for reviewing all policy proposals, felt this new strategy threatened to 'distort' the VUP and undermine its good work (int. respondent RG6). The strategy argued that universal grants for vulnerable groups would make them easier and cheaper to administer. However, cabinet expressed concern that universal grants would foster dependency and undermine fertility policy (int. respondents RG6, RD6). A new consultant was brought in to revise this draft, and a more modest proposal built around the VUP was approved by cabinet in 2011 (int. respondents RG6, RC1). In contrast to the original VUP proposal, which clearly resonated with core paradigmatic ideas within the ruling coalition, the proposal to transform the programme was rejected because of the tensions between categorical transfers and core paradigmatic ideas regarding self-reliance and dependency.

In 2013, the NSPS was revised for consistency with the EDPRS2, which focused on progress towards the ambitious, revised Vision 2020. Headline targets on growth and poverty reduction provided a strong influence on the challenging targets set for the VUP for 2013–18. First, the annual addition of one sector per district was ended and the decision made to target the poorest remaining sectors from 2012/13. Though facilitated by improved data availability in EICV3 (int. respondents RG6, RG7, RD2), this change signifies a shift from previous political concerns with geographic impartiality to maximizing resources for the poorest parts of the country to achieve Vision 2020. Second, direct support has been fast tracked and is planned to reach every sector in the country by mid-2016, while the more logistically challenging public works component will continue to expand more slowly. Respondents expressed a range of opinions as to the origins of these changes, including: discussions in the Social Protection Sector Working Group (int. respondents RG6, RG7, RD2); a specific request by some MPs (int. respondent RC2); and MINECOFIN demands to ensure that resources had the biggest possible impact (int. respondent RG10).

Third, EDPRS2 has a renewed focus on graduation with the VUP expected to contribute to poverty reduction targets. Although the original programme document envisaged graduation within six months, over time the approach had become more realistic, gradually extending intervals between re-targeting exercises to three years (int. respondent RC2). MINECOFIN pushed MINALOC to commit to specific graduation targets (int. respondents RC2, RD2, RG7)

due to the escalating costs of the roll-out and what they considered to be the VUP's minimal impact in its first five years (int. respondent RG10). As the Chief Economist in MINECOFIN argued,

You cannot have people receiving support for 3–5 years, it is too much ... a person who is 30–40 years old who is not disabled, they cannot be in a social protection programme for 5 years. A success story is when after three years someone graduates from poverty and we do not need to support them anymore. (int. respondent RG10)

#### **4.4 Elite commitment to the VUP and the challenges of implementation**

The strong elite commitment to the VUP is demonstrated by its implementation, with government financing a significant proportion of the costs, hiring staff, and institutionalizing the programme. Furthermore, while there have undoubtedly been cases of corruption, there is no evidence of the widespread use of the VUP for patronage purposes, as is evident in some of the other country case studies. Indeed, regular audits by the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG 2012), prosecutions of government officials found to have misappropriated funds, and regular exposés of corruption cases in government-controlled media (Karuhanga 2012; Rugira 2015), suggest clear intolerance for such activities within government.

This does not, however, mean that implementation has always been effective. Notably, programme participants have consistently received fewer workdays than government targets, while only 54 per cent of eligible households actually participated in public works in 2011/12 (MINALOC 2013: 53). While poverty reduction was undoubtedly a core concern driving the original adoption of the VUP, these implementation failings point to competing priorities within the ruling coalition that undermine the actual contribution of the programme to poverty reduction. Three main implementation challenges were noted by respondents and evaluations of the programme.

First, the VUP faces significant financial constraints that have limited its implementation. CDF receives a minimum of 10 per cent of the government budget by law. Social protection funding has grown over time to account for 40 per cent of this statutory funding, the majority of which goes to the VUP (int. respondents RG8, RC2). Nevertheless, relatively low rates of graduation thus far, alongside the annual expansion of the VUP to new sectors has resulted in the intensification of financial constraints. Although MINALOC has attempted to negotiate an increase of 5 per cent of the government budget, this has not been sanctioned by MINECOFIN (int. respondent RG8). The shortage of finance has led the government to reduce the number of local government staff per district responsible for administering the programme, resulting in capacity constraints (int. respondent RC2). Financial restrictions also present a partial explanation for the shortage of workdays offered to programme participants and the low rates of participation in the programme.

Second, the question remains as to whether poverty reduction is really the government's top priority and whether the VUP constitutes an effective form of social protection in practice. The potential of the VUP to contribute to multiple government objectives was a key feature of the original policy proposal and, it would seem, one reason for the high degree of elite commitment to the programme. However, there has been recurrent tension within the VUP between the relative importance of poverty reduction and infrastructure development. The key variable in this respect is the labour-intensity of public works, which determines the proportion of programme resources transferred to participants.

The VUP has never come close to the target of spending 80 per cent of the public works budget on wages. Indeed, over time the labour intensity of public works has reduced and, in 2013/14 was less than half this target: 38 per cent. Consequently, one respondent questioned whether VUP public works could accurately be characterized as social protection at all (int. respondent RC7). The VUP was originally located in CDF, which has a mandate to deliver value for money in community infrastructure projects. The original programme coordinator reported that he was continually asked to justify the value for money of the VUP, and CDF management pushed him to use contractors and capital-intensive production techniques that would undermine the protective function of the programme (int. respondent RG9). These tensions eased when CDF was transformed into the Rwandan Local Development Support Fund (RLDSF)<sup>9</sup> in 2011 with a broader mandate, including social protection (int. respondents RG8, RC2). Respondents in LODA and MINALOC argue that from that point the top priority was to support the poor and infrastructure development was of secondary concern.

Whatever the intentions within LODA, however, the VUP remains subject to competing pressures at local government level. While public works projects are supposed to be selected by communities, there has long been evidence that government priorities dominate decision-making (Devereux and Ndejuru 2010). *Imihigo* for local government officials contain a wide range of targets across different sectors, including infrastructure development. The inflow of significant VUP resources therefore provides strong incentives for local governments to use these funds to meet infrastructure targets, undermining the protective role of the programme (int. respondents RC2, RC4). Indeed, this problem has grown in importance as local governments have taken on increasing responsibility for identifying and planning projects, in line with the intention to use the VUP to support decentralization (int. respondents RC3, RC4). This focus on infrastructure development provides a partial explanation for the low and falling labour-intensity of public works.

The third major challenge concerns the targeting of programme participants. From the initial design discussions, donors expressed concern about the use of *Ubudebe* wealth classifications as a mechanism for selecting VUP participants. The WB, for example, repeatedly advocated a proxy means test in its place, without success (int. respondents RD1, RD4, RC4, RC7). A recent study by Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2015) matched individuals' *Ubudebe* classification with their wealth ranking in EICV3—the quantitative assessment used to assess national progress in poverty reduction. The results suggest that there is virtually no relationship between the two, with *Ubudebe* categories evenly distributed across consumption quintiles. Not only does this represent a significant challenge for assessing graduation, but it also raises serious questions about the VUP's objective of targeting resources to the poorest: 62 per cent of the poorest quintile in the EICV are likely excluded from the VUP as they are not included in categories 1 or 2 (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2015: 108). Growing evidence of these problems prompted the 2014 government leadership retreat to demand MINALOC 'expedite revision of *Ubudebe* categorization' (RoR 2014: 1). MINALOC piloted a new *Ubudebe* scheme in five districts from late 2014. This revised version of *Ubudebe* reduced the number of categories from six to four and complemented community assessments with a 13-question household asset survey intended to add an objective dimension. The new scheme was approved for nationwide use in 2016. Several respondents, nonetheless, expressed doubts about whether the new questions would provide any basis for identifying the poorest households.

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<sup>9</sup> RLDSF was renamed the Local Administrative Entities Development Agency (LODA) in 2014.



## 5 Conclusion

Respondents from government, development partners, and consultants were unanimous that the government drove the VUP policy-making process. The original initiative can be linked to core paradigmatic ideas within the RPF and the understanding that poverty and inequality constitute a threat to the political settlement that needed to be addressed. Donors certainly influenced the programme through the policy coalition by suggesting the PSNP as a policy model and strengthening the programme's problem framing regarding social protection. However, the VUP is very much an example of existing elite commitment in search of a policy idea, rather than donors advocating a policy and trying to generate commitment within government, as is the case in several of the other countries examined in this special issue.

While the VUP was a government initiative and elite commitment remains high, there remain doubts as to quite what the government is committed to. While the original initiative stems from the slow rate of poverty reduction, the programme design was approved by the government based on the programme's potential to contribute to a range of productive objectives in addition to the provision of assistance to the poorest. These multiple objectives have proven to be a recurrent challenge in programme implementation, with targets for infrastructure development, in particular, in tension with those of poverty reduction. As such, while there is some complementarity between the protective and productive objectives of the VUP, this can easily be overestimated. While the productive goals of the programme may have been essential to securing elite commitment within the context of a dominant coalition settlement, they also present a challenge to the implementation of social protection.

As such, the analysis in this paper shows that the adapted political settlements framework provides valuable insights into the Rwandan government's motivations for adopting the VUP. While social protection does not yet constitute an integral feature of the bargains that underpin the Rwandan political settlement, the political settlement has shaped commitment to and design of the VUP in vital ways. The VUP is an example of an elite driven, top-down initiative to address a perceived emerging threat to the political settlement and, as such, is inherently intertwined with the political legitimacy of the ruling coalition. Slow progress in poverty reduction and rising inequality constituted threats to the core ideas underpinning the political settlement and prompted action. The strong elite commitment to the programme is evidenced by the close alignment between the policy coalition and the ruling coalition, with key ministries and powerful ministers assigned responsibility and the president demanding the development of a programme and following up throughout the design process.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the value of incorporating a focus on ideas as an essential complement to the interest-based explanation in Khan's (2010) political settlements framework. Ideas at all levels were highly influential on the programme's orientation and design. First, core paradigmatic ideas within the political settlement are clearly evident in the government's commitment to economic growth and poverty reduction, and the importance of avoiding regional bias. This imperative is reflected in the integration of the VUP into the development strategy—rather a standalone anti-poverty programme—and the expectation that the programme should have a range of productive impacts, as well as providing protection for the poor. Second, and linked to this productive focus, is the problem definition regarding dependency and the resulting emphasis on public works. Self-reliance—both of individuals and the country—is a key objective of the ruling coalition and one that requires rapid developmental progress and the contribution of every Rwandan to productive activities. Finally, the VUP drew heavily on the policy model of Ethiopia's PSNP. In doing so, however, there was a clear attempt by the government to integrate the basic PSNP framework with existing Rwandan policies and ideas, considerably adapting the PSNP model in the process.

## **Appendix**

### **Interviews conducted**

#### *Government officials*

RG1, Deputy Director-General for Social Protection, LODA, Kigali, 19 and 21 May 2015

RG2, former Minister of Local Government, Kigali, 28 May 2015

RG3, former Minister of Health, Kigali, 29 May 2015

RG5, Head Human Settlement Planning and Development Department, MININFRA, Kigali, 21 May 2015

RG6, former Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, MINALOC, Kigali, 27 May 2015

RG7, VUP Director, LODA, Kigali, 22 May 2015

RG8, Director-General, LODA, Kigali, 22 May 2015

RG9, former VUP Programme Coordinator, CDF, Kigali, 20 May 2015

RG10, Chief Economist, MINECOFIN, Kigali, 20 May 2015

RG11, Vice-Governor, National Bank of Rwanda, Kigali, 7 July 2015

#### *Development partners*

RD1, representative of a development partner, by Skype, 20 March 2015

RD2, representative of a development partner, Kigali, 27 May 2015

RD4, representative of a development partner, by Skype, 24 March 2015

RD6, representative of a development partner, Kigali, 27 May 2015

RD7, representative of a development partner, Kigali, 27 May 2015

RD8, representative of a development partner, Geneva, 14 May 2015

RD9, representative of a development partner, Kigali, 20 May 2015

#### *Foreign consultants*

RC1, consultant on NSPS, by Skype, 25 November 2014

RC2, technical assistant to RLDSF / LODA, by Skype, 16 April and 25 May 2015

RC3, consultant on VUP design, by Skype, 16 March 2015

RC4, technical assistant to RLDSF / LODA, by Skype, 18 March 2015

RC5, consultant on VUP design, by Skype, 27 April 2015

RC6, consultant on VUP design, by Skype, 27 March 2015

RD7, consultant on NSPS, by Skype, 2 July 2015

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