

Knowledge Systems and Social Security in Africa: A Case Study on Ghana

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ABSTRACT Social security (SS) refers to a field of social welfare concerned with social protection or protection against socially recognized needs. It is a social insurance from which people receive benefits or services in recognition of contributions to an insurance scheme. These services typically include provision for old age, disability and provision for survivors. African cultural values, practices and the extended family system (EFS) constitute a formidable social protection for the population. It is an informal social security system (SSS) and is largely non-cash in character. The EFS is based on indigenous knowledge and the principles of solidarity and reciprocity and involves obligations on members to support each other in times of need. For instance, the role of the extended family in marriage, childbirth and care, management of puberty rites, care for the aged, and management of funerals provides a formidable form of social protection for each member of the family. However, globalisation, modernisation and urbanisation are causing a gradual disintegration of the EFS, thus rendering it ineffective as an SSS. In Ghana, the establishment of a national SSS by Act 279 of 1965 saw the beginning of a formal social security scheme in the country. A formal National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) was established in 2003 to serve as a financing mechanism for health care delivery. Despite the good intentions of the formal SSS, only 11% of the working population is covered. The majority of workers in Ghana are in the informal sector and are not covered by the formal SSS. The system is beset by a number of fundamental challenges that need urgent redress. One of its principal problems is externalisation of the traditional in-kind SSS which is anchored on the EFS. One of the surest ways of improving social security in Ghana and Africa as a whole is to adopt innovative mechanisms that allow an optimal combination of the in-kind SSS and the formal (in-cash) SSS which mainly targets the formal sector workers.