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# Only Cash? Power relations in the policy-making process of social protection in Madagascar

Léo Delpy, Claire Gondard

## Abstract

The development of social protection mechanisms in low-income countries is a major challenge in the face of significant issues related to poverty, health, and adaptation to climate change. The aim of this article is to investigate the policy-making process in Madagascar by examining the power relations among the main organizations involved in this national policy. Using a mixed-method combining policy network analysis and thematic analysis, we conduct a detailed analysis of the Malagasy policy network, the multi-actor power relations, and recent developments in national social policy. The findings highlight the important role played by international organizations in shaping national social protection policy through the financing of social assistance programs, support for institutions in charge of policy design and implementation, and the dissemination of transnational ideas. Drawing on the case of Madagascar, this study illustrates the growing importance of social assistance programs in low-income countries.

**Keywords:** Social protection, Social assistance, Cash Transfers, Madagascar, Policy Network

## Introduction

Social protection in low-income countries (LICs) is a major issue in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. At the intersection of poverty reduction, basic healthcare access, and adaptation to the consequences of climate change, public social protection policies have seen significant development since the 2000s in Sub-Saharan Africa (Delpy, 2025; Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2012), the 1990s in Asia (Han, 2023), the 1990s in the Middle East and North Africa (Jawad, 2019) and 1990s in Latin America (Barrientos, 2025). Since 1997 and the establishment of the first National Social Protection Strategy in South Africa (Plagerson et al., 2019), nearly all countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have developed a National Social Protection Strategy (Beegle et al., 2018). Protecting vulnerable populations by implementing and strengthening social assistance programs is a key element of these national strategies (Surender, 2023). These social assistance interventions include cash transfer programs, food distribution, and labor-intensive public works (Gentilini, 2022). Nevertheless, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa experience markedly different national trajectories. While some countries manage to develop national systems that cover a large share of their population, others face significant difficulties in establishing such mechanisms (Delpy, 2022). Madagascar perfectly exemplifies this second category. According to the latest data, only 15% of the population benefits from at least one social protection program (ILO, 2024). Faced with these difficulties and in line with regional dynamics, the country adopted its first National Social Protection Strategy in 2015. The strategy set an ambitious goal: to “reduce by 15% the number of people living in extreme poverty.” (MPPSPF, 2015).

In this article, social protection refers to the set of institutionalized mechanisms and policy instruments aimed at protecting populations against social and economic risks and reducing poverty and vulnerability. These mechanisms are implemented by public, private, national, and international organizations and encompass a wide range of interventions, including social assistance and social insurance. More specifically, our analysis of social protection policy focuses on two types of mechanisms that constitute the two main social protection schemes in Madagascar. First, the contributory insurance-based system developed since independence, which covers a limited portion of the population: workers in the formal sector. Second, non-contributory social assistance programs that mainly focus on populations living in extreme poverty (Gondard-Delcroix et al., 2019).

The social protection policy landscape in Madagascar has become increasingly complex in the context of the adoption of the national strategy, with a growing number of actors involved in the policymaking process. These include international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public national organizations, and private national organizations. The increasing number of stakeholders contributes to the complexity of governance, as they bring diverse visions of social protection and often pursue divergent interests. The interplay of compromise, conflict, and power relations among these actors is likely to shape the development of national social protection systems (Lavers & Hickey, 2021). The aim of this article is to investigate the policy-making process of social protection in Madagascar through an examination of the power relations between the main organizations involved in this national policy. Thus, we propose to analyze

the trajectory of national policy as the result of interactions and negotiations processes between the organizations. This approach aims to understand the trajectory of social protection public policy toward an “only-cash” model, that is, a social protection system predominantly structured around cash transfer programs.

This article makes several contributions to the field of social policies in Sub-Saharan Africa. First, it introduces an approach that remains underutilized in the analysis of policies in the Global South: policy network analysis. In this regard, it offers a methodological contribution to the study of public policies in these regions. These aspects have been insufficiently examined in the literature, which predominantly emphasizes the technical dimensions of policy effectiveness, such as targeting methods, transfer modalities, conditions, and their impact on various well-being and living condition indicators (see for example Owusu-Addo et al., 2018). Thus, this article contributes to a growing body of literature calling for stronger political economy approaches to the study of social protection systems in Africa (Hickey, 2008; Hickey et al., 2019; Lavers & Hickey, 2016). Adopting such an approach allows for a shift beyond analyses that focus primarily on program design or effectiveness, towards a deeper understanding of the power relations, actor coalitions, institutional constraints, and international influences that shape policy trajectories (Hickey et al., 2019; Seekings, 2019). Second, drawing on the case of Madagascar, this study illustrates a broader trajectory observed in many LICs: the growth of social assistance. We provide evidence that helps to objectify the role of international organizations in these national processes.

## **Social protection context in Madagascar**

In the early 2000s, Madagascar’s national social protection system had remained largely unchanged since independence (Olié. et al., 2024). The list of ILO conventions ratified by Madagascar indeed shows a marked slowdown in the 1970s and a period of inactivity in the 1980s (ILO, 2025b). In the 1960s, a series of laws and decrees established the foundations of a social insurance system based on employment, specifically concerning the retirement system in the public sector (Civil and Military Pension Fund - *Caisse de Retraite Civile et Militaire* (CRCM); and Provident and Pension Fund - *Caisse de Prévoyance et de Retraite* (CPR)) and in the private sector (National Social Welfare Fund - *Caisse nationale de prévoyance sociale* (CNaPS)). During the following period, which was primarily marked by structural adjustment plans, social insurance system was far from being a priority, and no reforms were undertaken. Thus, by the early 2000s, Malagasy social protection remained predominantly work-based, following a Bismarckian-inspired model, despite the fact that 94% of employment was informal (ILO, 2025a). In comparative studies of national systems and the state of social protection in Sub Saharan Africa, Madagascar is classified as an insecurity regime (Delpy, 2022; Wood & Gough, 2006). These regimes are characterized by high levels of vulnerability, a lack of formal social protection, and the persistence of informal forms of social protection based on relations of dependence. The political context of Madagascar remains highly unstable, which contributes to the paradoxical nature of the country’s economic growth (World Bank, 2022). The current GDP per capita is

only 60% of what it was in the 1970s, and each period of growth is invariably followed by a political crisis. Razafindrakoto et al. (2020) attribute this paradox to institutional factors. A small number of elite families concentrate power through clientelistic and rent-seeking practices, while opposing coalitions seek a greater share of growth during expansion periods, often triggering political crises (Rua et al., 2023). Additionally, the pyramidal structure of society, characterized by a large base of informal and rural workers and a weak middle class, perpetuates this political-economic trend, typical of countries where redistributive conflicts remain unresolved.

In the 2000s, a new trajectory for social protection emerged in Madagascar, aligned with the World Bank's fight against poverty agenda (Gondard-Delcroix et al., 2019). However, due to the coup d'état in 2009, the institutionalization of a new social protection policy did not commence until 2015, with the launch of the National Social Protection Program. Since 2015, three main cash transfer programs have been implemented in Madagascar: the Productive Safety Net Program (*Argent Contre Travail Productif (ACT-P)*), based on cash-for-work activities; the Human Development Cash Transfer (*Transfert Monétaire pour le Développement Humain (TMDH)*) program targeting poor households with children; and the FIAVOTA emergency cash transfer program implemented in drought-affected areas of southern Madagascar (Celada, 2017). This national program also established the *Social Protection Thematic Group*, which includes all the actors involved in the implementation of social protection policies. Co-led by UNICEF and the Ministry of Population, Social Protection and the Advancement of Women (*Ministère de la population, de la protection sociale et de la promotion de la femme*), the *Social Protection Thematic Group* aims to coordinate the implementation of the policy in a participatory manner. The group is composed of 80 actors from various categories: governmental actors, international organizations, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector. It is subdivided into four working groups based on the four pillars of the national social protection strategy: the cash working group (focused on combating poverty and vulnerability); the access to social services group; the protection of specific population groups; and the contributory social protection group. Between 2017 to 2019, the regular meetings of the *Social Protection Thematic Group* were instrumental in shaping the national social protection strategy. The objective of this article is to analyze how the interactions within the *Social Protection Thematic Group* have contributed to shaping the structure and form of social protection policy in Madagascar. More broadly, this study helps to partly fill a gap in the limited body of research on social protection policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in LICs.

## **Data & Methods**

This article employs a mixed-methods approach combining policy network analysis and thematic analysis to examine the policy-making process of social protection in Madagascar. The study relies on data gathered in two survey waves: the first in 2019, which included sociometric data and semi-structured interviews, and a second in 2021, which consisted of follow-up interviews conducted using a participatory approach. Before

outlining the data collection process, two challenges specific to inter-organizational network data collection must be addressed.

### **Conducting an inter-organizational sociometric survey**

#### *The network boundaries of social protection policy in Madagascar*

To determine the boundaries of the network, two main approaches are commonly used : the realistic and nominalist approaches (Laumann & Knoke, 1987). Nominalist approaches define the network boundaries based on characteristics observable by the researcher. On the other hand, realistic approaches define the boundaries according to the perspectives of network actors themselves. In the survey we conducted in 2019, we combined these two approaches by integrating three tactics to delineate the boundaries of the network. First, organizations are selected based on their participation in a common event or their membership in a shared institution. In our case, we focused on organizations that actively and regularly participated in *Social Protection Thematic Group* meetings. We had access to the attendance lists of representatives from these organizations at the *Social Protection Thematic Group* meetings (*interlock tactic*). Second, we submitted this initial list for evaluation to three experts of social protection in Madagascar from the World Bank, UNICEF, and the Ministry of Population, Women's Promotion, and Social Protection. These experts contributed by adding or removing several organizations from the final list (*reputational tactic*). Finally, building on the list generated through the two previous techniques, we assess the inclusion of additional actors in the network based on the perceptions of the actors already included. An organization was added when at least five surveyed organizations considered that it should be included in the list (*relational tactics*, also referred to as the *snowball method*). This approach involved a second phase of investigation when organizations were added to the initial list. In our case, the missing information was collected remotely by phone. The implementation of these three tactics allowed for the establishment of the final list of representative organizations within the social protection policy network in Madagascar.

#### *The selection of representatives from organizations*

The second challenge of inter-organizational networks is identifying a person within the selected organization. Using attendance lists from *Social Protection Thematic Group* meetings on social protection, we invited representatives from organizations that participated in these meetings. This approach enabled us to select individuals with significant knowledge of social protection, particularly regarding their organization's relationships (collaboration and influence) in the policy-making process. However, for several organizations, this approach was unsuccessful. In these cases, a respondent was selected based on their expertise in social protection and their position within the organization's hierarchy.

### **Data collection**

Data collection was carried out in two stages. First, in 2019, we conducted a study involving all the organizations included in the final list of representative organizations to collect both sociometric and reputational data. In the second stage, conducted in 2021, additional interviews were held with a subsample of the actors interviewed in 2019, in order to deepen and refine the study's findings. Thus, these two phases were designed to be complementary.

#### *Sociometric data*

Two types of sociometric data were collected (Table 1): collaboration and influence relationships among the various organizations on the list. For both types of relationships, respondents were asked to rate the intensity on a scale from 0 to 5.

**Table 1. Relationship definition and scoring scales of the interactions**

| Relationship  | Definition                                                                                                | Scale                                                                                      |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Collaboration | Formal and/or informal professional collaboration in the policy-making of social protection in Madagascar | 0: No relation<br>1: Very rarely<br>2: Rarely<br>3: Sometimes<br>4: Often<br>5: Very often |
| Influence     | Taking into account their opinion or action in the policy-making of social protection in Madagascar       |                                                                                            |

In practice, the sociometric component takes the form of a matrix that crosses all the organizations identified in the list of organizations with the two relationships studied (i.e. collaboration and influence). This matrix is completed during the interviews and allows for the collection of data characterizing each organization's relationships with the others on the list. Once all the organizations have been surveyed, the individual matrices are merged to produce two complete inter-organizational networks: the collaboration network and the influence network. We thus refer to networks as a set of public and private organizations connected through relationships of collaboration and influence and participating in the process of shaping national social protection policy in Madagascar.

#### *Reputational data*

We also conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the main trends in Madagascar's national social protection policy, the role of international organizations in the process, and the key stakeholders involved in the conception and implementation phases of public policy. In addition to these interviews, XX regularly participated in meetings of the *Social Protection Thematic Group*. These repeated attendances not only facilitated access to respondents, but also provided valuable insights into the subject of study (e.g. multi-stakeholder power dynamics, the growing dominance of cash transfers, and the influential role of international organizations).

#### *Additional interviews*

Following this first phase of data collection, a second wave of surveys was conducted in 2021. In total, eight additional interviews were carried out with representatives of organizations that had participated in the first phase. Each interview lasted an average of two hours. The selection of organizations reflected the diversity of organizational types (national vs. international) and intervention approaches (insurance vs. assistance) identified during the initial phase. The interviews were summarized and jointly discussed by the two authors. The interviews were structured as follows. First, the results from the initial phase were presented to the organizational representatives. The presentation of network graphs proved particularly effective in illustrating our findings and initiating discussion. This initial step generated a series of comments regarding the positions of different organizations, as well as the power dynamics between various organizations and groups of organizations. Second, following a participatory approach, we explored with the representatives of the eight organizations several specific themes in greater depth: (i) the current trajectory of national policy; (ii) the evolution of national public policy; and (iii) each organization's positioning within these dynamics. The participatory dimension of this second phase of data collection allowed us to consolidate and cross-check the data gathered during the first phase. The sensitive nature of the interviews led us to conduct them individually rather than in groups.

#### **Data Analysis**

To examine the policy-making process of social protection in Madagascar, we used a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative analysis relied on a two-step strategy, starting with an assessment of the structure and composition of the national policy network. This involves identifying the organizations included in the list, the types of organizations represented, and those that are most prevalent. The composition of the policy network was characterized by analyzing the inter-organizational collaboration network and presenting the various stakeholders. Then, to deepen our analysis, we analyzed the power of the stakeholders by combining two approaches. The power of an organization or group can be understood as the capacity of an actor to influence a rule, a policy, a program, or the actions of other stakeholders (Henry, 2011). We characterized the power of organizations in the policy-making process using social network analysis to identify the power of stakeholders through the inter-organizational influence network. To study the power of organizations as perceived by the members of the network, we focused on in-degree centrality of the influence network (Howlett et al., 2017; Ingold & Varone, 2012). This centrality measured counted the number of times an actor was cited as influential by another organization. Then, to complement this analysis, we graphically represented the influence network. The size of the organizations in the network indicated the level of power of each organization in the design of the national social protection policy between 2015 and 2019 (the first national strategy of social protection). We placed particular emphasis on the graphical representation of

networks, not only for visualization but also as an analytical tool. These representations make it possible to reveal structures and patterns that are invisible to the naked eye (Freeman, 2000). Then, we refined the analysis of power by mobilizing two questions related to the four main organizations involved in the design and implementation phases of national public policy. This approach allows us to distinguish between two phases of the national public policy-making agenda: design and implementation. We represented these data as a network by mapping all mentions of key actors reported by organizations. Node size reflected the number of times an organization was identified by other organizations as a key actor in Madagascar's social protection policy network.

In addition to these quantitative analyses, several qualitative analyses were conducted. Following realist and deliberative perspective, the research adopted a participatory approach that involved policy actors in validating and interpreting empirical findings (Swantz, 2008). In practice, during the additional interviews (second step of the data collection process) we shared the results of the analysis from the first phase of the survey with several representatives of organizations, reflecting the diversity of the actors involved. The presentation of these findings generated a number of discussions and comments from respondents. This two-stage analytical approach is particularly useful for understanding power relationships and the trajectory of national public policy. Using thematic analysis, we examined summaries drawn both from observations made during the meetings of the *Social Protection Thematic Group* (2018–2021) and from the summaries of the complementary interviews conducted in 2021. This approach allowed us to identify recurring themes emerging from the discussions and observations recorded by the researchers. It also allowed us to confirm or refine certain findings identified through the quantitative analysis. Furthermore, presenting the results to organizational representatives during the second phase of data collection allowed us to ground our findings in a more realistic understanding of policy implementation.

## Results

### Mapping the policy network of social protection in Madagascar

The policy network for social protection in Madagascar between 2015 and 2019 comprises of 41 organizations (see Table 2) of which 63% are national organizations (26) and 37% are international organizations (15). The most represented organizations include ministries (10), international non-governmental organizations (8), and technical and financial partners (7). Additionally, other types of organizations are present, such as government-affiliated organizations (6), national non-governmental organizations (3), mutual health insurance (3), private companies (2), labor' organization (1) and employers' organization (1). Among these 41 organizations, we successfully surveyed 36 organizations. Several organizations could not be surveyed due to various reasons (e.g., scheduling conflicts, refusals from organization leaders, legal issues, etc.).

274 **Table 2: The actors of the policy network for social protection in Madagascar**

| Name                                                                       | Acronym    | Type of organization           | Level                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| Ministry of Population, Promotion of Women and Social Protection           | Min_Pop    | Ministry                       | National             |
| Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock                                      | Min_Agri   | Ministry                       | National             |
| Ministry of Public Health                                                  | Min_Health | Ministry                       | National             |
| Ministry for the Civil Service and Administrative Reform                   | Min_civilS | Ministry                       | National             |
| Ministry of Employment, Technical Education and Vocational Training        | Min_Empl   | Ministry                       | National             |
| <i>Ministry of Finance and Budget</i>                                      |            | Ministry                       | National             |
| Ministry of Education                                                      | Min_Educ   | Ministry                       | National             |
| Ministry of the Interior and Decentralisation                              | Min_Int    | Ministry                       | National             |
| Ministry of the Economy and Planning                                       | Min_Eco    | Ministry                       | National             |
| <i>Primature</i>                                                           |            | Ministry                       | National             |
| National Social Security Fund                                              | CNaPS      | Public organisation            | National             |
| Universal Health Coverage Support Committee                                | CA_CSU     | Public organisation            | National             |
| Intervention Fund for Development                                          | FID        | Public organisation            | National             |
| National Risk and Disaster Management Office                               | BNGRC      | Public organisation            | National             |
| National Office of Nutrition                                               | ONN        | Public organisation            | National             |
| National Statistics Institute (Madagascar)                                 | INSTAT     | Public organisation            | National             |
| United Nations Children's Fund                                             | UNICEF     | TFP                            | International        |
| World Bank                                                                 | WB         | TFP                            | International        |
| World Food Programme                                                       | WFP        | TFP                            | International        |
| Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit                             | GIZ        | TFP                            | International        |
| <i>World Health Organisation</i>                                           |            | TFP                            | <i>International</i> |
| International Labour Office                                                | ILO        | TFP                            | International        |
| French Development Agency                                                  | AfD        | TFP                            | International        |
| Catholic Relief Service                                                    | CRS        | NGO                            | International        |
| Freidrich Eibert Stiftung                                                  | FES        | NGO                            | International        |
| Welthungerhilfe                                                            | WHH        | NGO                            | International        |
| GRET                                                                       | GRET       | NGO                            | International        |
| Humanity and Inclusion                                                     | HUM_INC    | NGO                            | International        |
| CARE                                                                       | CARE       | NGO                            | International        |
| Action Against Hunger                                                      | ACF        | NGO                            | International        |
| Positive Planet                                                            | POS_PLANET | NGO                            | International        |
| <i>Madagascar Red Cross</i>                                                |            | NGO                            | <i>National</i>      |
| Department for the Development of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar | SAF/FJKM   | NGO                            | National             |
| Collective of Citizens and Citizen Organisations in Madagascar             | CCOC       | NGO                            | National             |
| Group of Malagasy Companies                                                | GEM        | Employer organization          | National             |
| Sendika Kristianina Malagasy                                               | SEKRIMA    | Labor organization             | National             |
| TELMA                                                                      | TELMA      | Private company                | National             |
| Private Sector Humanitarian Platform                                       | PHSP       | Private company                | National             |
| <i>Savings and Mutual Agricultural Credit Fund</i>                         |            | <i>Mutual health insurance</i> | <i>National</i>      |
| OTIV-TANA                                                                  | OTIV       | Mutual health insurance        | National             |
| Tananarivian Inter-Company Health Organization                             | OSTIE      | Mutual health insurance        | National             |

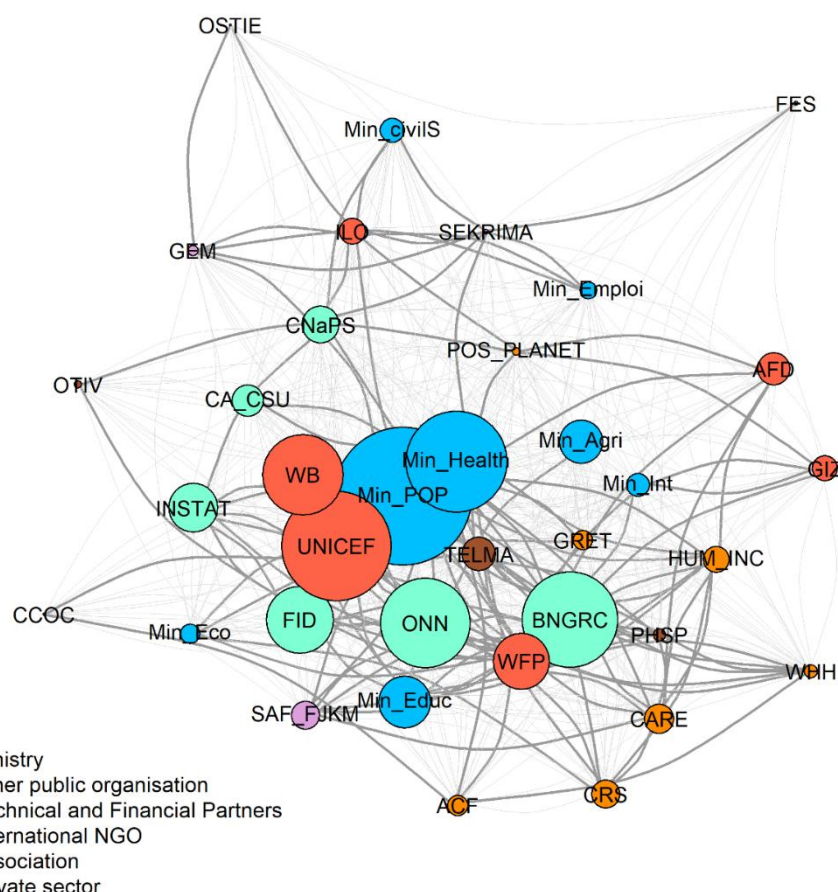
Note: The organizations in *italics* could not be surveyed during the data collection phase in 2019. TFP: Technical and financial partners, NGO: Non-Governmental Organization.

## Analysis of power in the public policy-making process

### *The key organizations in the inter-organizational collaboration network*

Figure 1 illustrates the inter-organizational collaboration network of the 36 surveyed organizations. It is noteworthy to highlight the centrality of three types of organizations in the collaboration network, an observation confirmed by the centrality indicators (see Table 3). Table 3, presents the 10 key organizations in the collaboration network, providing an understanding of the respective importance of different type of organizations. First, two ministries are at the center of the political network (See Figure 1 and Table 3): the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Population, Promotion of Women and Social Protection. The latter is responsible for leading the *Social Protection Thematic Group*, which facilitates the coordination among the various key organizations. Therefore, it is not surprising to find it in such a central position. Second, government-affiliated organizations are also significant within the collaboration network (see Figure 1). Three organizations appear particularly important: the Intervention Fund for Development, the National Risk and Disaster Management Office and the National Office of Nutrition. These three organizations are responsible for implementing several social assistance programs: (i) the Intervention Fund for Development is in charge of establishing conditional cash transfer programs, (ii) the National Risk and Disaster Management Office is partially responsible for implementing cash transfers following natural disasters, and (iii) the National Office of Nutrition is responsible for cash transfers related to food insecurity. Third, technical and financial partners also play an important role. UNICEF appears to be the most central actor among these technical and financial partners. The organization supports the Ministry of population, promotion of women and social protection in coordinating the *Social Protection Thematic Group*. Finally, it is noteworthy that other types of actors play a significantly less important role in the inter-organizational collaboration network in Madagascar (i.e., civil society, private sector organizations). It is interesting to note that the three identified technical and financial partners (i.e., UNICEF, World Bank, WFP) are among the most central actors in both considered networks (see Table 3). The World Bank and UNICEF are at the center of the both network, whereas traditional social insurance actors (i.e., ILO) find themselves on the margins. Thus, the most central organizations are those advocating for the development of social assistance programs. The analysis of qualitative materials allows us to refine these results by examining the trajectories of the two groups of actors and the structures of collaboration linking these two sets of organizations. Several interviews with organizations from the social insurance sector highlight a slowdown in their collaborative activities. Respondents note that partnerships which were once strong and well-developed between key organizations of the insurance system — such as the Ministry of Employment, Technical Education and Vocational Training, the National Social Security Fund, and the International Labour Office — have gradually weakened. In contrast, all interviews emphasize the dynamism of collaborations among organizations working in the field of social assistance programs. Several interviews point out the important

role of UNICEF and the World Bank in driving this dynamism. In particular, respondents underline the numerous collaborations between UNICEF and the organization responsible for policy design (i.e., Ministry of Population, Promotion of Women and Social Protection) as well as with the organizations in charge of implementing cash transfer programs (i.e., Intervention Fund for Development, National Risk and Disaster Management Office, National Office of Nutrition).



Note: The size of the nodes (i.e. circle) represents the in-degree centrality. Therefore, the larger the node, the more the organization collaborates with other organizations in the public policy-making process.

**Figure 1. Collaboration network of social protection in Madagascar**

**Table 3. Centrality for the collaboration and influence networks influence**

|                                                                  | Collaboration network | Influence network |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Name                                                             |                       |                   |
| Ministry of Population, Promotion of Women and Social Protection | 119                   | 85                |
| Ministry of Public Health                                        | 102                   | 75                |
| United Nations Children's Fund                                   | 106                   | 71                |
| National Risk and Disaster Management Office                     | 99                    | 77                |

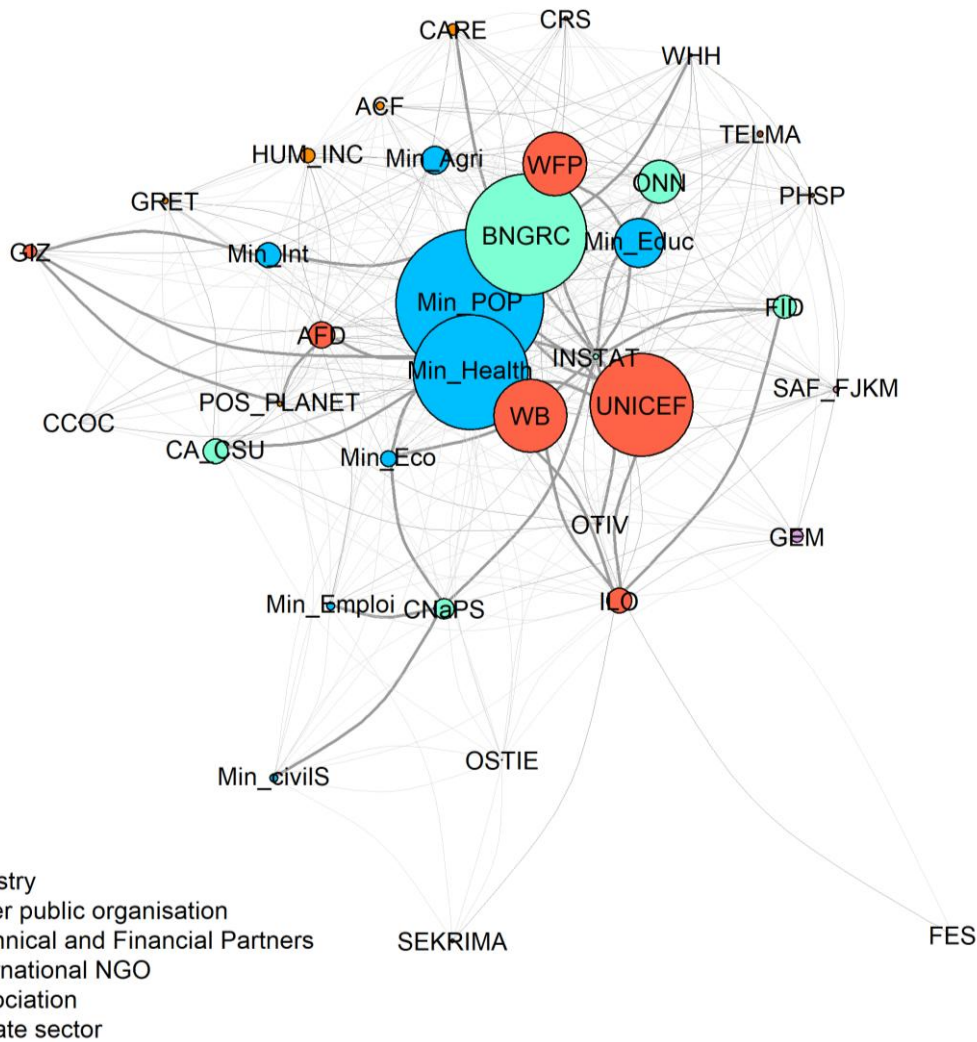
|                                            |    |    |
|--------------------------------------------|----|----|
| National Office of Nutrition               | 96 | 46 |
| World Bank                                 | 91 | 60 |
| Intervention Fund for Development          | 83 | 34 |
| World Food Program                         | 76 | 56 |
| Ministry of Education                      | 73 | 49 |
| National Statistics Institute (Madagascar) | 71 | 17 |

Note: Organizations are ranked in ascending order according to their in-degree centrality in the collaboration network. We calculate degree centralities using in-degree, weighted by the intensity of the different relationships.

#### *The key organizations in the inter-organizational influence network*

After analyzing the key organizations in the collaboration network, it seems relevant to examine the influence network. This type of relationship are important to understanding public policy-making processes. Are the most central actors in the collaboration process also the most central in the influence network, and thus in the public policy-making process? Figure 2 represents the influence network of Madagascar's national public policy in the field of social protection. This network reveals more pronounced differences compared to the collaboration network, particularly regarding the distinctions between central and peripheral actors. A small group of organizations have the most power over others during the policy-making process. This group includes three types of organizations: ministries, affiliated public organizations, and technical and financial partners. This observation is further confirmed by the results in Table 3, which presents the centrality measures of the influence network. It is worth highlighting the central role of three national actors: the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Population, as well as the National Risk and Disaster Management Office; and the three technical and financial partners in the political network. These six organizations form the heart of the network, playing a key role in shaping the public policy-making process. As previously noted, it is interesting to observe that these six actors are involved in the design and implementation of cash transfer programs in Madagascar. In contrast, social insurance actors (such as the ILO, Ministry of Employment, and National Social Security Fund) are marginalized within the influence network and thus have only a marginal impact on the policy-making process. This finding is supported by several interviews and by observations conducted during meetings of the *Social Protection Thematic Group*. We highlighted two types of discourse regarding the central role of organizations that are members of the cash working group. The first type of discourse, mostly expressed by actors involved in social insurance, criticizes the quasi-monopoly of these organizations over national policy resources. These actors adopt a rather critical stance toward the current trajectory of national public policy, for instance lamenting the abandonment of the social insurance system, the limited outcomes of social assistance programs, or the difficulties in financing such programs. A second type of discourse, more legitimist in nature, is expressed by the more influential organizations primarily operating within social assistance programs. While acknowledging the progressive dominance of organizations working in social assistance, these organizations justify their position through an urgency-driven argument. We thus identify a rationale built around two complementary

arguments: first, it is urgent to address humanitarian crises in Madagascar; and second, cash transfers represent an appropriate solution to achieve this goal.

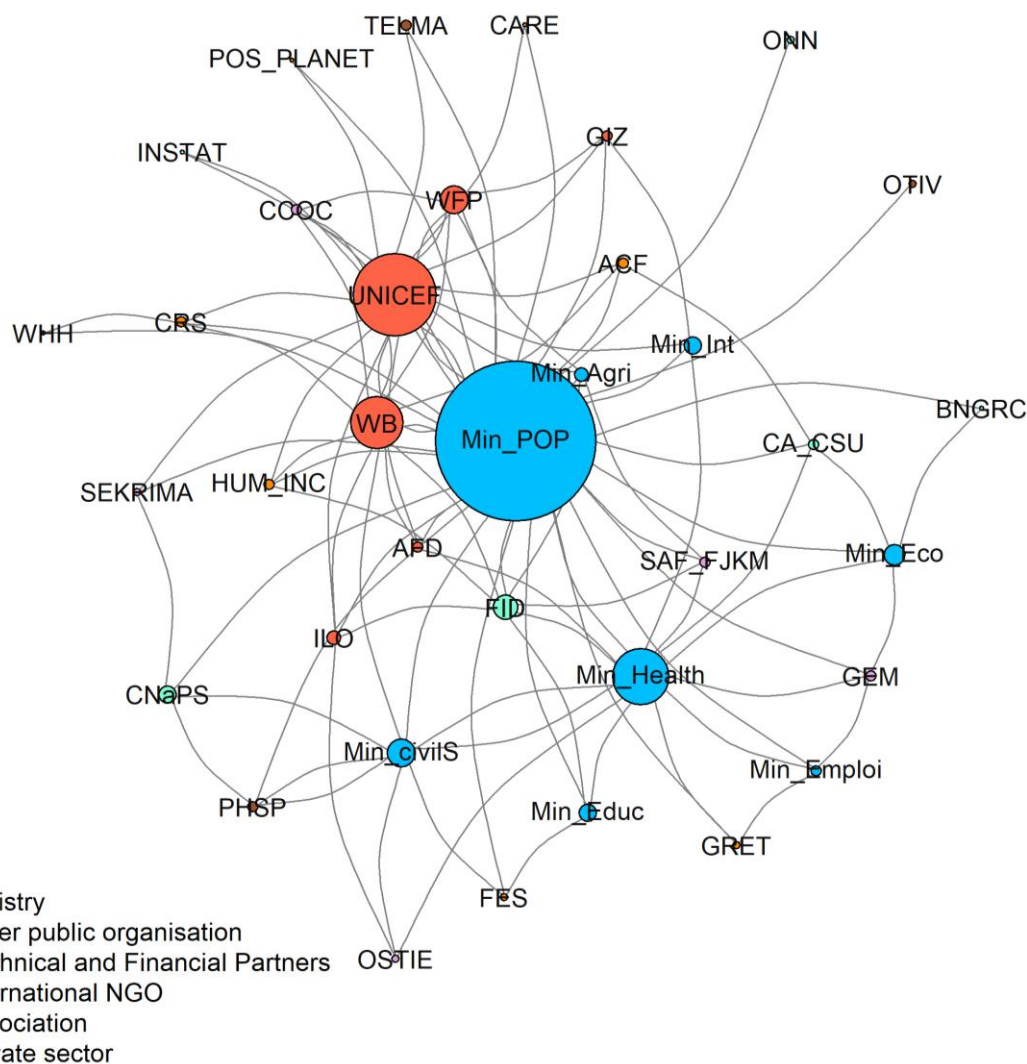


Note: The size of the nodes (i.e. circle) represents the in-degree centrality. Therefore, the larger the node, the more the organization influence other organizations in the public policy-making process.

**Figure 2. Influence network of social protection in Madagascar**

In addition to analyzing the inter-organizational influence network (with sociometric data), we seek to deepen our understanding of the power of organizations through an alternative measure. The survey helps distinguish the actors considered the most important by differentiating between the design phase (i.e., identification of the main principles and national objectives) and the implementation phase (i.e., execution of the public policy) of the national social protection policy. Figure 3 presents the citations received by organizations during the design phase, revealing four central actors. The Ministries of Health and Population, responsible for guiding the social protection system, play a key role in policy conception, particularly regarding social assistance and universal health protection. Among the technical and financial

partners, the World Bank and UNICEF also stand out as major organizations. UNICEF plays a leading role in coordinating national public policy actors. In contrast, the World Bank is less visible in policy coordination but remains an important actor, particularly through its financing of several social assistance programs. Although it is described as being less involved in shaping national policy, many interviewees emphasized its key role in supporting cash transfer programs since 2015. This support takes multiple forms (grants, loans, technical assistance, etc.) and contributes to the expansion of cash transfer programs.



Note: The size of the nodes illustrated the number of times an organization was cited by other organizations as a key actor in Madagascar's social protection policy.

**Figure 3. Network of citations of top actors during the public policy conception phase**

Using the same approach, Figure 4 visualizes the citation network of organizations deemed most important during the implementation phase. Unlike the design phase, the citation network in the implementation phase is less concentrated. However, the organizations involved in developing social assistance programs remain

the most central. During the implementation phase, as illustrated in Figure 4, organizations responsible for program implementation are cited more frequently, particularly because of their involvement in the delivery of cash transfer programs. The main social assistance program, the Human Development Cash Transfer, includes actors such as the Intervention Fund for Development, National Office of Nutrition, the Ministry of population, promotion of women and social protection, UNICEF, and the World Bank, while National office for risk and disaster management stands out in response to natural disasters, collaborating with UNICEF and TELMA. The importance of the National Social Insurance Fund in the implementation phase is also noteworthy, as it oversees the social protection insurance system. It is particularly interesting to examine the relationships of the National Social Insurance Fund, which are largely developed with historical social protection actors in Madagascar (i.e., Ministry of Employment, ILO, labor' organization, etc.). This positions the National Social Security Fund as a key actor during the implementation phase, although it is recognized primarily by organizations operating within the contributory social protection system.

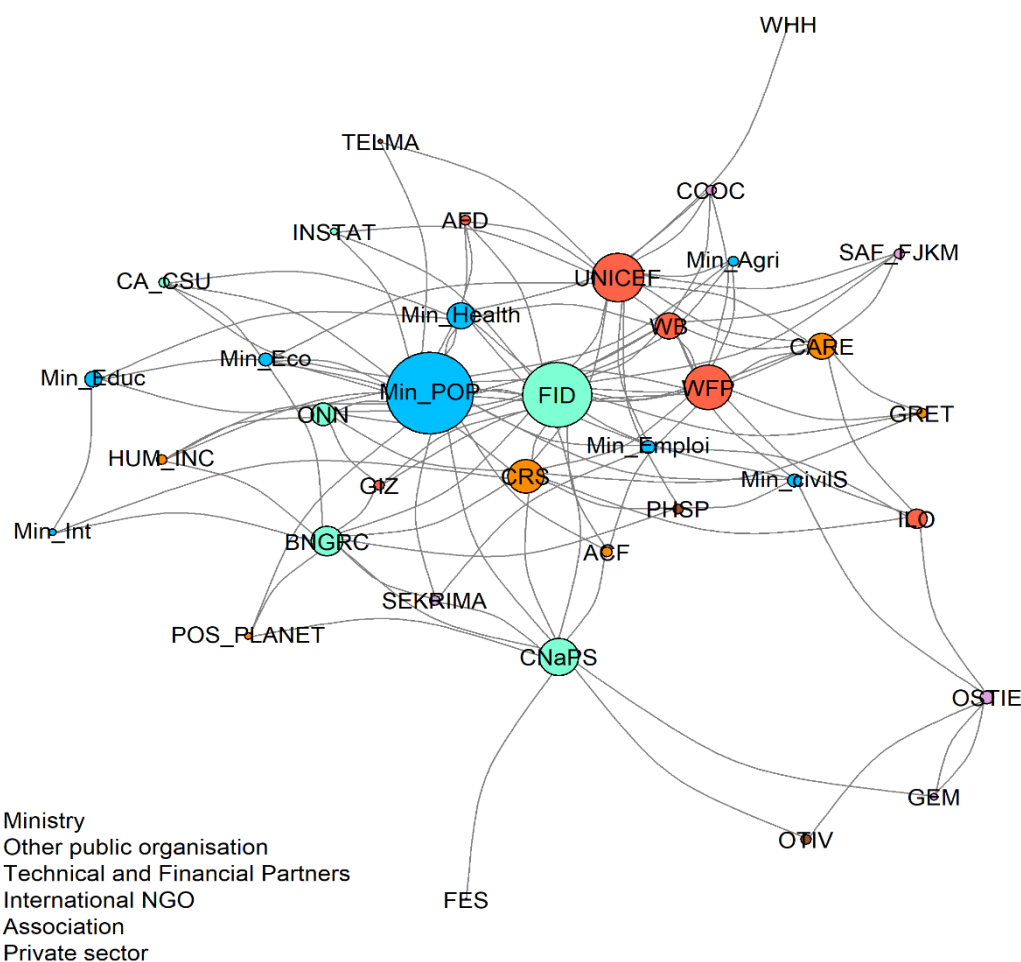


**Figure 4. Network of citations of top actors during the public policy implementation phase**

The two networks presented in Figures 3 and 4 allow us to distinguish the influence of actors across the different stages of the policy process. This approach thus helps clarify the results obtained from the inter-

organizational influence network. It appears that during the policy design phase, a group of six organizations plays a major role in defining the political problem and the designing strategic orientations. In contrast, during the implementation phase, the roles are somewhat more distributed. Consequently, organizations responsible for the execution of social assistance programs or the management of the National Social Security Fund are central.

The analysis of the interviews allows us not only to explain several findings identified through quantitative approaches but also to uncover results that could not be captured through quantitative methods. First, the thematic analysis highlights the absence of a common vision in the formulation of national public policy. Several interviews point to fragmentation in public action and a lack of shared orientation. For many representatives, each organization implements its own interventions without considering the actions of others. The development of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) was repeatedly cited to illustrate these difficulties in establishing a common policy orientation. Although UHC had been presented as a central policy objective for several years — including within social protection thematic working groups and the National Social Protection Strategy — it was gradually abandoned. As a result, several organizations responsible for implementing the program found themselves isolated in managing a large-scale national initiative. This fragmentation of public action tends to disorient organizations, particularly those situated on the periphery of the network. Second, the growing importance of cash transfers is clearly acknowledged by the actors interviewed. This prominence is highlighted both by organizations directly involved in these programs and by others. Moreover, the interviews allow us to go further by identifying several explanatory factors behind this transformation. A first element, identified by several organizations working in the field of social insurance, concerns the presence of conflicts and coordination difficulties among social insurance organizations. These conflicts primarily revolve around the financial management of social contributions by the National Social Security Fund. This institution, at the heart of the national social insurance mechanism, has been criticized for the limited social benefits it provides (with no increases for several years), for investments in diverse areas such as sports clubs and real estate, and for its interventions during the COVID-19 crisis. Regarding the latter, several interviews emphasized the inadequacy of the measures implemented during the pandemic in light of the country's challenges. In response to union demands for the introduction of partial or full unemployment support, particularly in the capital's free-trade zones, the National Social Security Fund granted loans to workers. In addition, several interviewees emphasized the significance of changes related to the structuring of the *Social Protection Thematic Group*. This group—initially organized around four working groups—no longer meets, whereas the cash working group continues to hold coordination meetings. As a result, the *Social Protection Thematic Group* has gradually restructured itself around the main organizations involved in the development of social cash transfer programs. Finally, several representatives highlighted that the management of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the chronic crisis in the Great South of Madagascar, contributed to strengthening the assistance-oriented logic. These two crises led to a major reallocation of funds toward the implementation of social assistance programs. For instance,

funds initially dedicated to the development of an integrated social protection system—including programs aimed at establishing social insurance schemes for informal sector workers—were redirected to emergency interventions in the southern regions of Madagascar.

## Discussion

This article analyzes the policy-making process of social protection policy in Madagascar, focusing on inter-organizational relationships and networks. By concentrating on power structures rather than the effectiveness of public social protection policies, this article makes an original contribution to the field of public social protection policy in LICs. It allows for a precise identification of multi-actor power relations as well as the dependency relationships between national and international organizations within the national policy process. By mobilizing a unique combined approach to analyzing influence networks, this article examines the roles of different types of actors in the political process. We highlight the importance of organizations involved in the development of social assistance programs. These findings help explain the shift in Malagasy public policy since 2015 toward the expansion of social assistance programs. Additionally, this article contributes to the discussion of several aspects of the policy-making process in LICs.

Madagascar provides a clear illustration of the dynamics observed over the past fifteen years in the development of social assistance programs in LICs (Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2012). The formulation of national social protection strategies, reflects the emergence of a hegemonic objective in the design of social protection systems in LICs: the fight against poverty. Social assistance programs have emerged as the preferred response to achieving this objective and have consequently expanded across LICs in Africa (Beegle et al., 2018). Based on an analysis conducted in eight African countries, Lavers and Hickey (2021) highlight the diversity of processes through which social transfers become institutionalized. They argue that the institutionalization of social cash transfers is shaped by the interaction between political survival strategies and transnational policy coalitions. On this basis, they distinguish different trajectories of institutionalization depending on two factors: the level of competitiveness of electoral regimes and the degree of dependence on international organizations. Applying this analytical framework to the Malagasy trajectory, one could characterize the political regime as hybrid, combining both a high level of instability and significant clientelism, alongside a strong dependence on international resources. Madagascar, like Mozambique, illustrates a “dependent transnational” trajectory, in which the institutionalization of social transfers results primarily from the presence and persistence of international coalitions within a weak and fragmented domestic political context.

Furthermore, it is interesting to consider the role of COVID-19 in accelerating the development of social cash transfers. We observed this in Madagascar, where it is closely linked to the crisis affecting the southern region of the country. This dynamic is similar in many African countries (Devereux, 2021) and more broadly in LICs (Gentilini, 2022). In the Malagasy case, it is notable that there was a significant reallocation of funding towards emergency social assistance programs. Moreover, this article highlights the difficulties faced

by social protection programs in responding to the pandemic, including low responsiveness, corruption, targeting issues, and more. These challenges are not unique to Madagascar. Across Africa, social insurance schemes faced difficulties in implementing measures to protect individuals from the cessation of economic activities or to cover informal sector workers (Olivier, 2019). Social assistance programs also encountered problems in targeting beneficiaries and in the misappropriation of certain funds (Abay et al., 2023). These challenges in implementing social transfers did not originate with the COVID-19 crisis and are not specific to social assistance programs (Hanna & Olken, 2018), but they were considerably exacerbated by the rapid implementation of new programs or the expansion of existing ones.

Add to these implementation challenges another major obstacle that limits the development of social protection systems: the issue of financing. Debates on the financing of different forms of social protection are longstanding and have often centered on the trade-off between targeting and universalism. These debates are particularly salient in LICs for at least three reasons. First, cash transfer programs remain largely funded by technical and financial partners, either through direct project financing or indirect financing via aid allocated to the general state budget (Schmitt et al., 2020). As a result, the question of social protection financing remains essential to the genuine national ownership of social protection policies introduced by international actors (Barrientos, 2016). Second, LICs are experiencing a massive expansion of cash transfer programs, which is rarely examined from a cost-effectiveness perspective. Third, national populations are highly vulnerable due to the weakness of existing social protection mechanisms. The COVID-19 crisis has only reinforced the importance of considering the issue of financing, accelerated the push for cash-based solutions, seemingly settling the debate on this issue, at least temporarily. Establishing a robust social protection system necessitates addressing the issues of redistribution and the social contract (Devereux, 2021). Ultimately, even cash transfer programs must be examined in the context of redistribution processes. The expansion of these programs will inevitably raise questions about their funding, particularly regarding the taxation needed to support social protection initiatives. It is interesting to note that in the presidential campaigns of 2018 and 2023, the issue of social protection and its funding did not emerge as a key theme, barely even as a very secondary one. However, during the COVID-19 crisis and in other circumstances (notably the 2021 famine in southern Madagascar), national programs of in-kind and cash transfers were launched, accompanied by media coverage of the distribution campaigns led by the president. According to the ILO report (2024), the government allocates only 0.8% of GDP to total social protection expenditure (excluding health), which places it around the average for LICs (estimated at 2%), but significantly lower compared to other income groups (e.g., an average of 16.2% in high-income countries, 8.5% in upper-middle-income countries, 4.2% in lower-middle-income countries). These figures highlight the considerable gap in social protection financing and underscore the importance of increasing public investment in this sector.

## Limits

This study has several limitations. First, analyzing organizations involves interviewing a person, and the choice of representative can influence the characterization of the data collected, particularly sociometric data. This limitation opens up new research perspectives for investigating the importance of interpersonal relationships in the making of social policies in LICs. Indeed, personal characteristics and interpersonal relationships are central to understanding complex policy-making processes (Devereux & Wolkenhauer, 2021). Secondly, some organizations could not be surveyed for various reasons (e.g. unavailability of key personnel, refusals from organizational leaders). As a result, there are missing organizations that were not included in our analysis. This limitation is common in articles utilizing social network analysis. To mitigate these effects, we paid special attention to defining the boundaries of the network.

## Conclusion

The findings of this article highlight the central role played by international organizations in shaping national social protection policy, which is primarily structured around social assistance programs, particularly cash transfer programs. The article describes the power relations that explain the orientation of public policy toward an “Only Cash” approach. This expression, used in the title and intentionally provocative, aims to emphasize the changes occurring in the making of social protection policy in Madagascar and, more broadly, in LICs. Thus, we offer several contributions to the analysis of the policy-making process of social protection in LICs. The first contribution is methodological, demonstrating the analytical richness of policy networks in the study of social policy. From this perspective, our analysis provides a precise understanding of the role that multi-actor interactions play in the formulation of public policies in LICs (Henry, 2011; Howlett et al., 2017; Ingold, 2011). In fact, the article presents an original approach to the analysis of social protection policies in LICs, which have traditionally focused largely on evaluating the effectiveness of these programs. The article responds to the lack of a political economy approach in the analysis of social protection policies in Africa identified by Hickey (2008). Building on previous work that has proposed a political economy analysis of social protection systems (Hickey et al., 2019; Lavers, 2016; Seekings, 2021), the article’s main contribution is to propose an empirical approach that makes it possible to observe outcomes identified in the literature. In this regard, the position of international organizations, as well as the dominance of cash transfer actors, are identified through the results of social network analysis. Thus, this work therefore represents a new contribution to the analysis of public policies in the Global South. The second contribution is analytical, emphasizing the central role of technical and financial partners in shaping social protection regimes (Lavers & Hickey, 2016; Schmitt et al., 2020). In this way, our research sheds light on the changes that have occurred in the field of social protection in Madagascar since 2015 (Gondard-Delcroix et al., 2019) and highlights the role of technical and financial partners in this process. Our findings

underscore the exogenous nature of the social policies implemented in Madagascar. Such findings are not unique to the Great Island; in almost all LICs, international organizations have played a major role in reshaping national social protection agendas (Schmitt, 2020; Seekings, 2021). As the Malagasy case illustrates, LICs, due to their institutional structure and the imbalance of power relations between national and international actors, face challenges both in designing policies adapted to national contexts and in effectively implementing the strategies adopted (Hickey et al., 2018; Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2012). The study also clearly illustrates what Seekings observes regarding the Social Protection Floor, namely the gap between global social policy frameworks and their translation into African policy contexts (Seekings, 2019). These types of difficulties also affect health policies, particularly in the context of UHC (Shroff et al., 2018) and performance-based financing (Gautier et al., 2019). These results raise questions about the ownership of social protection system development by national actors. As noted by Lavers and Hickey (2021), without the political elites and civil society taking ownership of social protection issues, social protection systems are likely to fail.

## Ethical issues

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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