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ABSTRACT

Despite impressive post-war growth and persistent demand for redistribution of the country's oil wealth, Angola's social protection system falls far behind that of comparable countries in terms of coverage and resources. How did it come to this? Constructing novel time series of fiscal, administrative, and legal data, this study traces the evolution of four central social transfer programmes from independence until today, mapping previously uncharted empirical terrain and providing new insights into the effective functioning of the system. The analysis shows, first, that extreme inequality has been a persistent feature, operating through inclusion/exclusion and disparities in scope of benefits both between and within social protection schemes. Second, the opacity of entitlements and heterogeneity of benefits have critically shaped the political bargaining over social transfers and rendered (un)certainly of benefits a central question. Third, the history of war has introduced a military bias in the social protection system, which, while largely transcending conflict cleavages nonetheless reproduces existing social inequalities. Situating policy changes within the wider military, economic, and political context, the analysis further provides insights into the factors that have continuously shaped the system. Guided by a logic of reward and appeasement rather than insurance, its development accordingly reflects fluctuating fiscal resources and the political leverage exercised by a small set of social groups. The end-result is a severely circumscribed system with little correspondence to objective needs. Against the background of civil war, oil rents, and authoritarian state institutions, Angola provides an extreme yet informative window into social policy as redistributive politics.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Trotz des beeindruckenden Wachstums in der Nachkriegszeit und der anhaltenden Forderung nach einer Umverteilung des Ölreichtums des Landes bleibt das Sozialschutzsystem Angolas hinsichtlich seiner Abdeckung und Ressourcen weit hinter dem vergleichbarer Länder zurück. Wie konnte es dazu kommen? Anhand neu erstellter Zeitreihen mit fiskalischen, administrativen und rechtlichen Daten zeichnet diese Studie die Entwicklung von vier zentralen Sozialtransferprogrammen von der Unabhängigkeit bis heute nach, erschließt damit bisher unerforschtes empirisches Terrain und liefert neue Einblicke in die tatsächliche Funktionsweise des Systems. Die Analyse zeigt erstens, dass extreme Ungleichheit ein beständiges Merkmal war, das sich durch Inklusion/Exklusion und Unterschiede im Leistungsumfang sowohl zwischen als auch innerhalb der Sozialschutzsysteme manifestierte. Zweitens haben die Undurchsichtigkeit der Anspruchsvoraussetzungen und die Heterogenität der Leistungen die politischen Verhandlungen über Sozialtransfers entscheidend geprägt und die (Un-)Sicherheit der Leistungen zu einer zentralen Frage gemacht. Drittens hat die Kriegsgeschichte zu einer militärischen Ausrichtung des Sozialschutzsystems geführt, die zwar Konfliktpaltungen weitgehend überwindet, aber dennoch bestehende soziale Ungleichheiten reproduziert. Indem die Analyse politische Veränderungen in den breiteren militärischen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Kontext einordnet, liefert sie zudem Einblicke in die Faktoren, die das System kontinuierlich geprägt haben. Da seine Entwicklung eher von einer Logik der Belohnung und Beschwichtigung als von einer Versicherungslogik geleitet wurde, spiegelt sie entsprechend schwankende Haushaltsmittel und den politischen Einfluss wider, den eine kleine Zahl sozialer Gruppen ausübt. Das Endergebnis ist ein stark eingeschränktes System, das kaum den objektiven Bedürfnissen entspricht. Vor dem Hintergrund von Bürgerkrieg, Öleinnahmen und autoritären staatlichen Institutionen bietet Angola einen extremen, aber aufschlussreichen Einblick in Sozialpolitik als Umverteilungspolitik.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Having joined the club of middle-income countries endowed with significant fiscal resources, Angola remains one of the most unequal countries in the world, manifested through the conspicuous wealth of those at the top, but equally the unremitted poverty of those at the bottom. In spite of incessant promises of social development and a more just distribution of the national wealth, more than two decades after the end of the civil war, most Angolans still live with little or no economic margins – and lack the most basic social protection.

Only 8.7% of Angolans are covered by a social protection programme, being less than half of the African average (18.8%) and a mere third of lower-middle-income countries (31.5%). Also in terms of public resources, Angola spends less than one-third as much on social protection (1.4% of GDP) compared to other African (3.7%) or lower-middle-income (4.2%) countries (ILO, 2024). Most of the resources go to relatively well-off, urban sections of the population, and do little to reduce inequality or ameliorate the living conditions of the rural poor (World Bank, 2023). Hence, throughout the last decades, international actors have agreed on one thing: social spending must increase and protection must be provided for those most in need.

Much of Angola's present challenges can be traced back to a colonial regime with little concern for development and the long and destructive civil war following in its wake. On the arrival of peace in 2002, Angola was left with over 4 million displaced people (Porto & Parsons, 2003, p. 11) and 230,000 war disabled (INE, 2016) on a territory scattered with landmines but few functioning bridges or schools, governed by a state apparatus that for decades had been focused on military survival. Social development and economic reconstruction – vaunted as the main political priority – would be an enormous challenge for any government. Constructing roads and railways require time, skills and investments; so does rehabilitating sanitary infrastructure and electricity networks. Provision of education and health care require new schools and clinics to be built as well

as teachers and medical workers staffing them. Housing (re)construction takes time, planning and simultaneous investment in auxiliary infrastructure. Social protection, however, is different. For, in contrast to infrastructure or hospitals, social protection schemes, capable of quickly ameliorating the situation for the most vulnerable, necessitate neither high overhead investment nor massive administrative capacity (Seekings, 2017). What it does require is fiscal resources – something that Angola has in relative abundance. So why, two decades after the civil war, does social protection in Angola remain in such a skeletal state, and why is it so unequally distributed?

The question goes to the heart of Angolan post-civil war politics, characterized, as argued by Soares de Oliveira (2015, p. 206), by “a rhetoric of universal inclusion contradicted by a practice of mass exclusion.” But exclusion is a matter of degree and above all, constant contestation. To understand the logic of inclusion and exclusion, of *who gets what*, in post-war Angola, and generate insights into the political economy of distribution in other conflict-affected countries, it is essential to study both the varying fortunes of the included, and those on the margins struggling to get in. Beyond its intrinsic importance for social development, and the priority attached to it by ordinary Angolans (Schubert, 2017), therefore, studying social policy can provide a valuable analytical lens to illuminate otherwise opaque political dynamics.

However, to date there is little systematic research on Angolan social policy. Most scholarship on modern Angola has focused on its civil war in its international and economic dimensions (Le Billon, 2001); questions of memory, identity, and reconciliation (Schubert, 2017; Spall, 2020); or the political economy of elite corruption, repression, and the shadow state (Hodges, 2001; Roque, 2021; Soares de Oliveira, 2015). A few studies have, however, pointed to the importance of various social policy fields as instruments of clientelism in Angola (Soque, 2025). In this regard, the post-war housing development programme has received particular attention (Cain, 2020) as an eye-catching example of “developmental patrimonialism” (Croese, 2017). Social protection schemes have received less attention and then mainly treated

from a technical point of view. Notwithstanding recent reports by the World Bank (2023) or the Catholic University of Angola (“Relatório Social de Angola”), providing snapshots of social spending and its implications for poverty and inequality, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of social protection development over time and the factors that shaped it.

In a first step to fill this gap, this study aims to provide an empirical account of the evolution of social protection in Angola from its independence in 1975 until today. In order to assess over-time developments of social protection programmes, three analytical dimensions will be considered: coverage (inclusiveness), scope of benefits, and finally the reliability of benefits and entitlements, which, as will become clear, remains of particular importance in Angola. In other words, it seeks to answer *who gets how much and with what certainty*. Notwithstanding the limited size of the incipient Angolan welfare state, its fragmented, indeed nebulous structure, paired with a severe lack of documentation and detailed statistics, makes it impossible to analyse it in its entirety within the scope of this paper. Concretely, then, the present study limits the empirical scope to the development of the four most important programmes of social transfers, being at the centre of political contestation and soaking up almost all public resources spent on social protection. While not denying the importance of other welfare or quasi-welfare systems with equally significant social and distributional consequences (health care, education, housing construction, and general price subsidies), social transfers – in principle both individualized and quantifiable – provide a particularly sharp comparative lens.

As a single country case study, the primary analytical approach is one of over-time mapping and comparison, where the establishment, expansion, restriction, or over-time stability of distinct social protection schemes are put in relation to the contemporaneous political, military, and economic context. The exercise ultimately, and additionally, allows for comparisons across schemes, providing insights into the evolving fortunes and leverage of separate social groups. The analysis relies on several types of primary data. First, gov-

ernment spending statistics stretching more than three decades have been compiled and consolidated to provide a comprehensive overview of the relative and absolute growth of social transfers. While high inflation, weak budgeting procedures and off-budget spending pose analytical challenges and reduce the reliability of the published data, careful interpretation and linking of year-on-year budget posts nonetheless yields an informative picture of aggregate, long-term tendencies. Second, through an extensive review of the *Diário da República* and the compilation and coding of close to 400 legal acts, time-lines of the main social protection schemes and the evolution of their effective scope of benefits have been reconstructed. Combining formal benefit provisions with synthetic salary measures produces a detailed image of the over-time developments of social benefits, even in the near-complete absence of individual-level data on de-facto benefits. Third, data on policy coverage, including beneficiary numbers and their geographical distribution, has been obtained directly from Angolan government institutions and complemented through secondary sources when necessary. Finally, to correctly treat and interpret the data, as well as reconstruct significant events and contextual factors, a variety of secondary sources have been utilized: from IMF and World Bank reports, to monographs, expert publications, and local and international news media.

The section that follows illuminates three salient factors – war, autocracy, and oil – which, based on previous studies, are likely to have shaped the Angolan social protection system, albeit in ambiguous ways. A brief political background then sets the stage for the empirical analysis, primarily centred on the post-Cold War period. A subsequent overview of government expenditure highlights the slow growth of social protection spending, in spite of the ultimate arrival of peace and surging oil revenue.

The main empirical part traces the evolution of the four consecutive social protection programmes.

Chronologically ordered by their date of establishment, the programme-centred analysis starts with veterans’ pensions, introduced in the early 1980s as the first social protection system in post-independence Angola. In the following, the term *veteran* is accordingly used to denote

anyone who in principle could be a primary beneficiary of said system: including notably *antigos combatentes* or *liberation fighters*, having participated in the liberation struggle in one way or another, but also those whose eligibility might stem from participation (and injury) in subsequent phases of the civil war. Second is the general social protection system, set up in the early 1990s. While providing a variety of social benefits and theoretically open to all *formally employed*, it has most critically provided a pension system for the predominantly urban and public sector employed middle class. Third is the military pension system, which, separated from the general system, provides particularly generous social benefits to members of the Angolan Armed Forces, and its officer class in particular. In contrast to veterans, *military officers* are defined not by their implied sacrifices or specific needs, but simply by their continuous membership in the military hierarchy of the state, whether in active service or in retirement. The fourth section analyses successive demobilization and reintegration programmes, constituting an evolving system of social benefits for the hundreds of thousands *demobilized ex-soldiers* from all sides of the civil war. In practice dominated by rank and file soldiers, their defining feature is their exclusion from the military hierarchy following any of the three peace processes.

Each of these programmes thus targets separate but in practice often overlapping groups – *veterans*, *formally employed*, *military officers*, and *ex-soldiers* – who, together with *the government* and various *international actors* constitute the main actors in the account that follows. At the outset it should be noted that none of these groups are static nor possible to clearly define a priori. Rather, as will become evident, group definitions and their membership itself constitute a focal point in the ongoing struggle for, and thus development of, social protection in Angola. Notwithstanding the fluidity of group boundaries, however, the narrow set of beneficiary groups thus identified provides a first piece of the puzzle towards understanding the apparent dysfunctionalities of the welfare system. Providing generous benefits to a small segment of the formally employed (civilian or military) it fits into a common pattern of “truncated welfare

states” (Díaz-Cayeros & Magaloni, 2009) found across the Global South. But if the lopsidedness and restricted scope of the Angolan welfare system is not unique, it certainly appears as an extreme case with a distinctly military flavour. Why, in a context of so much need, has so little state resources been spent on social protection, and why have so much of it been dedicated to people other than the most desolate? As the subsequent analysis will make clear, the development of social protection in Angola has not, in fact, been primarily driven by social need, but by a logic of reward and appeasement. But to understand how this general logic may concretely shape social policies, we must additionally introduce three salient features of Angola’s post-independence history, likely to structure its distributive politics.

2. UNDERLYING EXPLANATIONS

Drawing on previous research on welfare development and public goods, three prominent characteristics of post-independence Angola immediately emerge as plausible and complementary explanatory factors: war, autocracy, and oil.

First, the Angolan civil war (1975-2002), following the war of independence (1961-1974), was among the most deadly and protracted armed conflicts of the latter half of the 20th century (Dixon & Sarkees, 2016). Mass warfare has been a critical driver of welfare state development in the West (Obinger, Petersen, & Starke, 2018), but the process relied on several conditions which are far from universally present. Notably, in the ideal model, the wartime increase in demand for social protection (Dryzek & Goodin, 1986) was preceded by incipient welfare institutions, accompanied by an imperative for egalitarianism and nationwide solidarity (Titmuss, 1950), and followed by a post-war dividend when the fiscal capacity built for war could now be dedicated to social ends (Peacock & Wiseman, 1961). In contrast, as argued by Skocpol (1992), the early expansion of veterans’ pensions following the American Civil War, unmatched by corresponding fiscal capacity, retarded long-term welfare expansion. In addition, recent research

emphasizes how civil war, in undermining state control and social cohesion, may promote narrow and fragmented rather than universal social policies (Cammett, 2014; Liu, 2022).

Second, despite several multiparty elections since 1992, democratic accountability in Angola remains low, with the MPLA party effectively monopolizing power since independence. An opaque electoral system, suppression of dissenting voices (Roque, 2021), and an extremely centralized and hierarchical state structure (Soares de Oliveira & Taponier, 2013) leave few avenues by which citizens can affect social policy expansion (Huber & Stephens, 2012). Scholars of comparative political economy argue that autocrats, relying on a smaller “winning coalition” (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003) than democratic governments, can respond to internal threats by either repression or by co-optation through selective redistribution. Specifically, Knutsen and Rasmussen (2018) argue that autocracy shapes social policy in at least two ways: due to a narrow winning coalition (the “critical supporters”), autocrats will promote targeted programmes over universal ones; and as a way to mediate the lack of accountability mechanisms, their supporters will push for reliable long-term insurances such as old-age pensions over short-term benefits. Grünewald (2021) confirms that autocracies indeed have both narrower and particularly generous old-age pensions.

Third, until recent years, the Angolan government has been blessed with ample oil revenue. Despite ongoing war, the country’s sheltered offshore oil production started to increase from the mid-1980s, and then took off after the conclusion of the war in the early 2000s, making Angola the second largest oil producer in Africa (OPEC, 2024). The availability of oil revenue “on the cheap” could amplify the co-optation logic in distributing social benefits, albeit with uncertain end results. On the one hand, as oil rents tend to diminish the competitiveness and fiscal relevance of other sectors, the leverage of groups active in these sectors (as taxpayers and producers) is reduced. Thus, the winning coalition on which the government relies is further reduced, resulting in an even smaller circle of beneficiaries. On the other hand, oil rents could also provide the means

to spread benefits widely (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Karl, 1997), particularly when the government is under serious internal threat (Eibl & Hertog, 2024). Regardless of the outcome, abundant rents increase the government’s autonomy, reducing the leverage not only of domestic producer groups but also of external actors such as international donors. Finally, the volatility of oil revenues ought to amplify the government’s commitment problem. Whereas social groups will have all the more interest in well-defined, long-term insurance programmes, the government inversely prefers vaguely defined ad hoc benefits that maximize expenditure elasticity.

These conjectures will guide the following analysis of the four central social protection programmes, focusing on the period from 1990 onwards. However, to situate the social policy dynamics of the last three decades, the next section provides a brief political background.

3. POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Following the hasty withdrawal of the Portuguese in November 1975 the three Angolan independence movements turned their guns towards each other. As FNLA soon collapsed, the scene was set for a protracted battle between FAPLA, the armed wing of MPLA, in control of the capital Luanda, and UNITA’s FALA forces with its strongholds in the South and East of the vast territory. Both were nationalist movements above all, but with distinct social bases. Marxist-oriented MPLA drew their leadership from a well-educated largely mestiço elite, and were able to mobilize popular support from the second largest ethnic group, the Ambundu, as well as the small Luanda-based business class (Hodges, 2001, p. 8). The UNITA leadership, equally from the educated minority, was rural in outlook and while primarily mobilizing from the country’s largest ethnic group, the Ovimbundu, also relied on traditional leaders to gain a wider following (Roque, 2024, p. 117). The imperative for distinction in the civil war and the incentives given by Cold War competition drove the parties to polarized ideological positions. Marxist-inspired

MPLA formally endorsed Marxist-Leninism, and received Soviet material aid and Cuban manpower in return. UNITA, on its part, proclaimed to be struggling for *true* Angolan independence – now against the forces of international communism (Roque, 2024, p. 123) – and were accordingly supported by South Africa and several Western countries.

For more than a decade after independence, the two sides fought it out across the territory, in what developed into one of Africa's most destructive civil wars. Moreover, after the departure of the Portuguese, Angola was left with a hollow state and a formal economy void of human capital.

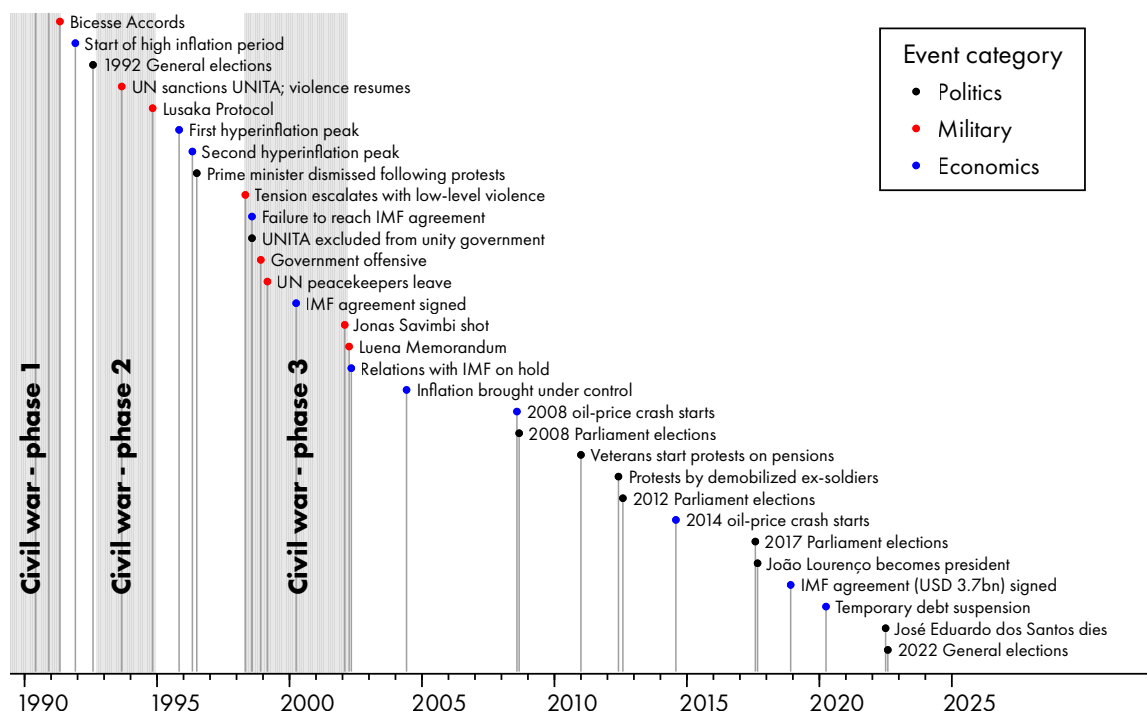
In this context, the government, periodically controlling no more than the capital province, oriented their revenue effort towards easily accessible rents: ensuring material support from the exterior while maximizing the nascent off-shore oil sector. Thus, as the non-extractive economy shrivelled (Ferreira, 2002), the government became ever more reliant on the oil industry (Le Billon, 2001). Spending focused on one thing only: the military. The sparse stock of schools and hospitals crumbled under the weight of disinvestment and war (Hodges, 2001, pp. 32-34), kept on life support by the tens of thousands of Cuban teachers and

medical staff who arrived along with the equally numerous soldiers joining forces with the FAPLA. The MPLA kept promising social development – to be realized once the war was won.

After 15 years of civil war, the end of the Cold War augured a new era: external powers withdrew, the MPLA opened up for multiparty elections and with the Bicesse Accords of 1991, a fragile peace appeared on the horizon.

Naturally, things would not be so straightforward. As a glance at Figure 1 shows, providing a timeline of key background events for the subsequent analysis, the civil war soon resurged, the transition to a market economy would be marked by crises and systemic corruption, and the MPLA would have as much difficulty in relinquishing political power as in diversifying its oil-dependent fiscal system. While a small elite of politically connected families and army generals profited immensely from currency manipulation, mining concessions, privatized security, and, with the ultimate arrival of peace, an opaque reconstruction process (Hodges, 2001; Soares de Oliveira, 2015), the promise of social development for the majority would be long in the making.

Figure 1. Angola 1990-2025: Timeline of major events



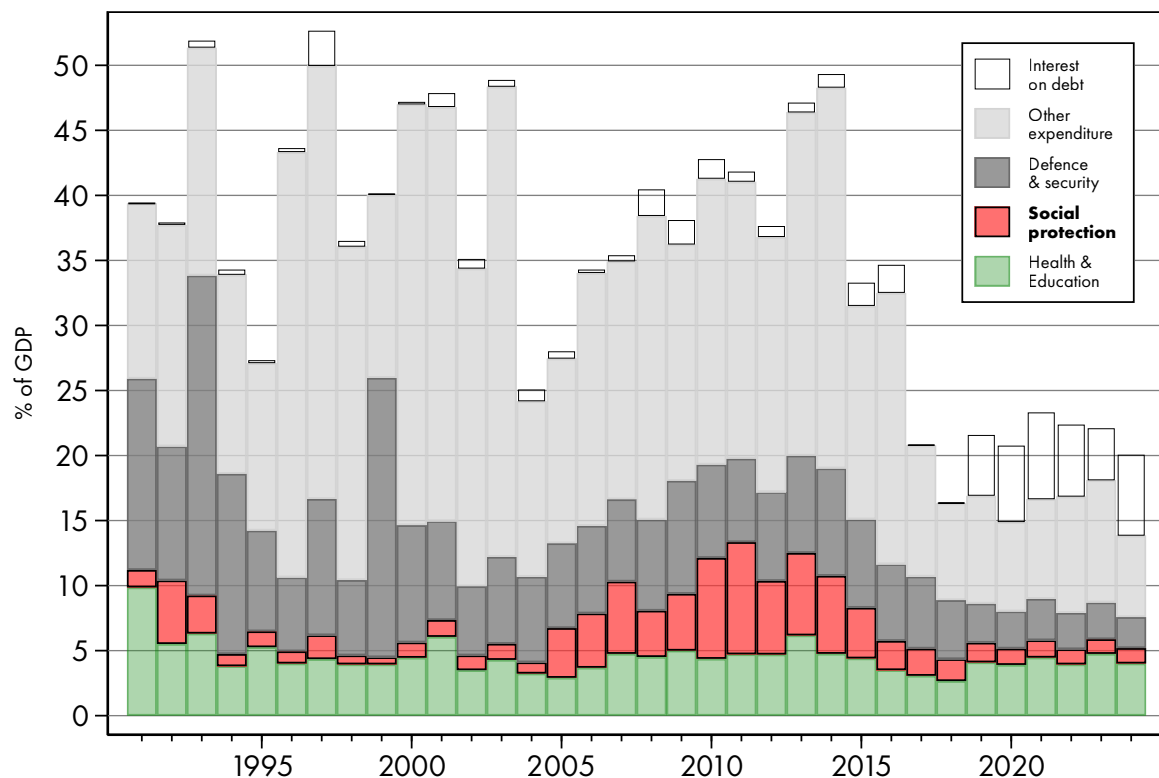
4. SOCIAL SPENDING AFTER THE COLD WAR

This section provides a sketch of the development of social spending in Angola. Leaving the question of target groups and underlying policies to later sections, it aims to provide an initial look at when, and to what extent the government has prioritized social spending across the post-Cold War period. Studying fiscal developments in Angola poses several challenges. First, the reliability, detail, and inter-annual consistency of budgetary data (particularly in terms of execution), is less than satisfactory, especially so during the 1990s and early 2000s (World Bank, 2005). Precise figures and year-on-year fluctuations in this period should be interpreted with caution. Second, volatile economic growth and revenue developments complicate over-time comparison. High inflation compounds the problem. With that said, cautiously analysed fiscal data can nonetheless provide valuable insights.

Figure 2 presents the development of total expenditure between 1991 and 2024 across five categories, based on data from the Angolan Ministry of Finance. Three periods can be discerned. First, until the mid-2000s, expenditure is generally high but with extreme year-on-year variation, both in terms of overall spending and its components. One reason is that high inflation – reaching a peak of 4,000% in 1996, and only pushed below 100% in 2003 – rendered budget planning difficult. However, spending equally reflected political priorities, clearly manifested in the sharp increases in defence expenditure in 1993 (following the failure of the Bicesse process and renewed war) and in 1999 (intensification of the last phase of the civil war).

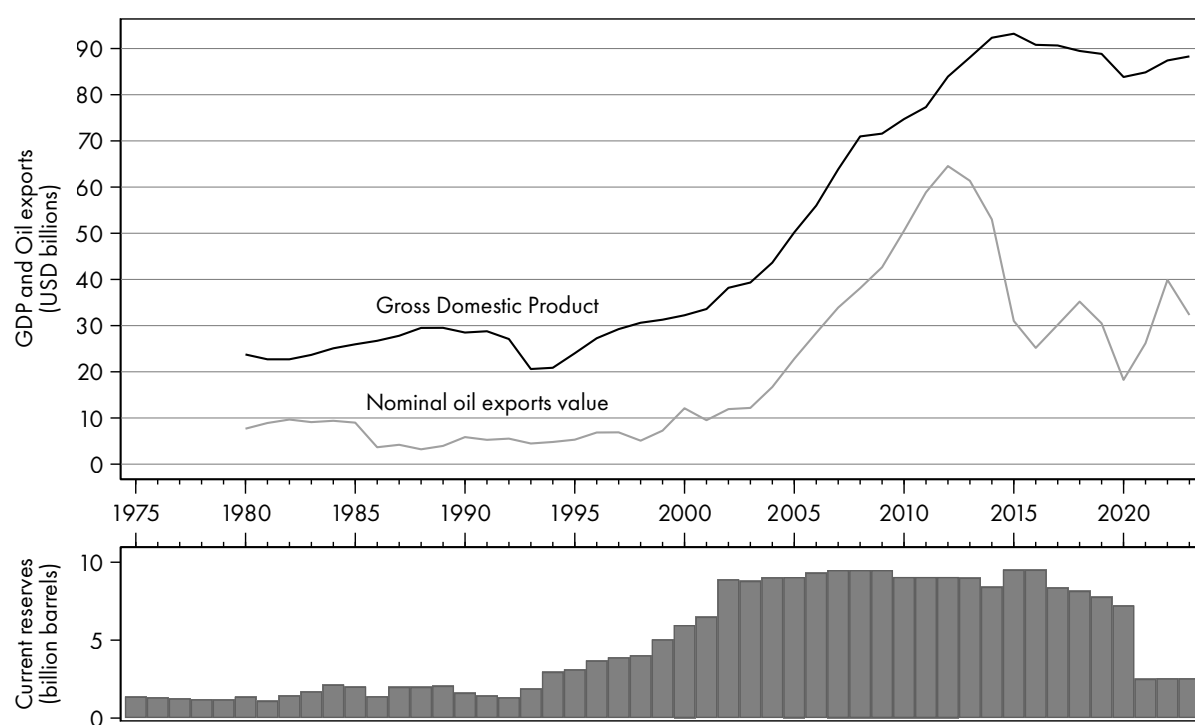
Second, after the immediate post-war period, expenditure first dropped sharply (2004) and then increased steadily to 50% of GDP over the coming decade. The development must, however, be interpreted in the light of a drastic oil-driven expansion of GDP (Figure 3). At its peak in 2014,

Figure 2. Government expenditure, 1991-2024



Note: Based on GDP data from the World Bank's WDI (2024), budget execution data from the Angolan Ministry of Finance ("Resumo Geral De Despesa por Função"), and budget figures taken from the general state budget (Orçamento Geral do Estado). Figures for years 1991-2018 are realized expenditure and actual GDP; those for 2019-2024 are budgeted expenditure and projected GDP. Expenditure excludes debt re-financing operations.

Figure 3. GDP, oil exports and reserves, 1975-2023



Note: Oil figures based on data from OPEC (2024). Nominal oil exports value calculated on the basis of reported year-averages of daily crude oil production volume and world market price (real 2017 USD). GDP based on the World Bank's Development Indicators (real 2015 USD, adjusted by a factor of 1.03 for consistency with 2017 figures). Reporting error and within-year fluctuations may result in inaccurate yearly averages.

real expenditure had multiplied four times compared to the final phase of the civil war.

The international oil price crash of the same year marks the start of the third phase, characterized by sharp fiscal contraction. Having utilized the booming oil income to access cheap foreign loans rather than investing in alternative tax instruments,¹ the sudden slump in 2014 had the triple effect of contracting revenue, cutting access to international credit, and drastically increasing interest costs of the now substantial debt stock. Forced to adjust, in a few years spending as a share of GDP was reduced by more than half, one quarter of which was dedicated to interest payments. In real terms, the reduction was even more drastic (two-thirds), bringing government spending back to the levels of the immediate post-war period.

Both changes in government priorities (due to war) and the wildly fluctuating fiscal leeway (related to oil) should have implications for the relative

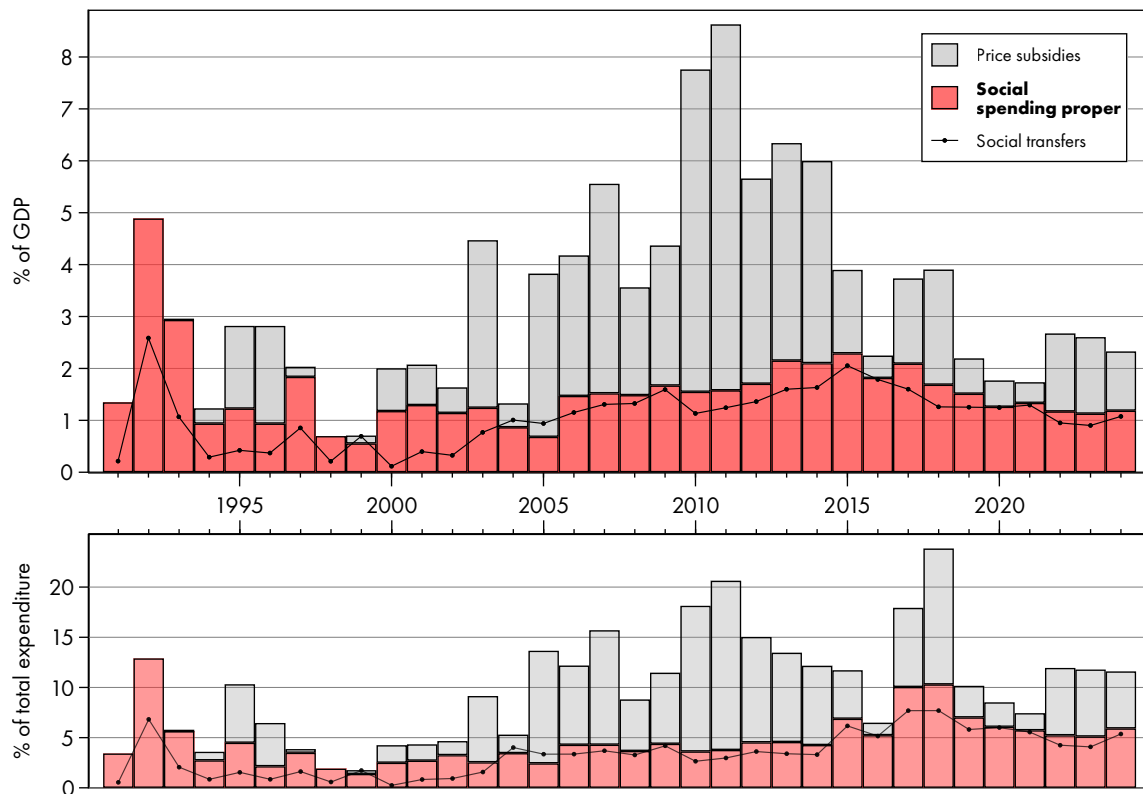
growth of different spending areas. Yet overall, the shifts are less dramatic than could be expected.

First, through periods of war and peace, booms and busts, the relative resources dedicated to health and education have been remarkably stable at just below 5 % of GDP, except for a moderate reduction following the 2015 crisis. While far from covering objective needs, and often skewed towards elite groups, the level remains similar to the regional average.²

¹ Non-resource revenue had increased from an average of 6.5% in the turbulent 1990s to around 8% in the mid-2010s (Prichard, Cobham, & Goodall, 2014).

² In Sub-Saharan Africa, average government expenditure on health has increased from 1.4% of GDP in the early 2000s to 1.8% of GDP two decades later (WHO, 2025). In the same period, public education spending has increased from 2.9% to 3.5% (UNESCO, 2024). While Angola has thus compared well with its neighbours in terms of overall education spending, its composition has been severely biased towards tertiary education, effectively serving only a small elite (World Bank, 2023, p. 50). Large shares of both budget items have also been dedicated to hospital care and university studies abroad for a miniscule share of the population (Hodges, 2001, p. 41). The latter has also served as a much-resented vehicle to escape the military draft (EIU, 1999a, p. 14).

Figure 4. Government social protection expenditure, 1991-2024



Note: Upper panel shows social expenditure as a share of GDP; lower panel as a share of total expenditure. Based on budget execution data from the Angolan Ministry of Finance ("Resumo Geral De Despesa por Natureza/Função"), and budgeted figures from the general state budget (Orçamento Geral do Estado). GDP data is from the World Bank's WDI (2024). Figures for the years 1991-2018 are realized expenditure (and actual GDP); those for 2019-2024 are budgeted expenditure (and projected GDP). Calculations are based on the assumption that price subsidies are included in the social protection budget for 2005-2016. For social transfers, budgeted figures are used from 2017 onwards. Social transfers are benefits in cash or in kind that are received by individuals or households with the purpose of poverty alleviation or protection from social risk. The figures are based on the budget item "Transferências Correntes Para Famílias", excluding transfers to traditional authorities (Sobas) and study grants (Bolsas de estudos). No detailed breakdown or definition is available, but in practice it is almost completely composed of pension benefits.

Second, security spending has been maintained at a high and strikingly stable level. While the most intense periods of fighting are clearly reflected in huge spending peaks, the arrival of peace, on the other hand, is less noticeable. In the booming post-war period, security spending was maintained at around 7% of a quickly expanding GDP, with military spending constituting the largest, and growing (!) share. At its post-war peak just before the 2015 crisis, military spending (5% of GDP) was three times the average for Sub-Saharan Africa (SIPRI, 2022). It was only when fiscal crisis hit that security spending was drastically reduced, eventually stabilizing at around 2.5% of GDP.

At first glance, social protection spending (red bars) appears more variable. Notwithstanding large year-on-year fluctuations, it remains very limited in the first period marked by civil war, be-

fore eventually taking off in 2005. However, the picture is largely illusory. For, during most of the period, the Angolan government budgets included price subsidies, mainly on oil products, under "social protection". Oil subsidies can fill an important role in protecting vulnerable social groups from fluctuating world markets. However, in a country like Angola where petroleum consumption is sharply concentrated at the top of the income ladder, they largely benefit the rich.³ Moreover, as a primary producer, expenditure on oil subsidies are to a certain extent an accounting phenomenon, revealing more about international price

3 Poorer segments largely benefit through effective price reductions on public transport and kerosene (for cooking). That a rich minority appropriates the bulk of the benefits does not negate the fact that subsidy reductions is most acutely felt among the poor.

movements than the actions of the government. Having been extensively analysed (and criticized) elsewhere,⁴ the following analysis will focus entirely on formal social policies.

Thus, Figure 4 presents the development of social spending net of price subsidies, as a share of GDP (upper panel) and total expenditure (lower panel). Due to insufficient information on the precise budget decomposition for each year, each data point should be interpreted with caution. Yet in terms of the over-time development of social spending, it certainly provides a more valid picture. As can be seen in the upper panel, what we may call social spending proper (red bars) showed a discernible increase in the final phase of the civil war, dropped after the immediate post-war period, and then started a more substantial increase with the oil boom. Having eventually peaked at above 2% of GDP, it gradually declined to just over 1% following the onset of the crisis. What emerges from this data is, first, that social spending has always been modest, notwithstanding a temporary increase in the post-war period. The larger relative share dedicated to social spending in the recent crisis period (lower panel) has not sufficed to outbalance the drastically reduced fiscal space. Second, even net of oil subsidies, increases in social spending appear more correlated with oil incomes (Figure 3) and political turbulence (most clearly, the 2012 protest wave – see below) than any guns-for-butter effect on the arrival of peace. What did occur at the end of the civil war was that social transfers – and principally old-age pensions – started to completely dominate social spending. It is to the origins of these expenditures that we now turn.

5. VETERANS' PENSIONS

A few years after independence, the government instituted a State Office for Veterans⁵ tasked with fulfilling the constitutionally enshrined promise of

providing assistance to those who fought against the colonial regime. A veteran was defined as anyone, civilian or military, who participated in the “struggle for national liberation” between 4 February 1961 and 24 October 1975.⁶ While the Office would put in place and execute policies aimed at the physical rehabilitation and economic integration of veterans, the concrete content of such policies remained vague until the early 1980s when a system of legally regulated benefits, financed by the state, was finally introduced.⁷ It covered liberation fighters (*Antigos Combatentes*), those participating on the government side in the early phase of the civil war (*Combatentes da defesa da Pátria*), as well as everyone who joined the armed forces from 1978 onwards.⁸ Besides an inherited colonial-era civil servant pension system⁹ of little practical importance, the veterans’ pension scheme, or the *regime especial*, was the first properly Angolan social protection system. It was composed of a wide range of benefits. First, injured soldiers were granted disability benefits reaching up to 100% of their previously held salary, complemented with a caregiver grant for the severely disabled. Second, in the event of death,¹⁰ surviving spouses were granted 75% of the original salary if unable to work; and children a fixed-sum monthly grant. Finally, elderly veterans unable to work were equally granted a monthly pension equivalent to 75% of their previous salary, or a minimum of 4,000 Kz, effectively introducing an old-age pension system. For reference, the average salary of unionized agriculture workers at this time was 4,466 Kz, with the overall unionized average

4 See e.g. IMF staff reports throughout the post-civil war period.

5 *Secretaria de Estado dos Antigos Combatentes*, as per Lei 81/78, 20 April 1978.

6 The attack on the São Paulo prison on 4 February 1961 marked the start of the independence struggle according to official MPLA discourse; the latter date coincides with the start of the South African invasion, and thus the shift from an independence struggle to a “defence of the homeland”.

7 Decreto 85/81, 16 October 1981.

8 Yet the law carefully noted that it applied to those having participated in the struggle “without abandon or treason” – likely in reference to the violent internal purges conducted against MPLA “traitors” in mid-1977.

9 Regulated through Decreto 52/75.

10 Although not clearly stipulated in the law, later legislation (e.g. Decreto 28/92) indicates that this concerns soldiers killed in service.

reaching 7,692 Kz (IMF, 1990, p. 76). As such, the minimum pension – likely applying to a majority – was hardly luxurious, but certainly above the average income in a country dominated by informal subsistence agriculture.

Catering to a group not only with special needs, but also of particular merit, the system included further privileges. Thus, veterans – the majority of whom were still young and fit for work – were granted priority access to jobs and promotions, and privileged benefits under the extant pension system. Notably, the age limit for accessing old-age pensions under the inherited system was reduced by five years, and all years spent as an MPLA fighter would count double in the minimum time of service. Disabled veterans were granted additional holidays, reduced working hours, priority access to subsidized or free housing, a reduction in public transport fares, and special access to public services. As would be expected for a system targeting the most deserving of the nation, the costs were to be carried by the population as a whole, financed through the general state budget.

While no data are available on the effective initial coverage of the system, the absence of any marked increase in welfare transfers (World Bank, 1991, p. 340) would indicate that the number of effective beneficiaries was small and only increased gradually. Also in terms of entitlements, little would change during the first decade; except, that is, for a steady inflation-induced devaluation of benefits levels, amounting to around one-third at the end of the 1980s. However, at the end of the Cold War, with economic crisis and accelerating inflation linked to the withdrawal of external support, the situation deteriorated rapidly. With the first democratic elections approaching in September 1992, the minimum monthly veterans' pension could not even buy a chicken in a Luanda marketplace (IMF, 1994, p. 13);¹¹ hardly worthy of a key government support group. In addition, along with the prospect of peace brought with the Bicesse Accords came the necessity of providing for tens of thousands of wounded rebel soldiers.

The reform implemented in mid-1992¹² dealt with both issues. First, with unmistakable electoral timing, veterans' pension levels were increased for the first time, and drastically so: the standard pension increased by over 30 times, bringing real values to unprecedented levels. Second, the coverage was expanded to include any war disabled integrated into the military up until the formation of the new unified Armed Forces (September 1992) – effectively entitling demobilized UNITA (FALA) soldiers to benefits. While explicit references to MPLA (or FAPLA) were thus removed, *antigos combatentes* still retained a privileged status. With the reform, the system also became more generous to secondary beneficiaries,¹³ and similar to the American Civil War pensions analysed by Skocpol (1992, p. 111), it shed much of its original insurance logic, turning it into a straight-up benefit regime without reference to specific needs.¹⁴

In the following years, plagued by accelerating inflation, the government's intermittent adjustment of pension levels had little effect. As seen from Figure 5, visualizing the real-value development of veterans' pensions (with the 2009 median income as a reference), it was only in late 1996 that veterans' pensions temporarily recovered. The context is revelatory: in the wake of the failed Social and Economic Programme launched a year earlier, and the resultant hyperinflation, by mid-1996 urban discontent was spilling out on to the streets (Hodges, 2001, p. 111). While the proliferation of private security forces and the roaming Rapid Intervention Police provided a stick to dissuade protests (EIU, 1996, p. 9), the guns had to be combined with some butter in the form of proper pensions. Not least for the battle-hardened veterans. However, the relief was short lived, with resurging inflation soon erasing much of the increase. After several years of decline, real pensions eventually stabilized during the final phase of the civil war.

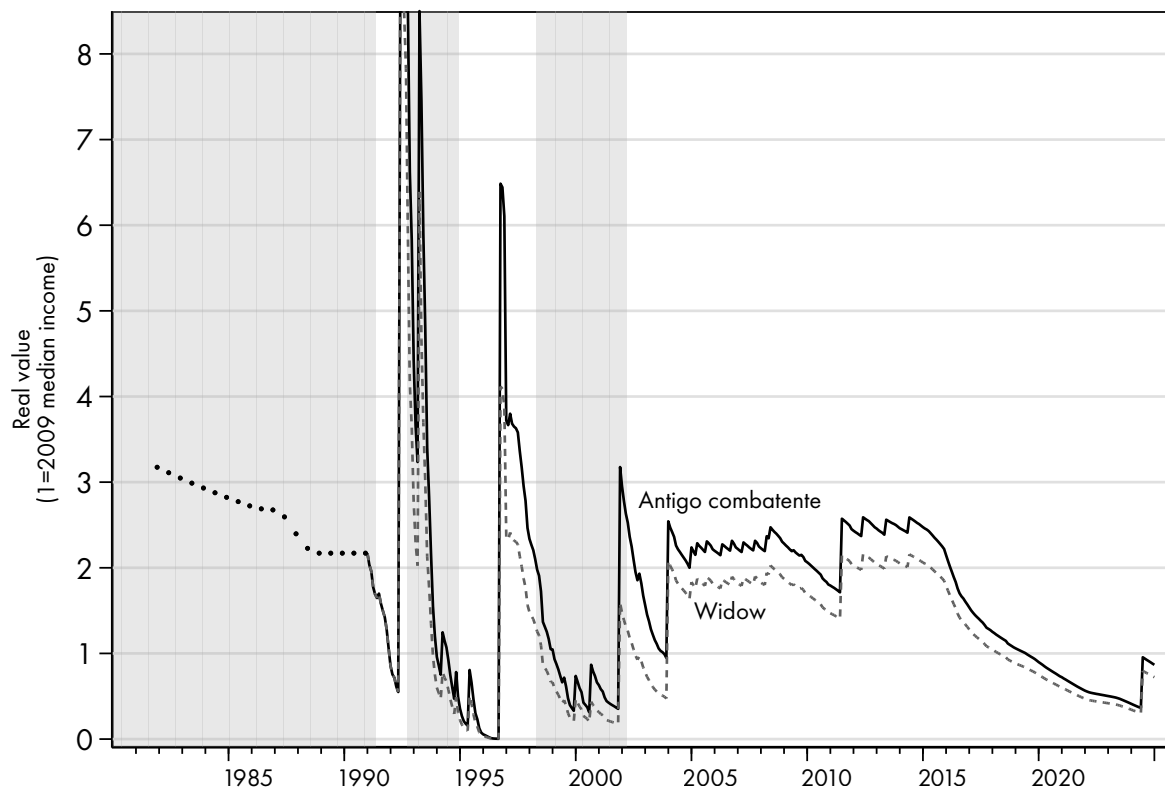
11 For comparison, in the early 1980s, it was equivalent to 45 chickens.

12 Decreto 28/92, 26 June 1992.

13 E.g. each orphan of a veteran would receive 70,000 Kz, or more than 50% of the standard pension of 131,000 Kz. In a context where households typically counted many children, this could amount to a very substantial income.

14 Henceforth all pensions were granted as fixed sums, without reference to previous salaries; old-age pension were granted regardless of working capacity.

Figure 5. Veterans' pension level over time



Note: Inflation-adjusted development of legally stipulated veterans' pensions, expressed in multiples of Angolan median income beginning of 2009, and based on consecutive legislation published in the *Diário da República*. Inflation figures for pre-1991 period are highly uncertain and calculated real values should be taken as a rough estimate. Values above 8.5 are truncated; notably for a few months in 1992 and 1993 when pension levels reached a max of 16x the 2009 median income. Grey areas indicate conflict periods.

It was only after the war, however, that any significant change would take effect. Immediately following the ceasefire agreement in early 2002 (retroactively applicable from December 2001), pensions were drastically increased. A few months later, the system was reformed for the second time,¹⁵ effectively expanding its application to those killed or disabled in the last phase of the war and adding further benefits. While some of these benefits were evidently tailored towards the basic needs of the most vulnerable – a lump-sum “death allowance”, free medical treatment and mobility aids, as well as a variety of integration support measures – others, including priority access to university education and medical treatment abroad, appear more as perks for the already well-off. Veterans were also exempted from income tax, granted tax-free imports (based on vague criteria), and entitled to subsidized acquisition of privatized state assets. Such

measures would hardly aid the majority of poor soldiers-turned-farmers covered by the system and left obvious room for corruption.¹⁶

After the initial consolidation of the peace and in spite of the recent broadening of benefits, the government yet again neglected the veterans' pensions, which within two years lost two-thirds of their value. It was only in early 2004, amid accusations of large-scale embezzlement and rising criticism of the government for reneging on its promises of social development (EIU, 2004) that the pensions were restored to their initial levels. During half a decade, pensions for the more than 120,000 beneficiaries were kept stable at around twice the median income thanks to frequent adjustments. But after a last adjustment in mid-2008,

¹⁵ Lei 13/02, 15 October 2002.

¹⁶ Hodges (2001) notes both the “shockingly high” public expenditure dedicated to foreign study grants and hospitalizations, mostly benefiting a small, well-connected circle (p. 41), and the selling of state assets for symbolic sums, often to military officers (p. 119).

and the elections in September that year, they were once again left to slide. The apparent background factor was the sudden collapse of international oil prices in the second half of 2008 (OPEC, 2024).¹⁷ Yet even as oil prices slowly recovered in 2009 and 2010 (see Figure 3), the government neglected to readjust benefit levels.

Having lost a quarter of its value, it was the failure to make timely payments of the pensions – including the “13th month”, introduced a decade earlier – for the end-of-year holidays in 2010 that eventually triggered veterans to take to the streets (Albano, 2011b). Unconvinced by government claims of lacking funds in the midst of an oil boom, throughout the spring of 2011, *antigos combatentes* and war disabled staged demonstrations demanding overdue payments, adjustment of pension levels (Albano, 2011a), and ultimately, their inclusion into the regular social security system for the Armed Forces (see below) (RFI, 2011).

In mid-2011 the government finally reacted by significantly increasing pension levels. With oil revenues flowing, the government made sure to keep veterans’ pensions stable through adequate annual adjustments. Until, that is, the next oil price slump, beginning in the latter half of 2014, and proving much more prolonged. As inflation picked up, real pensions steadily declined. In mid-2017, veterans’ pensions had lost half of their value, in mid-2021, three-quarters. But notwithstanding increasingly widespread and vocal discontent (Camuto, 2022; Voice of America, 2024), veterans generally refrained from taking to the streets. It would take one decade, by which time veterans’ pensions had gone from representing one quarter of social transfers to a mere 7%, for the government to readjust pension levels, albeit to a level inferior to the 2009 median income.

Several factors likely contributed to the enduring inaction of the government. Most generally, the seriousness of the fiscal crisis: spending had to be drastically and durably cut across the board. This, together with the recession that ensued, rendered the government’s claim of a lack of funds credible; and while veterans’ pensions lost their value, they

remained a privileged group compared to most Angolans, who lacked any form of safety net. The political feasibility of demanding higher pensions was severely restrained.

The fiscal situation also forced the government to negotiate with international financial institutions. A central demand from the World Bank was to reduce fuel subsidies and increase targeted, “pro-poor” cash transfers (World Bank, 2015). While negotiations did not explicitly focus on veterans’ pensions (being effectively more “pro-poor” than fuel subsidies), the World Bank noted that the situation provided an opportunity “to think through the continuation of veteran benefits.” (World Bank, 2018, p. 6). In the view of the World Bank, scarce social spending should be awarded according to need, not merit. Reducing the fiscal weight of veterans’ pensions would certainly be favourably received by external creditors.

Finally, after almost four decades at the head of the country, in September 2017, José Eduardo dos Santos handed over the presidency to João Lourenço. As he was the ex-Minister of Defence, observers saw his appointment as a way to appease the powerful military establishment (Bye, Inglês, & Orre, 2021, p. 8), and one would be forgiven for assuming that he would defend the interests of both active and former soldiers.

Yet in terms of the resources dedicated to the military, he would prove considerably more frugal than his predecessor. Having already initiated processes to “clean up” regular military pensions (Jornal de Angola, 2016) and associations for demobilized fighters (Jornal de Angola, 2017), in 2018 it was time for the veterans. A new beneficiary ID card was designed¹⁸ and a proposal for a revised law on *antigos combatentes* was floated, which would impose stricter eligibility criteria, particularly for children of veterans (Jornal de Angola, 2018). In fact, as most of these criteria were already in the present legislation (Lei 13/02), the initiative rather appears as political signalling: instead of new legislation (never introduced) it pre-saged a drive to root out inexistent or ineligible beneficiaries. The system had de facto become too inclusive. In the following year the government

17 According to OPEC data, international oil market prices dropped by close to 70% in the last six months of 2008.

18 Decreto Presidencial 68/18, of 5 March 2018.

Table 1. Number of beneficiaries of veterans' special regime

	2013		2023 (or closest year)			2024		
	N	(%)	N	(%)	Δ	N	(%)	Δ
Total beneficiaries	159,075	100	134,619	100.0	-15.4	64,531	100.0	-51.3
Antigo Combatentes	69,993	44	70,542	52.4	0.8	41,846	64.8	-40.7
War disabled	25,452	16	20,260	15.0	-20.4	14,932	23.1	-26.3
Orphans	50,904	32	31,742	23.6	-37.6	3,636	5.6	-88.5
Other beneficiaries	12,726	8	10,032	7.5	-21.2	4,096	6.3	-59.2
Widows			6,211	4.6		3,160	4.9	-49.1
Dependent parents			3,212	2.4		607	0.9	-81.1
Assistants			609	0.5		329	0.5	-46.0

Note: Figures for 2013 are from Associação de Militares Mutilados de Guerra de Angola, cited by Valmario França (2014, p. 14), with sub-category beneficiary numbers imputed from share of total. Figures for 2023 and 2024 are based on data received from Direção Nacional de Protecção Social (Ministry of Defence), Luanda, February 2025.

issued a decree regulating an envisioned “re-registration and proof of life process” which would come to severely reduce the number of beneficiaries.¹⁹

After the conclusion of the civil war and the inclusion of new cohorts of war disabled, the number of beneficiaries had amounted to just under 120,000, of which 29,000 disabled and 47,000 *antigos combatentes* (Agência Lusa, 2004b).²⁰ Ten year later, as new cohorts of liberation fighters reached pension age or passed away – leaving widows and orphans behind – the total had grown to over 160,000 (see Table 1). Counting only the 70,000 *antigos combatentes*, this would have amounted to some 16% of Angolan men over 60,²¹ thus reaching a non-negligible portion of all households. According to the minister in charge, the total rose to 174,000 before the start of the re-registration process in 2019 (Jornal de Angola, 2024). Towards the end of the much-delayed process (2023 or closest preceding year), and based on province-level data obtained from the Ministry of Defence, the number had dropped to 133,000. Yet the drastic change occurred after the completion of

the process, in 2024, when the number of beneficiaries was reduced to a mere 64,000.

As the authorities has long been accused of unjustly denying access to public benefits for various groups of veterans – and inversely granting them to those failing to fulfil the criteria (see below) – it is pertinent to study the numbers in more detail.

The severity of the reduction differed substantially between beneficiary categories. “Orphans” were reduced from more than 50,000 in 2013, to less than 4,000 in 2024. Since the category is supposed to only include children under 18, the former figure was almost certainly inflated.²² Dependent parents – many of whom may reasonably have died – were likewise drastically reduced; widows less so. The central category of *antigos combatentes* was likewise substantially reduced, albeit only towards the end. Since the very youngest cohort of *antigo combatentes* must have passed their 65th birthday in 2024, many of their older comrades must already have passed away.

22 Any orphan of a soldier who fell in the war, ending in early 2002, must have turned 18 in 2020 at the latest, which barring university studies – a privilege still reserved for very few – would have disqualified them from benefits. As a particularly privileged category, children of *antigos combatentes* could fall into the category of orphan even if their parent's death was not war-related (and thus potentially occurring after 2002). However, in 2002, the youngest *antigo combatentes* would have already been around 45 years old; the number of descendants of *antigo combatentes* still under 18 in 2020 should have been limited.

19 Decreto Executivo Conjunto 220/19, of 26 August 2019.

20 The precise figures given by the president of the national assembly were 47,408 *antigos combatentes*, 28,588 war disabled, and 41,824 dependants.

21 Standing at 431,000 according to the 2014 census (INE, 2016, p. 98).

The category experiencing the least reduction was that of disabled combatants. Given the rather restrictive initial numbers – 29,000 at its peak, for a country with hundreds of thousands of war deaths – and the eligibility of younger cohorts, the relatively moderate reduction appears logical. Clearly, the beneficiary rolls failed to accurately reflect the true population of entitled persons; and the relative size of reduction across categories suggests that a significant explanation lies in a failure to cease payments to *once eligible* beneficiaries.

But studying the geographical distribution of beneficiaries suggests a complementary and more political story. Notably, five provinces – Bengo, Lunda Sul and Norte, Cuando Cubango and Moxico – stand out with an extreme density of beneficiaries before 2024²³ and an equally extreme reduction thereafter. Several of these provinces experienced intense fighting during the civil war; yet in terms of war disabled – the group that should have followed from significant participation in the post-liberation civil war – the five provinces are not much different from the rest. Instead, their extreme figures stem primarily from severely inflated numbers of (liberation war era) *antigo combatentes* and (their) orphans. In fact, in three of these provinces, the number of registered *antigo combatentes* beneficiaries by far exceeded the *total* number of males above the age of 65.²⁴ Tiny Lunda Norte would accordingly boast as many liberation fighters as the capital province of Luanda, having a population eight times larger and counting one hundred times more regular military pensioners.²⁵

The numbers are all the more puzzling since, with the exception of Bengo – a stronghold of FAPLA

guerrilla warfare during the war of independence (Hodges, 2001, p. 8) – none of the other four, distinctly peripheral, provinces are intuitive home regions of independence fighters. In fact, what demographically distinguishes them is the dominance of two linguistic minority groups: the Chokwe speakers (6.5% of Angolans), predominating in Lunda Norte, Lunda Sul and Moxico; and the Nganguela (3.1% of Angolans), predominating in Cuando Cubango. Notably, while their home territories – inaccessible, strategically important, and resource rich – constituted prime battlegrounds during the civil war, these groups generally lacked close affiliation with either of the three liberation movements. If anything, ethnic affiliation would suggest that these provinces would be devoid of liberation veterans – not full to the brim.

Such an extreme discrepancy can hardly be explained by administrative inefficiency or error. Indeed, while administrative structures were certainly seriously undermined during the war, there is little to indicate that the bureaucracies of the concerned peripheral provinces would have been significantly worse than others in Angola.²⁶

What set them apart was their post-war political sensitivity. Their inhabitants paid a heavy price as their territories became the focal point of the war and the economic extraction that underpinned it. But due to their minority status and tenuous affiliation with the major military-political movements, they were largely excluded from the resulting benefits, and equally important, from the Angolan national narrative of anti-colonial struggle and state-building (Hodges, 2001, p. 163). The political precariousness of these economically important but difficult-to-police provinces became evident in the 1992 parliamentary elections, when the regionalist Partido de Renovação Social (PRS) became the second largest party in the two Lundas, coming in third nationally. The strong results were repeated in the first post-war elections of 2008, providing obvious cause for concern for the

23 Ranging from 14 to 24 per 1,000 inhabitants before the 2024 reduction. For most provinces the figure stood between 1.5 and 2.5.

24 Bengo, Lunda Sul and Moxico. Based on population projections from UNFPA (2022) and data provided by the Direção Nacional de Proteção Social (2023 or closest proceeding year). An unknown but non-negligible share of *antigos combatentes* are women. The calculation is nonetheless conservative as it includes individuals who were only 17 years old in 1974, the last year of the liberation war.

25 According to data obtained by the author from the ISS-FAA in Luanda, October 2024.

26 To take but one telling indicator, the share of people holding a birth certificate was, at the time of the 2014 census, around 53% across Angola. Three of the concerned provinces had a higher share (Lunda Sul: 77%; Bengo: 62%; Moxico: 56%) and two had a lower share (Cuando Cubango: 47%; Lunda Norte: 45%).

government. Against this background, the inflated beneficiary numbers would appear to be not so much a result of administrative error as a reflection of a strategy of state co-optation deployed vis-à-vis peripheral regions (see also Soares de Oliveira & Taponier, 2013). While the success of the strategy should not be overstated – popular demand for autonomy continues to be manifested and violently repressed in the eastern provinces – providing a large share of households with a stable if dubiously attributed and thus politically contingent pension has constituted a relatively cheap way of mitigating material grievances while making households dependent on the MPLA state. Yet the misuse of the veterans' pension system has had implications for the remaining beneficiaries.

Having refused to readjust veterans' pension levels until its registers were cleaned up (Angola 24 Horas, 2023) – thus putting the onus for faulty payments on the beneficiary collective – the government finally kept its promise and increased pensions by a factor of three in mid-2024. The implicit link between (limited) coverage and (generous) scope of benefits was clear. In practice, however, the result was a general benefit level significantly below that of the previous two decades, indeed inferior to the minimum salary, paid to a drastically reduced number of beneficiaries. If liberation fighters, their families, and disabled veterans were once uniquely privileged, they had long since been overtaken by a new middle class.

6. THE GENERAL SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

In late 1990, with a post-Cold War peace and multiparty elections on the horizon, the MPLA government introduced the country's first-ever general social security system. As is noted in the preamble to the Social Security Law (Lei 18/90), while the state early on fulfilled its constitutional commitments vis-à-vis liberation fighters and their families, only a minute share of the country's "workers" had been protected through the pension system "inherited from the past". The establishment of a contributory system in principle covering all formal

employees and the self-employed, as well as their families, was intended to rectify this lacuna.

The system envisioned a comprehensive set of benefits, covering maternity and (temporary) disability benefits, old-age and survivors' pensions, family allowances, and unemployment and work-injury insurance. However, the central pillar of the system was and has remained pensions, with other branches implemented belatedly or not at all, and with at most marginal fiscal importance (World Bank, 2023, p. 74).²⁷

Pensions, on the other hand, were generously designed. While the new system, in contrast to the *regime especial*, demanded payments from future beneficiaries, the contribution rates were low.²⁸ Old-age pensions were granted after the age of 60 or 35 years of service, on the condition of having payed contributions for 15 years. *Antigos combatentes* were once again granted privileged conditions, with years spent in the liberation struggle counted double. In addition, workers in arduous professions were granted retirement from the age of 50.²⁹ After 35 years of service, old-age pensions were provided at a nominal replacement rate of 100%, based on the two last years' salary. At face value, this was extremely generous. In practice, however, the high inflation rates would enter as a significant and complicating factor.

First, rapidly increasing nominal salaries follow from high inflation. Accordingly, extending the reference period backwards quickly depresses the average. Throughout the 1990s, annual inflation figures in the hundreds rendered the reference salary all but worthless. The situation was ameliorated following public sector strikes in mid-1999 (EIU, 1999b), when the retrospective period was completely removed for public sector employees and reduced to one year for the private sector. As inflation was slowly brought under control, subse-

27 Disability pensions covered close to 4,000 beneficiaries in the years following the end of the civil war (INE, 2010), but then declined steadily. They appear to have been effectively abolished around 2017.

28 2% of the gross salary for employees, and 5% for employers (Decreto 17/91, 25 May 1991), later increased to 3% and 8%, respectively (Decreto 7/99, 28 May 1999).

29 As per Despacho Conjunto 69/93, of 3 September 1993.

Table 2. General old-age pension legislative provisions, successive reforms

	Lei 18/90	Decr. Lei 12/99	Decr. 76/05	Decr. 40/08	Decr. Presidencial 299/20	
Valid from	1990	1999	2005	2008	2021	→ 2024
Min. contribution period (years)	15	15	15	15	15	
Min. age/service time (years)	60/35	60/35	60/35	60/35	60/35	
Reference salary period (years before retirement date)						
<i>Civil servants</i>		0		1	2	5
<i>Private sector</i>	2	1	1	3	4	7
Nominal replacement rate *	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
Minimum level (% of legal minimum salary)	100%	100%	90%	100%	N/A**	

* Assuming 35 years' service time.

** Periodically adjusted through separate decrees.

quent reforms, outlined in Table 2, have gradually expanded the reference period backwards, while generally preserving a more beneficial status for public employees. Even with relatively modest post-war inflation, these extensions have had important consequences. With an annual median post-war inflation rate of around 16%, a reference salary based on the last year of work will be 7% below that of the final salary; one based on the last five years will be 29% below. Thus, whereas successive governments have kept the nominal replacement rate at 100%, they have been able to use adjustments to the reference period to effectively increase or decrease pensions.

Even more importantly, the general social security system – as with the *regime especial* – was never equipped with a mechanism for automatically adjusting benefits. Thus, even with an initially decent reference salary, inflation would continuously erode its real value, leaving beneficiaries to rely on periodic adjustments decreed by the government. The result has been a system which, while overall very generous (World Bank, 2018, p. 46), is both difficult to assess and open for discretionary manipulation.

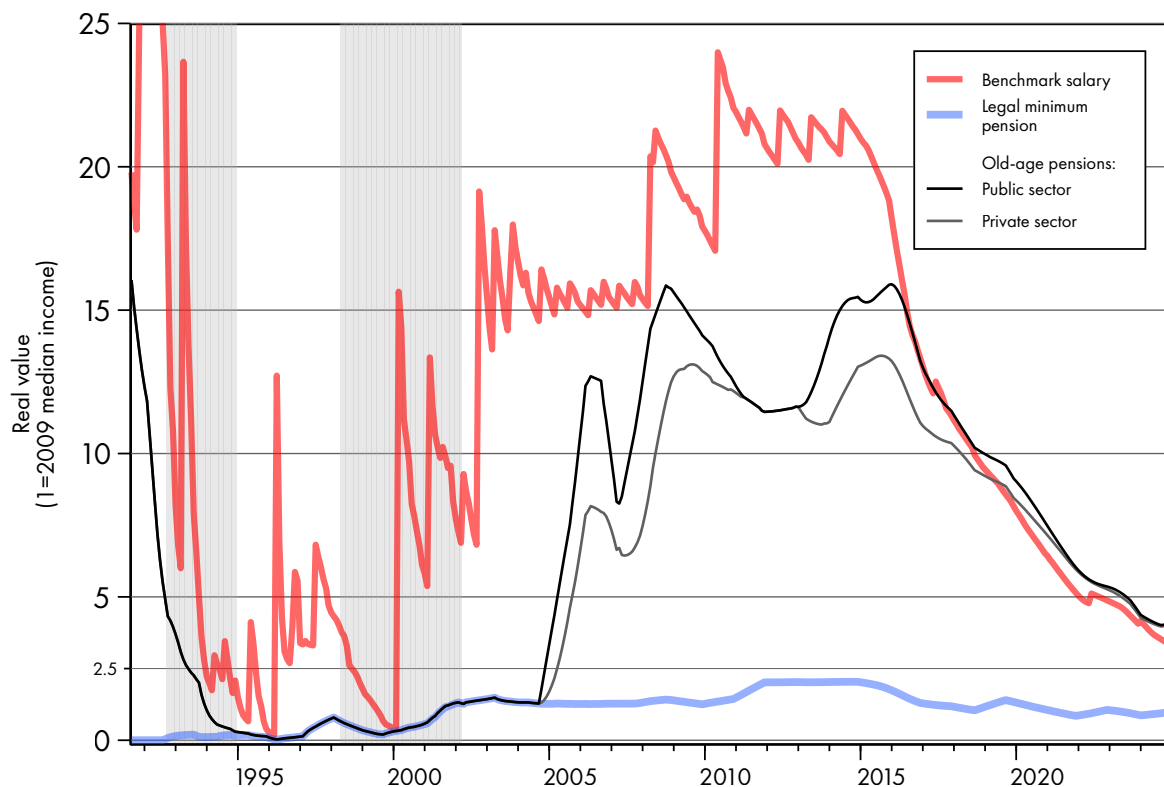
To understand how the system has worked in practice in the last three decades, it is necessary to account for changes in nominal salary levels, reference salary formula, periodic adjustments of general and minimum pension levels, as well as inflation. Lacking wage statistics, synthetic wage series for a hypothetical educated end-of-career

employee, representing a “benchmark salary” has been constructed based on the legally stipulated wage schedules for teachers between 1991 and 2025.³⁰ The monthly development is shown by the red line in Figure 6, expressed as multiples of the Angolan median income in 2009.

Similar to the veterans' pensions (Figure 5), public sector salaries experienced some noticeable bursts in the early 1990s, and again in 1996, as teachers went on strike in protest at their evaporating purchasing power. Following further public sector strikes in late 1999 and 2000 (EIU, 2001, p. 12), and in mid-2002 (AFP, 2002), salary levels were again drastically increased, and thereafter kept buoyant. Eventually, however, with the oil-price slump beginning in 2014, the government reverted to mere symbolic adjustments, leading to a precipitous decline over the last decade. For much of this period, old-age pensioners have, however, been considerably worse off. While nominally linked to previous salaries, the generally weak and ad hoc adjustments of old-age benefits

30 For the period under analysis (1991-2025), teachers' salaries were regulated first according to the general public sector wage schedule (1991-1997) and then according to three subsequent, education sector-specific schedules (introduced 1997, 2010, and 2018). Care has been taken to correctly link each subsequent system, based on qualitative assessments and overlapping wage series, but since equivalence in relative rank or education level cannot be guaranteed across breaks, comparison across the whole time period may not be fully accurate.

Figure 6. General old-age pension simulation, 5 years after retirement



Note: The benchmark salary (red line) is a synthetic salary measure simulating that of a hypothetical end-of-career educated worker, based on consecutive legal salary scales for teachers, as published in the *Diário da República*. The black and grey lines represent the resultant effective pension received by a former employee in the public and private sector, respectively, after 5 years of retirement, smoothened across 12 months. Changes in the calculation of the reference salary (pre-retirement) and all subsequent adjustments of pension levels (5 year after retirement) are accounted for. All values are inflation adjusted and expressed in multiples of the Angolan 2009 median income. Values above 25x are truncated; notably for a few months in 1992 when salary levels reached a max of 67x the 2009 median income. Grey areas indicate conflict periods.

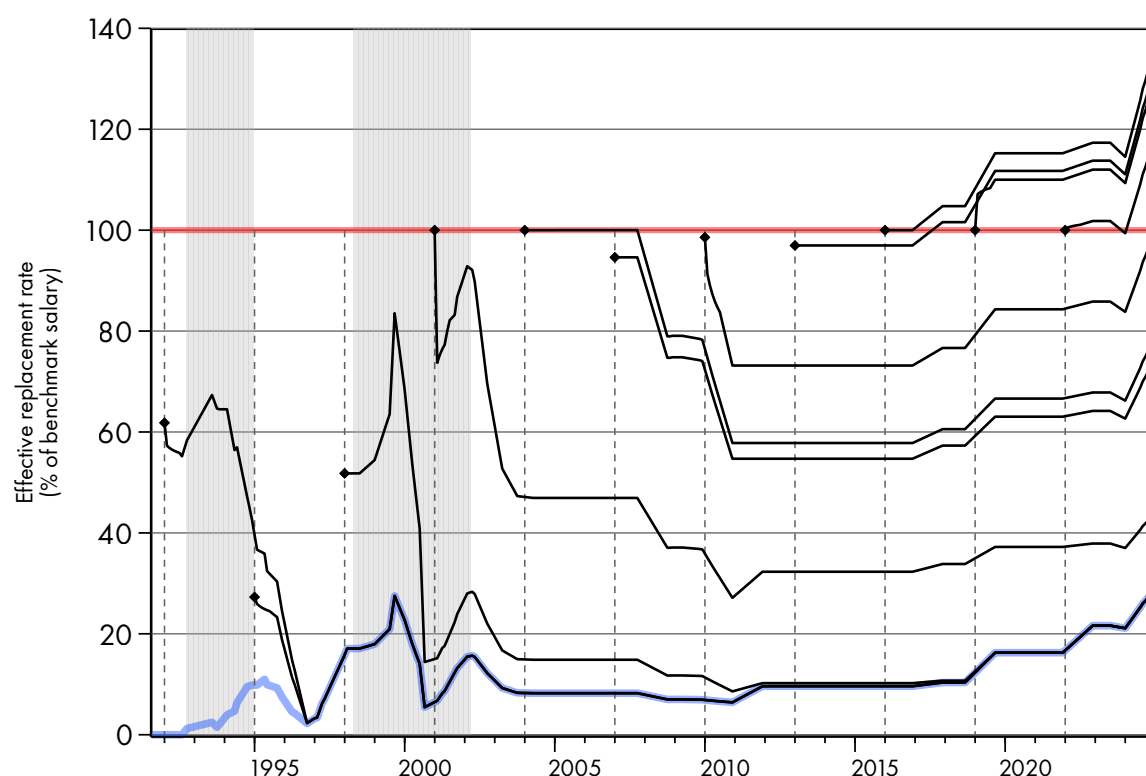
in contexts of high inflation eroded their real values vis-à-vis current equivalent salary levels. The tendency is illustrated by the black and grey lines in Figure 6, representing monthly snapshots of a hypothetical worker five years after their date of retirement, having fulfilled the full service time.³¹ Thus, throughout the civil war period, pension increases – typically in tandem with salary increases – failed to compensate for inflation. Even the income of pensioners with a very high final salary would soon fall to the legal minimum pension, represented by the thick blue line. Once there, there was no way to recover. Only well into the post-war period, when previous real salary increases met moderate inflation rates, would subsequent cohorts of pensioners enjoy reasonable – indeed

highly privileged – pensions. Finally, with the fiscal crisis, real pension levels experienced a dramatic decline, losing three-quarters of their value in a decade. The fact that nominal pension increases for the first time outpaced those of salaries only dampened the fall slightly.

The design of the system and its management in a volatile price context led not only to drastic variation over the long term, but also to extremely inequitable outcomes at any given time – even for retirees with comparable histories. One immediate reason was the legally stipulated difference in reference salary calculation between the public and private sector, the result of which is clearly seen in the difference between the black and grey line Figure 6. But more importantly, both abrupt nominal salary increases in the short term and long-term variation in the extent to which pension adjustments have kept pace with salary increases have introduced a strong component of arbitrariness

31 With the exception of the first five-year period (1991-1996), when the lines trace a worker who retired at the first date in the sample, i.e. August 1991.

Figure 7. General old-age pension simulation, effective replacement rate by cohort



Note: The benchmark salary (red line, constant at 100%) is a synthetic salary measure simulating that of a hypothetical end-of-career educated worker, based on consecutive legal salary scales for teachers, as published in the *Diário da República*. The black lines show the simulated development of pension levels for different cohorts of old-age pensioners, assuming public sector employment, expressed as a percentage of their current benchmark salary. Each cohort's entry into retirement is marked by a black diamond. The legal minimum pension is traced by the blue line. Changes in the calculation of the reference salary (pre-retirement) and all subsequent adjustments of pension levels are accounted for. All values are smoothed into 12-month moving averages. Grey areas indicate conflict periods.

ness and uncertainty in pension entitlements, making it largely a question of timing.

Figure 7 provides an illustration by tracing the development of pensions for distinct cohorts of pensioners compared to current salary levels, and based on the same data and assumptions as in Figure 6. Keeping the benchmark salary (applicable for someone still in service) constant and distinguishing between cohorts allows for an appreciation of the relationship between salary and pension developments, as well as the extent to which differences in pension levels depend on the timing of retirement. Thus, all those entering retirement in the 1990s would start out with a low replacement rate, soon to fall to the legal minimum. Later post-war cohorts were more fortunate, but with significant variation depending on date of retirement. Notably, in the decade following the war, authorities intermittently raised pensions relative to equivalent salaries, sometimes let them

slide, and sometimes meticulously matched them. Only in 2011 – a year marked by veterans' protests and political uncertainty linked to the incipient Arabic Spring – would a decisive break occur: the lowest pensions regained some of their value, and henceforth the government would be careful not to let pension levels drop relative to salaries. Finally, in the last years of economic crisis and rapidly declining real salaries, governments under the new president Lourenço have clearly attempted to dampen the fall of pensions, and particularly those at the lower end. However, benefit levels remain highly unequal even for pensioners with comparable professional histories. For example, according to the simulations in Figure 7, an educated individual who retired in the late 1990s would currently receive a minimum pension. This is equivalent to a mere 30% of the current benchmark salary and approximately equal to the median income in 2009. In contrast, such an individual who re-

tired a decade later would receive around 80%, whereas a new retiree would receive 140% (!). The built-in inequity has been further amplified by steep income differences between different sectors and education levels, rendering the system as a whole sharply unequal (see e.g. World Bank, 2018, p. 46).

Nonetheless, for all its arbitrariness, the beneficiaries of the general pension system have remained privileged. Even after the rapid increase in beneficiaries following the oil-price crisis – the number of old-age and survivors' pensions under the general system increased from very low numbers in the 1990s to just below 100,000 on the eve of the oil crisis, then doubling to almost 200,000 in 2021³² – they only constituted around 15% of the population aged 60 and over. Moreover, applying almost exclusively to the formal sector (and the public sector in particular) in a country dominated by informal and subsistence activities, pension beneficiaries, disproportionately concentrated in the capital province, remain considerably more well-off and higher educated than the rest of the population (World Bank, 2023, p. 79).

In the most general sense, these privileges have been a result of the power of the relatively well-educated, largely Luanda-based, public sector employees for whom the system constituted an essential old-age insurance. Strikes not only posed the risk of costly interruptions in the critical tertiary and extractive sectors, but could expose cracks in the repressive façade. The nominal generosity of the system as well as the wildly fluctuating but generally buoyant salary levels underpinning it was a reflection of this fact. Yet, compared to salary levels, effective pension levels were, in the two first decades, derisory. The technical reason for the discrepancy has been detailed above; the political reasons are more difficult to ascertain. If pensioners for obvious reasons no longer wield the strike weapon, why the apparent absence of protests, and why no concerted mobilization from future beneficiaries? Notwithstanding the urban concentration of beneficiaries – in contrast to e.g.

veterans – the inequality and non-transparency of the system likely acted against collective action. With the formal replacement rate of 100% being largely a chimera, and lacking access to official records, it would have been difficult to make a coherent assessment of what was effectively paid to whom. The problem was compounded by the extreme variation in pension levels: not only between those at different ends of the pre-retirement salary scale, but more drastically so, between cohorts. Lacking a coherent understanding of the problem, it was difficult to mobilize for a solution.

Inversely, the stabilization of pensions relative to salaries, first in 2004, and then more durably from 2011 onwards, clearly coincides with periods of general public discontent and anti-government protests linked to corruption and lack of social development. In light of this, renewed attention to urban pension levels appears to have been a pre-emptive strategy, seeking to stem the spread of protests to a central yet hitherto quiescent support group.

Why then, did pension benefit levels start outpacing (public) salaries a few years into the fiscal crisis? One reason would be the need to shield urban pensioners from the price increases acutely affecting the middle class. However, pensions were increased across the board, including for the highest echelons – hardly a cost-effective method to protect the most vulnerable in times of crisis. A complementary explanation lies in the pressure exerted by international actors, and the IMF in particular. For, in order to access the urgently needed funds offered by the IMF in 2018, the Angolan government committed to strict minimum social spending targets as an exception to general austerity (IMF, 2019). While international donors would certainly have preferred a rapid expansion of targeted “pro-poor” programmes (see below) and inversely criticized further spending on veterans, ordinary pensions had the benefit of being both acceptable for the IMF and promising domestic political returns.

32 According to figures from the World Bank (2018) and data provided by the Instituto Nacional de Segurança Social in Luanda in 2024.

7. MILITARY PENSIONS

The third major pension system in Angola – and until recently constituting the single largest component of social protection spending (World Bank, 2023, p. 75) – is the designated military pension system, set up on the eve of the Lusaka Accords in the mid-1990s (Decreto-Lei 16/94).

The new system was particularly generous, in several respects. Contributions were identical to those of the general system, but old-age pensions were granted already from the age of 55 (instead of 60), or after 30 years' service (instead of 35 years); and in the case of death – outside of service – it provided survivors' pensions at 80% (instead of 70%). Most importantly, however, whereas the general system allowed for a disconnect between old-age pensioners and their still active peers, with often disastrous consequences for the former, the new military system made sure to tie their fortunes tightly together by using the *current* salaries of still-active military officers as the basis for calculating pensions (Decreto 11-I/96). Regardless of the macro-economic context and the relative political attention paid to pensions, a retired military officer would receive a pension equal to 100% of the salary of his equivalent still in service. In addition to increasing transparency, it mitigated some of the unreliability of future benefit levels.

The provision reflected both lessons learnt from the (dis)functioning of the general pension system and the specific moral and political status of the military. It likewise implies that any analysis of military pensions over time is above all an analysis of military salaries and their determinants. As Figure 8 makes clear, tracing the development of legally stipulated military remunerations, with mid-ranking officers represented by the rank of captain (red line) and their current pensions (black line), this would mostly be a good thing. The reignition of the civil war in 1998 and the accompanying hyperinflation brought with it growing albeit wildly fluctuating incomes for military officers: mid-ranking officers fared better overall compared to the typical educated civilian employee, traced in Figure 6, and more to the point, military pensions were kept afloat. If the top brass had been the major winners

of the resumption of the war – the effective “war bonus” implied a six-fold salary increase for generals, compared to a doubling for the rest – the post-war increase equally benefited lower-level officers and soldiers. For several years, most military remunerations were kept perfectly stable at high but strongly disparate levels according to rank.³³ However, with growing oil incomes and in an apparent effort to prop up political support, on the eve of the national elections in 2008, officers' salaries were suddenly doubled or even tripled. The increases were considerably larger than the modest if equally evident pre-election salary increases in the public sector at large or those of veterans' pensions (see Figures 5 and 6). The fact that rank-and-file soldiers – numerically more significant and cheaper to “pay-off” – in contrast received no equivalent raise, speaks to the special status of the Angolan officers' class. Too few to have a decisive influence on voting patterns, but as the key government support group, their loyalty was nonetheless imperative.

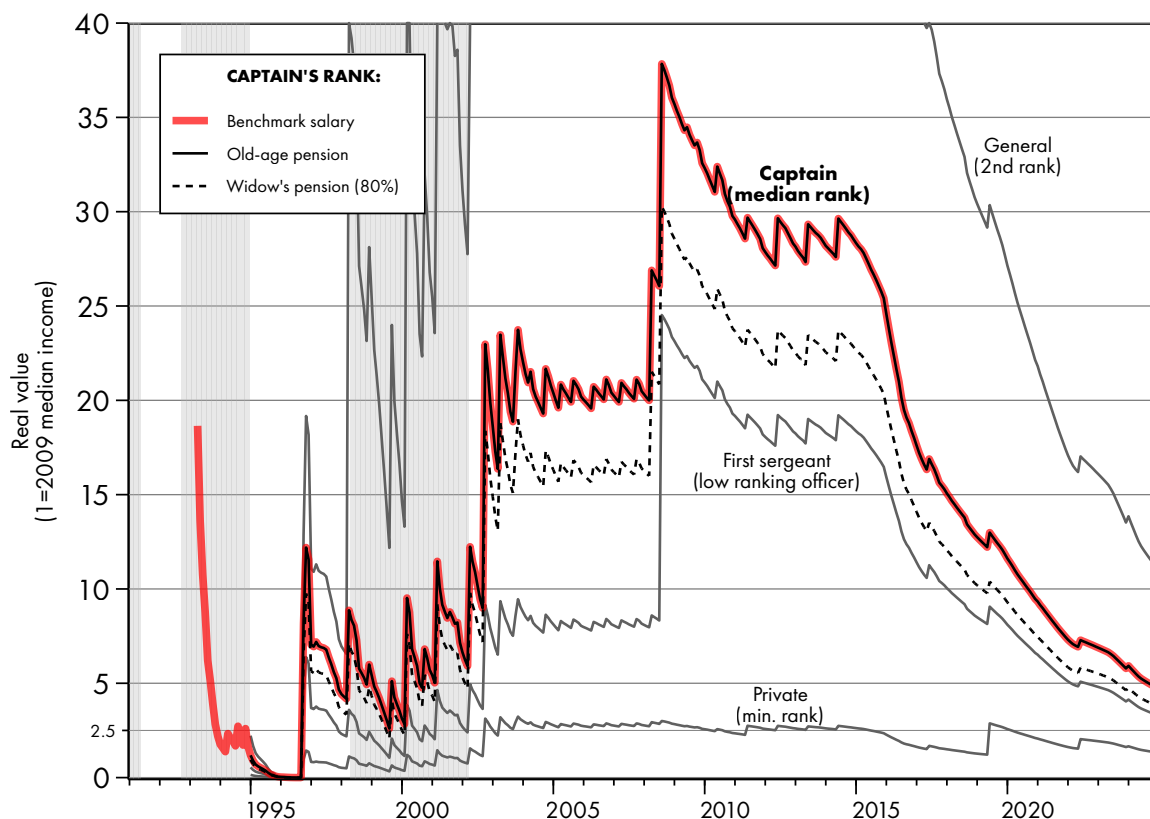
With military pensions pegged to current salaries, retired military officers automatically benefited. Thus in 2008, the average military pension was approximately ten times higher than the already quite generous civilian pensions. Accordingly, while representing 20% of pensioners, former officers received two-thirds of total public expenditure on contributory pensions (World Bank, 2023, p. 75); most of which was paid through the general budget.³⁴

The lavish pensions of FAA officers constituted an object of envy for groups claiming to have been unfairly excluded. Soon after the civil war, ex-UNITA officers and political representatives began criticizing the government for breaching the peace agreement by refusing military pensions to demobilized officers (Agência Lusa, 2004a, 2004c). In fact, whether any of the close to 100,000 newly demobilized UNITA soldiers – beyond those 5,000 effectively integrated into the FAA – were entitled to pensions, and if so, under what system,

33 For example, a general earned almost eight times the salary of a first sergeant, and twenty times that of a private.

34 For beneficiary numbers see Figure 9. Expenditure estimated from Figure 74 in World Bank (2023, p. 75).

Figure 8. Military pension levels over time



Note: Inflation-adjusted development of FAA pensions, for selected end-of-career ranks, expressed in multiples of Angolan median income in early 2009. Author's own calculations based on consecutive legislation published in the *Diário da República*. Solid lines are old-age pensions, assuming 30 years' service (100%); dashed lines are survivors' pensions, assuming death outside of service (80%). Captain represents an approximate median rank among retired military officers (2008-2024). Privates', sergeants' and generals' salary/pension levels are included for reference. The latter is truncated (reaching a max of 92x median income in 2008). Grey areas indicate conflict periods.

was far from clear. On the one hand, the original military pension legislation from 1994 provided for "extraordinary pensions" to those who "by virtue of the Peace Agreements for Angola [the largely mute Bicesse Accords of 1991], are registered with the personnel bodies of the Angolan Armed Forces" (Lei 16/94 art. 2.1(b) & art. 32). On the other hand, having seemingly remained a dead letter, the question of pension entitlements was explicitly excluded from the 2002 demobilization and reintegration process (Porto & Parsons, 2003, p. 35). Thus, despite being nominally integrated into the FAA as part of the demobilization process, most of the several hundred thousand demobilized ex-soldiers from each side and subsequent peace processes, remained excluded.³⁵

35 An unknown number of demobilized FAPLA (MPLA) commissioned officers is supposed to have been integrated into the military pension system (AllAfrica, 2012).

In the wake of the veterans' protests in 2011, and as military pensions reached extreme levels, discontent was brewing. In early 2012, a group of ex-FAPLA soldiers wrote an open letter protesting their exclusion from the Social Security Fund of the FAA (CSS/FAA), while "phantom generals", businessmen, and political figures who "were never military personnel of the MPLA, UNITA, or FNLA", were paid generous benefits (Maka Angola, 2012c). When the organizers of a planned protest were violently assaulted a few months later, it sparked an outpouring which would seriously unsettle the regime. On 7 June 2012, three months before the national elections, around 3,000 demobilized predominantly FAPLA soldiers marched towards the Ministry of Defence in Luanda. The numbers alone were remarkable in a context where the slightest public protest could be lethally repressed. The ensuing dynamic is equally illustrative of the potential power of ex-soldiers: hav-

ing fought their way through water cannons and several lines of heavily armed presidential guards and riot police, the unarmed and mostly elderly protesters halted in front of the ministry and started singing old MPLA war chants (Maka Angola, 2012a). Face-to-face with younger colleagues and within shouting distance of the generals on whose orders they had once risked their lives, the deeper message was loud and clear: with little respect for guns but a cleaner patriotic resumé than most, their demand for basic social protection could not simply be swept aside.³⁶

In the following weeks, a series of violent clashes and altercations between demobilized soldiers and representatives of the military establishment ensued. However, with a combination of individualized one-off payments, playing the different ex-military groups off against each other, and targeted repression, the government eventually subdued the protests before they could grow into a coordinated, cross-partisan movement (Maka Angola, 2012b, 2012d).

The relative privilege of retired military officers would decline in the years to come, as inflation ate away the previous extravagant pension raises and as civilian pensions became increasingly buoyant. The imputed military–civil pensions level ratio shrank from 10:1 in 2008, to 3:1 in 2013 and 2:1 in 2019.³⁷ Yet, compared to those left out, the gulf remained insurmountable.

In contrast to the veterans' pensions – easily extended and a cheap sedative for disgruntled and disadvantaged groups – the regime had no interest in opening the doors to the military pension system. Backed by the associations for the demobilized, the government claimed to be processing thousands of requests on an individual basis (Rede

Angola, 2015). But little came of it. Far from including those previously excluded, as can be seen from Figure 9, the hitherto rapidly expanding number of military pension beneficiaries subsequently stagnated. If the officer class were reluctant to share their privileges under the oil-drenched largesse of the dos Santos era, they were unlikely to extend a hand under the new frugal leadership of Lourenço, who already in 2016 had initiated a process to root out the “ghosts” from the registers.³⁸ The calls for solidarity from elderly demobilized soldiers from all sides towards “the generals” on the inside continued to emerge from time to time (Voice of America, 2022), but remain unanswered. The stance has not saved the officers from crisis-induced austerity, but at least until now, they have avoided the drastic purges experienced by other beneficiary groups (Figure 9).

In sum, the exceptionally privileged situation for retired military officers is a direct result of the central position of the (active) officers' class within the Angola power structure whose self-interest not only worked towards keeping salaries high, but also to maintaining (their future) pensions pegged at parity. Yet if self-interest implied solidarity with their older peers, it equally dictated the exclusion of their former, now-demobilized comrades-in-arms.³⁹ Once again, privileged benefit levels were premised on carefully circumscribed inclusion.

Lacking material and organizational leverage, demobilized soldiers and their families had little chance of receiving permanent social benefits. What they could realistically hope for were the one-off reintegration benefits promised to them as part of the peace agreements. Mere scraps from the officers' table, but potentially decisive for ensuring a livelihood after years out in the bush. But even that, they had to fight for.

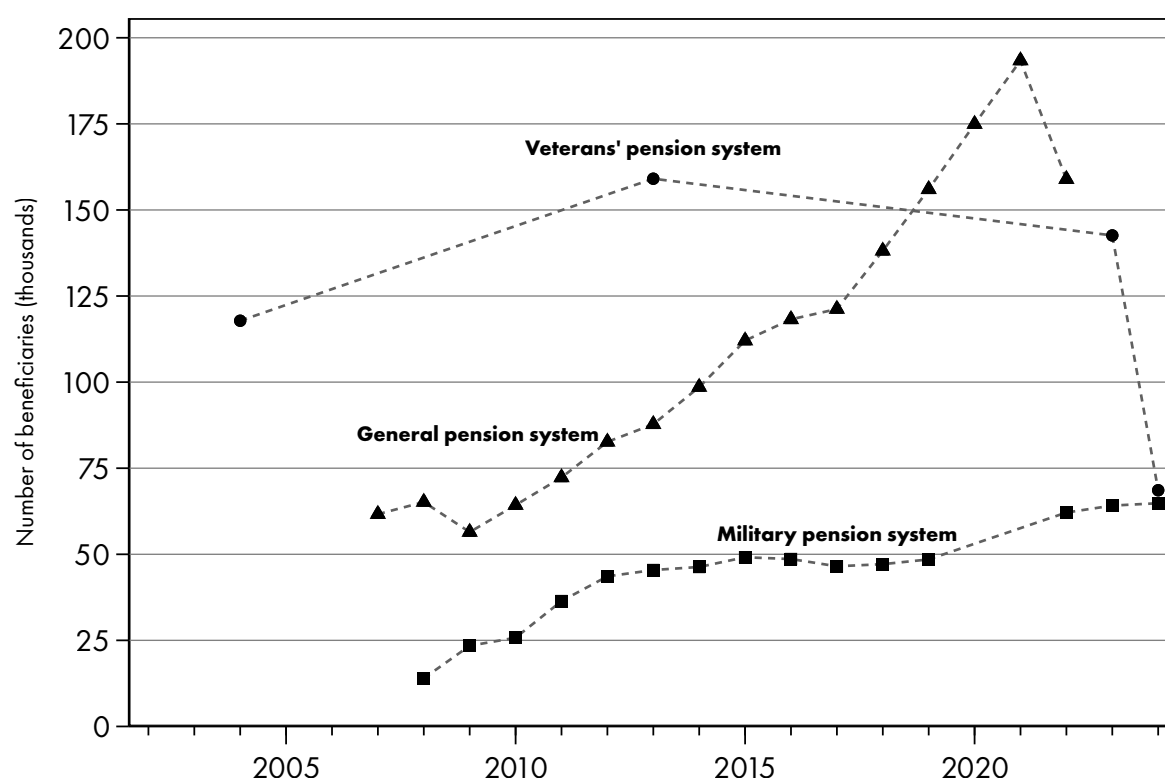
36 As recounted by a journalist: “One former soldier stood his ground while the police advanced and screamed that he lost his fear when a landmine blew his limb away during the war. ‘We defended your power, thieves!’ he exclaimed.” (Maka Angola, 2012a).

37 *Antigos combatentes*, in contrast, lost out relative to general pensions: decreasing from around half the average in 2013 to one-third in 2019, while keeping stable at a ratio of around 1:5.5 compared to military pensions. Estimations based on number of beneficiaries (Figure 9) and approximative expenditure figures from the World Bank (2023, p. 75).

38 This led to a brief decline of around 5% in the number of beneficiaries.

39 As emphasized by a high-ranking military officer working in the Angolan state administration, there is a clear social distinction between on the one hand the demobilized, who as the term *ex-military* implies, lose their military status, and retired military officers, who formally retain their rank and membership in the military corps (private conversation, Ministry of Defence, December 2023).

Figure 9. Pension beneficiaries across programmes



Note: In addition to old-age pension beneficiaries, figures include survivors' pensions for the military and general pension systems, and disabled, descendants, and widows of veterans. Sources: For the general system, INE (2010; 2013), World Bank (2018), and data provided by MAPTSS; for military pensions, data received from ISSFAA in October 2024; for veterans' pensions, data received from Direcção Nacional de Protecção Social (Ministry of Defence), February 2025.

8. SUPPORT TO DEMOBILIZED SOLDIERS

At the end of the civil war, Angola had an estimated 400,000 ex-soldiers who could claim the right to special assistance. But who were they, and what were their entitlements?

Before the ultimate government victory in 2002, Angola experienced two failed peace processes, accompanied by equally unsuccessful demobilization processes. While a central feature of the Bicesse Accords of 1991 was the creation of a much-reduced, unified Angolan army (FAA), it lacked any detailed provisions regulating the demobilization of the 150,000 then-to-be redundant fighters – let alone their social reintegration (UNSC, 1991). Despite a tight timetable, it took six months before a body charged with reintegration support was established (Porto, Alden, & Parsons, 2007, p. 41). In addition to paying salary arrears at demobilization, the government planned to grant a cash allowance equivalent to the current

military salary for one year – 12,000 Kz for soldiers, 166,000 Kz for officers⁴⁰ – reduced to 75% for the following year, together with additional payments linked to service time, payable upon return to their villages (Porto et al., 2007, pp. xiii, 62). These were substantial sums, but nonetheless low compared to those provided in other post-conflict countries, and moreover exceptionally skewed towards the politically sensitive officer class (World Bank, 1993, pp. 59-65). In addition to a climate of distrust at the elite level, this contributed to the low demobilization rates. For an ordinary soldier, the uncertain prospect of getting a “pathetically small gratuity” – as expressed by the head of the UN mission (Anstee, 1996, p. 52) – and a severance payment soon to be eaten up by inflation, did not compensate for the deplorable conditions of the demobilization camps. Thousands deserted

⁴⁰ This can be compared with the pension paid to *antigo combatentes* which was increased from 4,000 Kz to 131,000 Kz in mid-May 1992.

or failed to report in the first place. After a year, a mere 20,000, mostly government soldiers, had been officially discharged (UNAVEM II, 1992b, p. 6). Notwithstanding a belated acceleration of the demobilization process, its incompleteness not only directly contributed to the resumption of the war a few months later, but also meant that thousands of ex-soldiers (UNAVEM II, 1992a, p. 13) lacked documentation to back up future entitlements.

After two years of fighting, the 1994 Lusaka Protocols represented a renewed attempt at implementing the Bicesse Accords. This time, an extended timeframe and international involvement provided more favourable circumstances. With UNITA forces constituting the initial focus of the demobilization process, it would take one year before the quartering process started (late 1995), another year to complete it (late 1996); and several additional months before demobilization could begin (IOM, 1997, p. 6). Once under way, each soldier received demobilization kits including three months' food provisions and a reintegration kit containing basic construction, agriculture, and household materiel, supplied by international donors (IOM, 1997, p. 38). Reintegration grants⁴¹ equal to one year's salary were provided, although with considerable difficulty, by the newly established Angolan reintegration agency IRSEM (IOM, 1997, p. 29). In addition, over 10,000 ex-soldiers were classified as Military War Disabled (UCAH, 1996, 1997), in principle entitling them to immediate disability benefits under the new military pension system.⁴² Whereas tens of thousands went AWOL, close to 50,000 ex-UNITA soldiers eventually received their ID cards proving their demobilized status before the peace yet again broke down in late 1998 (UCAH, 1998).⁴³

However, to speed up the process it was decided to skip the step of formally integrating them into the FAA before being discharged (IOM, 1997, p. 4), thus complicating any future inclusion into the military pension system.⁴⁴ In addition,

the envisioned post-demobilization "national social reintegration programme" hardly got off the ground due to the deteriorating security situation.

When UNITA was ultimately defeated in early 2002, the cards were all in the hands of the government. The updated peace agreement (Luena Memorandum) envisioned demobilization and social reintegration to be completed within a year. The government acted quickly: in mid-2002 85,000 ex-UNITA soldiers and 280,000 dependants had been quartered. Demobilization entitled ex-soldiers to five months' salary as a "contingency subsidy", a travel grant, and a resettlement kit, received, this time, after having been "administratively absorbed" into the FAA (Porto & Parsons, 2003, pp. 21, 36). In early 2003 most of the 100,000 ex-soldiers had been formally and effectively demobilized.

If this time around, the government showed exceptional rigour in pushing the demobilization process forward,⁴⁵ the commitment to long-term reintegration was wavering. Already in mid-2002, a UN report expressed concerns about a lack of both domestic capacity and political will (Gambari, 2002, p. 9). A World Bank project in support of IRSEM was launched to solve capacity problems (World Bank, 2009). However, reintegration of what now amounted to up to 250,000 ex-soldiers, including those from previous peace processes, would not start until early 2004. Moreover, progress was slow. In response to UNITA criticism, dos Santos promised to speed up reintegration (Vines, Oruitemeka, & Oruitemeka, 2008, p. 255). A steady stream of new reintegration projects, typically involving vocational training, micro-credits, or provision of agricultural machinery and implemented locally by international NGOs

term social benefits to which different categories of demobilized soldiers could be entitled. In contrast to the Bicesse Accords, which envisioned disabled ex-soldiers – but only those – being absorbed into the veterans' pension system, this time around both the disabled and non-disabled would be covered by the provisions of the newly established military pension system – on the critical condition of first being integrated into the FAA in order to then be duly discharged.

45 It should be noted, however, that only a few hundred soldiers on the government side, out of an envisioned 33,000, were ever demobilized.

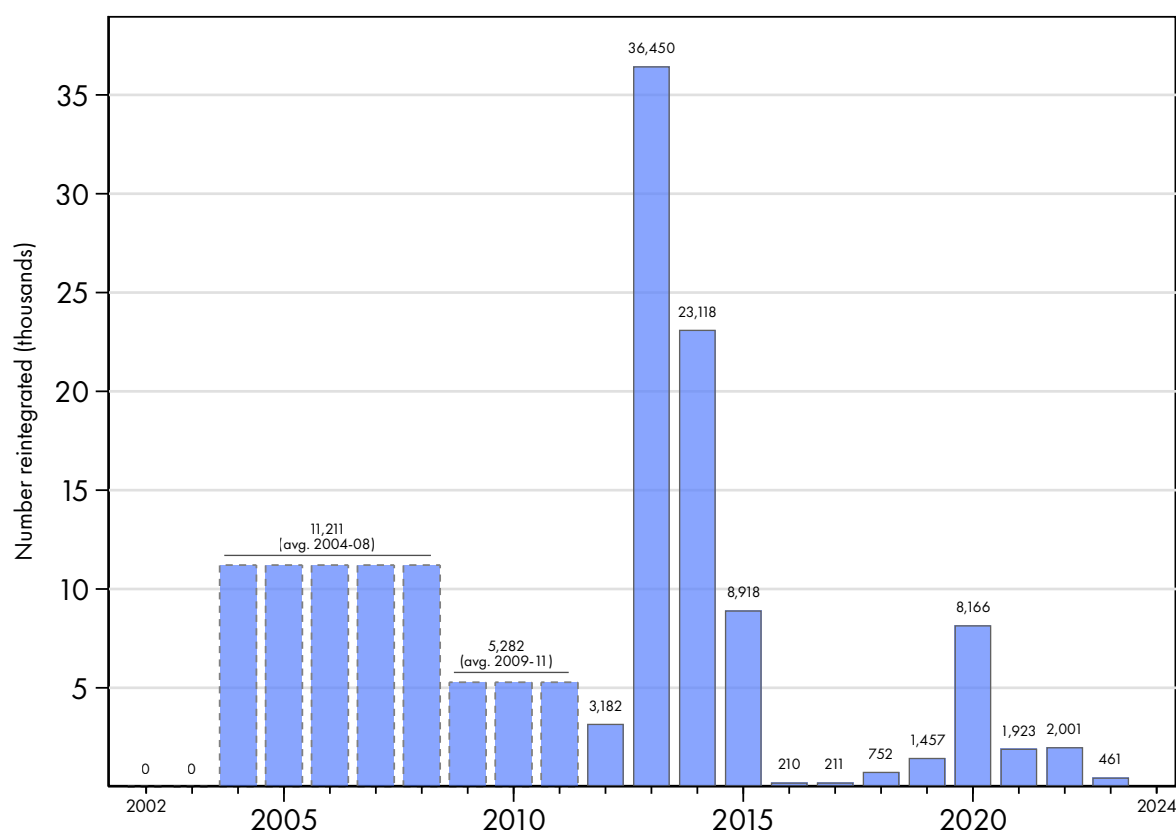
41 Subsídio Especial de Apoio à Reintegração (SEAR)

42 See Resolução 11/96, of 8 August 1996.

43 In the end, the FAA never demobilized a single soldier.

44 The legal framework for the demobilization and reintegration process under the Lusaka Protocol (Resolução 11/96) contained a detailed exposition of the long-

Figure 10. Ex-soldiers reintegrated by year



Note: Bar labels show actual numbers. Figures for 2004-2008 and 2009-2011 are imputed from period aggregates. Data received from IRSEM, Luanda, July 2024. No data available for 2024 (554 left for reintegration, according to updated registers).

were announced. However, the pace was woefully insufficient. Data provided by IRSEM, plotted in Figure 10, shows that between 2004 and 2008, on average just over 11,000 beneficiaries were officially reintegrated each year. As international involvement gradually wound down, the pace dropped further. What eventually spurred the government into action was the eruption of the 2012 protests, detailed above. For while the government kept the door to military pensions firmly shut for most of the demobilized, it clearly recognized the problem of having tens of thousands of poor and disgruntled ex-soldiers gathering in provincial capitals. In contrast to pensions, reintegration support held the promise of a quick fix without long-term material commitment. Thus, in the following year, the number of beneficiaries multiplied by ten.

Important as it was for those now receiving vocational training and materials, the fervour would not last. As oil prices plummeted, so did reintegration rates. In 2016 reintegration was at a virtual standstill; proving, if needed, the fiscal

utility of programmes that bypass individual long-term entitlements. From representing around 3% of government social transfers in 2013, spending on reintegration declined to next to nothing.⁴⁶ But with the fiscal crisis deepening, what to do with the 80,000 registered ex-soldiers still awaiting reintegration? While the process appeared to gain momentum again in 2020, the funds largely bypassed the responsible agency, IRSEM. Instead, it relied on a new “presidential initiative” that distributed tractors to collective farms as well as lump-sum transfers to municipality administrations under the new “Integrated Programme for Local Development and Combating Poverty” (PIDLCP). Despite its name, echoing donor priorities, 70% of its beneficiaries were to be ex-soldiers.⁴⁷ Proceeding through ad hoc programmes, as the director of IRSEM noted, increased the risk of ineligible in-

46 Based on World Bank (2018 p. 145) and the Angolan Ministry of Finance budget execution figures.

47 Decreto Presidencial 140/18 of 6 June 2018, art. 77.

dividuals receiving reintegration support (Ver Angola, 2021). Simultaneously, IRSEM was charged with launching a revision of its registers, aiming to locate and verify all remaining ex-soldiers (Jornal de Angola, 2021). As it transpired, out of the now 70,000 left on the rolls, only 5,000 remained after the revision. Part of the discrepancy certainly stemmed from duplicate entries and ex-soldiers having passed away since demobilization; others would simply have given up on claiming their benefits. Irrespectively, it finally allowed the government to close the books on a three decades long reintegration process.

The predicament of demobilized soldiers was in the first instance shaped by the complex dynamics of a destructive and intractable civil war. In the first precarious rounds of peace, neither side had any urgency to effectively demobilize and reintegrate its own soldiers; leaving tens of thousands in a legal-administrative limbo. After the victory in 2002, the virtual annihilation of the UNITA military structure meant that the government no longer had any compelling reason to pay attention to them. Neither did the ex-soldiers have much material or normative leverage to exercise.

First, in contrast to military or civilian old-age pensioners, demobilized soldiers lacked an active peer group on whose self-interest they could rely. Their key characteristics were that they were no longer neither useful nor acutely threatening to the regime.

Second, in contrast to the *antigos combatentes*, whose honourable merits had been carefully crafted to be politically unproblematic – recalling a point of common cause and national agency before the fratricidal split – the official narrative of the civil war was more ambiguous. While the regime generally refrained from vilifying ex-soldiers on either side, neither did it wish to turn them into heroes. The civil war was framed as an unfortunate sidetrack of history, a calamity where everyone was more or less a victim of circumstances (Schubert, 2017). Thus, whereas material rewards to *antigo combatentes* reinforced the regime narrative of Angolan unity, compensation to civil war ex-soldiers could inversely raise sensitive questions about a chapter best forgotten.⁴⁸

48 It is telling that the lobby of the ISSFAA (responsible for

Third, demobilized ex-soldiers were organizationally weak. In a political context already hostile to independent associations, the regime did its best to frame demands from ex-soldiers in partisan terms, which could accordingly be dismissed. Moreover, lacking any political precedent for entitlement or even a clear definition of their group status,⁴⁹ they lacked a natural and unified list of demands. When the game reached its peak in 2012, demonstrators placed their stakes on the grand prize of military pensions, and lost.

9. ENTER THE POOR?

For decades, social policy in Angola was directed towards a distinct set of groups on whose active services, or acquiescence, the government depended. Those on whom the government did not actively rely – materially or otherwise – but could nonetheless cause trouble (demobilized soldiers), received one-off benefits when necessary. Entitlements did not arise simply from being poor (in effect, quite on the contrary). Apart from comparatively low social spending, this bias constituted a main point of critique from international actors, and continued to impede the professed aim of social development and redistribution.

It was certainly never out of a lack of programmes: in 2018, the World Bank identified 28 active social assistance programmes, in principle providing publicly financed support to vulnerable and poor individuals and communities. Yet almost all spending went to programmes to support ex-soldiers and *antigos combatentes*, to demining initiatives, or for higher education grants. Most

military pensions; successor to CSS/FAA) is decorated with portrait photographs of the three rebel leaders (Holden Roberto, Agostinho Neto, and Jonas Savimbi) taken in the mid-1970s, before the civil war (personal observation, December 2023).

49 In a 2023 Opais article reporting about ex-soldiers being denied integration into the military or veterans' pension system, the problem of vague group definitions is captured by an ex-FALA soldier: "We've already gone to the Veterans' Office, but they told us that the matter wasn't handled by them, that they only deal with veterans. So what are we, after all?" (Opais, 2023).

other programmes, be it the provision of school meals or support to rural women, represented well below 1% of an already minimal social assistance budget and were subject to extreme year-on-year fluctuations (World Bank, 2018 Annex 6).

However, in the last decade, an incipient general social assistance system has been developing, starting with the Kikuia Card launched in 2014 in response to the economic crisis (World Bank, 2018, pp. 60-61). In 2020 it was superseded by the considerably more ambitious Kwenda programme, providing direct cash transfers to several hundred thousand families, based on municipal-level poverty assessments (World Bank, 2023, p. 82). Benefits were limited to one year, and at a level of 8,500 Kz per month and family, later increased to 11,000 Kz, it was considerably lower than a veteran's pensions (23,200 Kz at the time); or the minimum general pension (33,600 Kz). But with more than 1.5 million poor and mostly rural families having benefited to date (FAS, 2025), it has had both a wider and better targeted impact than any of the established social transfers systems. At a total cost many times lower than that of ill-targeted fuel subsidies, it represented a cost-effective means to start realizing the promise of a better redistribution of national resources. For the first time, Angola's rural poor, hitherto ignored by the centre, would receive something tangible to directly improve their lot. Yet it is clear that the programme did not emerge from successful mobilization from below. The initiative only came after decades of international pressure, at a moment when the government was finally forced to toe the line in order to access much needed external financing. Indeed, with the USD 3.7 bn Extended Arrangement signed in late 2018, the IMF could put force behind its long-held demands: remove fuel subsidies, increase social spending, and target it to the poor (IMF, 2019). Moreover, a World Bank loan stood for more than three quarters of the direct funding in the first four years of the Kikuia programme (World Bank, 2023, p. 82). While the programme has been subsequently extended (still ongoing at the time of writing), the government has been slow to put up its side of the funding (IMF, 2025fn. 11), and its durability remains uncertain.

10. CONCLUSION

Throughout the post-civil war period, numerous actors have repeatedly pointed to the feeble and lopsided social spending in Angola; an observation that can neither be explained by a lack of state capacity nor fiscal resources. By mapping the comparative development of the major social protection systems since independence, and situating it within the politico-economical context, this study has sought to present a first, comprehensive account of the politics of social protection in Angola.

Four periods can be distinguished: first, the Cold War period, when social transfers were focused on the deserving liberation fighters; second, the 1990s, marked by the abandonment of state socialism, transition in and out of war, and severe inflation, when incipient contributory pension systems were established; third, the post-civil war phase, when the oil boom fuelled a vertiginous rise in pension benefits, above all to the officer class; and the final post-2014 period of fiscal crisis, characterized by retrenchment of both benefit levels and coverage. Notwithstanding a recent, tentative shift in attention towards poorer and previously uncovered groups, four decades of social policy developments have resulted in an atrophied social protection system characterized by a plethora of mostly minor programmes – ranging from costly university subsidies to the rich to miniscule breast-feeding allowances to the poor – but dominated by the pension system targeting a minority of the old and the deserving.

Throughout the last decades, however, several enduring features are evident, each contributing to the peculiar, often extreme, character of the Angolan social protection system. Notably, from the 1990s onwards, the distribution of social benefits has been marked by an extreme inequality. To some extent a reflection of a society of insiders and outsiders, and of sharp wage differences, the system of social transfers has in several ways amplified rather than dampened existing inequalities. The narrow coverage, which with the exception of veterans caters to a small, urban middle class, and an even smaller military elite, has created a gulf between those on the inside and those excluded.

But also for those on the inside, enjoying the privileges of state benefits, the differences are vast. First, because of inequities produced within the systems: original wage inequalities have been exacerbated by divergence between cohorts (general pension system); ad hoc perks provide additional benefits de facto only accessible for the elite (veterans system). Second, and most strikingly so, because of the extreme difference in benefits levels between the different systems, starting with the officer class on top, and ending with the rural poor at the bottom. But it is not only the scope and levels of benefits that differs between beneficiary groups. As emphasized by previous studies, the problem of credible commitment appears as a major structuring factor in the bargaining game over social benefits. Indeed, there is a clear hierarchy with regards to the *reliability* of access to future benefits, as well as their level and duration. The pensions of retired military officers are not only high but securely pegged to the salaries of the most powerful group in society. Veterans, who likewise enjoy life-long security in theory, in contrast, have little certainty over their long-term benefit levels, nor their de facto access to entitlements. Further down, demobilized soldiers retain an individualized right to limited benefits, but are denied long-term security, and have little certainty of its content and timing. For those at the end of the social hierarchy, the rural poor, de facto access to benefits is uncertain (and unlikely), strictly limited in time, and lacks any basis in individual entitlement.

At the most general level, war, oil, and autocracy have all contributed to shape the system. The anti-colonial struggle and the ensuing civil war shaped the primary social categories and their respective leverage, making military experience and rank – arguably more so than adherence to either side in the war – a primary structuring dimension in the bargain for benefits. Oil rents have sustained periodic largesse but also made long-term commitments costly, rendering reliability of benefits a salient variable and, effectively, a privilege of the elite. The political incentives of (competitive) autocratic rule have favoured narrow social protection schemes and discretionary benefits. While social benefits have been mobilized to ensure the stability of the system, not least in election periods, it has

targeted key support groups (or trouble-makers) rather than wider electoral strata.

The outcome is a social protection system with narrow coverage, sharp differences in scope of benefits, and general but variable uncertainty of future entitlements.

These enduring features of the Angolan social protection system also highlights that “social protection” is in fact an evident misnomer. Protection in the sense of providing insurance from (future) risk has decidedly not been a guiding principle of the system. Instead, it has served the principles of compensation (veterans), reward (military officers), and pacification (urban pensions, ex-soldiers, and peripheral populations); all of it underpinned by the general logic of keeping a narrow group of critical supporters loyal, and outsiders calm, while preserving governmental discretion over future fiscal resources.

The absence of any insurance logic also helps explain variation over time: rather than being expanded in times of war-induced need or economic crisis, it has largely followed the availability of resources – and the precarity of the political situation. Moreover, the relative fortunes of beneficiary groups have varied over time, not because of need, but because of their status, resources, and mobilizing capacity. In the short term, retired military officers were particularly rewarded in conjunction with war and elections; public servants when they used the strike weapon; and veterans and ex-soldiers when they manifested their capacity for concerted mobilization. Yet over the long term, the comparative development of social benefits also reflects a structural shift within the “winning coalition”: the initially privileged position of veterans was taken over by the military officers in the 1990s and during the post-war boom; their position is now in turn slowly being rivalled by the educated middle class. However, despite internal rearrangements, the basic winning coalition has remained virtually unchanged. In the absence of any insurance logic, this has likewise kept “social protection” a privilege of the few and the promise of redistribution moot.

In recent years, however, there have been signs of a possible shift in the making. Aligning with principles of fiscal prudence and poverty alleviation,

as promoted by international creditors, beneficiary rolls have been drastically “cleaned up” and social assistance extended to previously ignored groups. Whether the apparent shift is solely driven by international pressure, in which case it is likely to be abandoned if and when the next oil boom arrives, or additionally driven by a change in domestic politics, remains a critical but hitherto unanswered question. With the spectre of renewed civil war receding and the MPLA tainted by decades of corruption and unkept promises, the population, starting with the urban middle classes, has begun to question previous political loyalties. In this context, the MPLA leadership may well seek to build a real popular support base – something that would necessitate acting on the demands of the poor majority.

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