

POLICY IN FOCUS

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Overcoming food security and nutrition roadblocks in social protection



POLICY IN FOCUS

Policy in Focus is IPCid's flagship publication—a magazine designed to synthesize policy debates and discussions while educating and raising awareness on specific development themes. It invites experts to engage in these debates by defending or critiquing various policy models and components.



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Editorial

Fábio Veras Soares and Juan Gonzalo Jaramillo Mejía

Welcome to the new *Policy in Focus* magazine, a publication of the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Development (IPCid) of the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea). It is an honour to introduce this new series with a special collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP), facilitated by the socialprotection.org platform, now hosted by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD).

Building on the legacy of the late International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), this inaugural issue focuses on social protection—specifically on overcoming obstacles that limit the impact of social protection systems on food security and nutrition outcomes. Strengthening these outcomes is essential not only for human capital development but also for catalysing local economic growth, broadening the spillover effects of social protection measures across multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This issue underscores the centrality of nutrition and food security in shaping robust social protection systems capable of breaking the cycles of poverty, vulnerability, and inequality.

As we face growing demands on social protection systems worldwide, a critical paradox emerges: while social and food assistance programmes often increase food intake and purchasing power, they do not always result in improved food or nutrition security. This disconnect between income security and nutritional well-being, which is vital for health and development, reveals a deeper issue. True success requires that social protection systems not only boost income security but also ensure access to diverse, nutritious diets, enabling people to thrive and build resilience against shocks.

Social protection is explicitly mentioned in the SDG targets 1.3, 5.4 and 10.4. These targets highlight its role as a critical instrument for eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, and fostering gender equality. However, as Devereux and Hoddinot remind us in the opening article of this issue, the 2012 High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) report, *Social Protection for Food Security*, commissioned by the Committee on World Food Security

(CFS), already emphasised that “all countries should put in place a comprehensive, nationally owned social protection system that contributes to realising the right to adequate food for all”.

The 2012 HLPE report outlined four key actions:

1. Implementing social protection systems with a twin-track approach that includes livelihood support.
2. Ensuring that social protection is accessible to those vulnerable to poverty and hunger whenever needed.
3. Grounding these systems in the human rights to food and social protection.
4. Supporting agriculture-based livelihoods, particularly among smallholder farmers vulnerable to food insecurity.

In recent years, progress on these fronts has been mixed. According to the *2024 State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* (SOFI) report, between 713 and 757 million people experienced hunger in 2023, reflecting an increase of 152 million compared to 2019. At the same time, global obesity rates have tripled since 1975, contributing to the rise of non-communicable diseases such as heart disease. By 2030, projections suggest that 582 million people will face chronic undernourishment—a significant barrier to achieving SDG 2 (Zero Hunger).

The *ILO World Social Protection Report 2024-2026* further reveals that social protection coverage grew unevenly between 2015 and 2023. While it increased by 14.7 percentage points in upper-middle-income countries, it only grew by 2 percentage points in low-income countries, reaching just 9.7 per cent of their total population. The situation is even worse for vulnerable persons covered by social assistance, where coverage in low-income countries grew by just 0.7 percentage points, from 6.1 per cent to 6.8 per cent.

Editorial

This issue of *Policy in Focus* explores the intersection of food security, nutrition, and social protection, offering evidence and perspectives on how social protection can better address persistent challenges that hinder improved nutrition outcomes. These challenges, exacerbated by global crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing conflicts, climate shocks, and shrinking fiscal space, particularly in low income countries where progress on SDG 1 and 2 has been dismal—underscore the urgency of integrating food and nutrition security into social protection frameworks.

Nutrition-sensitive, climate-adaptive, and gender-sensitive social protection programmes are essential to safeguarding livelihoods, building resilience, and promoting healthy diets, especially in marginalised and vulnerable communities and demographic groups more likely to be left behind. Adequate nutrition not only impacts individual well-being and human capital but also shapes systemic outcomes within food, education, and health systems. However, barriers such as limited service provision, insufficient funding, and implementation challenges restrict the broader potential impact of social protection systems.

The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit highlighted the need for social protection systems that address both food and nutrition security. From this summit, an interagency coalition emerged, recognising social protection not just as a poverty reduction tool but as a crucial driver of food security.

- In light of these challenges, this issue proposes several shifts in approach:
- Hunger and malnutrition must be understood not only as outcomes of poverty but also as drivers, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and inequality.
- Social protection must ensure access not just to calories, but to diverse, nutritious diets.

- Social protection should be seen as an investment in human capital, with far-reaching benefits for health, productivity, and social cohesion.

Some progress has been made in this direction. The Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) has supported the development of the [Inter-agency social protection assessment \(ISPA\) tools on food security and nutrition](https://ispatools.socialprotection.org/). This tool was devised specifically to support countries implementing social assistance programmes achieve greater impacts on food security and nutrition. The ISPA tools repository has recently moved to the socialprotection.org platform and can be found at [<https://ispatools.socialprotection.org/>](https://ispatools.socialprotection.org/).

Focusing specifically on country-level support, the upcoming launch of the [Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty](#) at the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro in November 2024 will bring together a variety of stakeholders—countries, international organisations, multilateral development banks, philanthropy, and research centres. This initiative has the potential to remove some of roadblocks that have prevented social protection from producing better food security and nutrition outcomes. Through its national, financial, and knowledge pillars, the Global Alliance can mobilise sustained political will and facilitate access to financial and technical assistance for implementing SDG 1 and SDG 2-related policies and programmes. The policy instruments supported by the Global Alliance, and consolidated in its [collaborative policy basket](#), include a range of tested interventions with various country-level experiences, some of which are discussed in this issue.

We invite you to explore the diverse perspectives shared in this special issue of *Policy in Focus*, featuring 22 articles written by experts and practitioners from around the world. We also encourage governments, international organisations, financial institutions, and knowledge centres to join the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty and to the best of their capacity commit to support this collective sprint to end poverty, hunger and malnutrition by 2030.

Foreword

As we embark on the journey towards the Second World Summit on Social Development in 2025, we find ourselves at a critical juncture. The road ahead is demanding, yet filled with immense opportunities. It is a moment for bold, transformative action to redefine the frameworks that underpin social progress and to address the most pressing global challenges—poverty, hunger, and malnutrition.

In this context, I am honoured to introduce this special issue of *Policy in Focus*, which brings together over 60 global experts to discuss the critical intersections between social protection and food security. The World Food Programme (WFP) has done a tremendous service in fostering this dialogue, focusing on the central role of Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) in shaping social protection systems. This issue explores the state of the evidence and points toward the new frontiers of research, policy, and practice that will define a new era of social protection.

Timor-Leste, a nation born from conflict, stands as a testament to the resilience and determination needed to create a future of shared prosperity. As President of Timor-Leste and Co-Chair of the Global Task Force on Social Protection for Nutrition, Human Capital, and Local Economic Development, I am deeply committed to eradicating poverty, hunger, and malnutrition in all their forms. These goals are at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and demand our unwavering focus.

Social protection has long been a crucial tool in the fight against poverty and hunger. From the pioneering safety nets in Latin America to the advanced systems we see today, social protection has proven its value in addressing

essential needs and responding to large-scale crises. In Timor-Leste, programmes like Bolsa da Mãe and Merenda Escolar have not only helped meet basic needs but have also fulfilled the promise of independence by ensuring that our people thrive.

Yet, despite these successes, a harsh truth remains: over four billion people globally still lack access to social protection, and more than three billion cannot afford a healthy diet. These gaps are especially stark in fragile and least-developed countries, where social protection coverage and benefits remain inadequate. The urgency of expanding and strengthening our systems has never been clearer.

We must be ambitious. Decades of collective knowledge must now serve as the foundation for a new era of social protection—one that places food security and nutrition at the center of our efforts. Poverty reduction alone is not sufficient; we must address the troubling paradox that, despite improvements in income security, hunger and malnutrition persist. Globally, poverty reduction has not been matched by reductions in hunger, a divergence that threatens the achievement of our Sustainable Development Goals.

A more nuanced approach to social protection is required. We must go beyond basic income provisions and ensure that social transfers are designed to meet the full spectrum of human needs, including access to nutritious food, healthcare, and education. It is not enough to fill bellies; we must nourish minds, bodies, and spirits. Social protection systems must be equipped to address the complex vulnerabilities people face, especially in fragile and least-developed countries.

Foreword

One of the most significant lessons we have learned is that food security and nutrition are not only outcomes of poverty—they are also drivers of it. Hunger and malnutrition perpetuate inequality and constrain human potential. Families may escape poverty in economic terms, but if they fail to meet their nutritional needs, the effects—stunting, disease, cognitive impairment—can last for generations.

As we move forward, it is clear that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG1 (No Poverty) and SDG2 (Zero Hunger), requires a comprehensive approach to social protection. We must confront “biological poverty”—the inability to access nutritious food. This is not simply a humanitarian issue; it is a question of justice and human dignity. Every person has the right to adequate food, and national social protection systems must be harnessed to fulfill this right.

In an era of polycrisis, fragile and least-developed countries like Timor-Leste and those within the Group of Seven Plus (g7+) face unique challenges. Global inequities, climate change, and economic shocks have compounded the difficulties these nations encounter. We must direct our attention to these vulnerable countries and ensure that no one—and no country—is left behind in our global development efforts.

The Global Task Force on Social Protection for Nutrition, Human Capital, and Local Economic Development, co-led by Timor-Leste and Chile, envisions a future where social protection systems are robust, inclusive, and transformative. We are dedicated to ensuring that the most nutritionally

vulnerable—mothers, children, and adolescent girls—are prioritized in our efforts. By integrating services that address malnutrition and social vulnerability, we aim to create national systems that foster human capital and economic development.

Let us imagine a future where every person has access to the resources they need to thrive, not just survive. A future where social protection systems are not just safety nets but safety trampolines—propelling people toward greater opportunities and a better, fairer life. This is the vision we are working towards, informed by the esteemed experts featured in this issue of Policy in Focus. It is a vision we must achieve together.

In the words of Maya Angelou, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” Today, we know better. Let us now go forth and do better—by placing nutrition at the heart of social protection for our people, our nations, and our world.

Obigado Barak,



Jose Ramos-Horta

President of Timor-Leste and co-chair of the Global Task Force on Social Protection for Nutrition, Human Capital, and Local Economic Development

Social protection for food security: Revisiting the 2012 HLPE Report

Stephen Devereux¹ and John Hoddinott²

In 2010, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) commissioned a report from the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE), titled “Social Protection for Food Security” (HLPE 2012).³ In his foreword, then Chair of the HLPE Steering Committee, the late M.S. Swaminathan, explained the rationale:

“Social protection has risen rapidly up the development policy agenda in the last decade. There is also a clear trend to making social protection, as well as food security, ‘rights-based’ rather than ‘discretionary’. Yet no clear consensus has so far emerged concerning many basic design choices and implementation modalities of social protection policies and programs. This is why, in 2010, the CFS requested the HLPE to work on Social Protection and more specifically, on ways to lessen vulnerability through social and productive safety net programs and policies with respect to food and nutritional security” (HLPE 2012: 7).

Because social protection as a policy discourse has evolved rapidly in the quarter-century since the late 1990s, it is appropriate to reflect on the findings and recommendations of the 2012 HLPE report, and on progress made in terms of linking social protection and food security objectives and outcomes, in policy and programming. This article therefore starts with a recapitulation of the 2012 report, continues with a discussion of relevant developments in the 12 years since, and concludes with some ideas on ideal and likely ways forward for this agenda.

The 2012 HLPE report

The 2012 HLPE report took an instrumental approach, exploring how social protection programmes can be designed and deployed to reduce or eliminate individual- and household-level food insecurity and hunger. This focus was motivated by a recognition that social protection at that time was advocated primarily as a safety net for risk management or

poverty alleviation, and secondarily as an investment in human capital and pro-poor access to essential services. Arguably, this reflected the mandates of three highly influential international development agencies—the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and the World Bank—that led the diffusion of social protection as a policy agenda throughout the Global South in the early 2000s.

The Rome-based agencies with agriculture and food security mandates—the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP)—were slower to integrate social protection into their workplans, and had less influence over the direction that the discourse took in its early stages. WFP, for example, updated its “Safety Nets Policy” of 2004 in 2012, but did not publish its “Strategy for Support to Social Protection” until 2021. FAO published its “Social Protection Framework”—subtitled “Promoting Rural Development for All”—in 2017. In 2021, IFAD produced a ‘Strategic Discussion Paper on Rural Social Protection’.

Social protection instruments

A substantial proportion of the 2012 HLPE report examined the food security efficacy of 10 instruments, four of which—conditional and unconditional cash transfers, public works, and school feeding—are perhaps the best-known social protection modalities, while supplementary feeding is less familiar. The other five—input subsidies, crop and livestock insurance, food price stabilisation, food subsidies, and grain reserves—could be classified as food security instruments, but to the extent that they transfer or stabilise the incomes of poor or vulnerable people, they also have social protection characteristics.

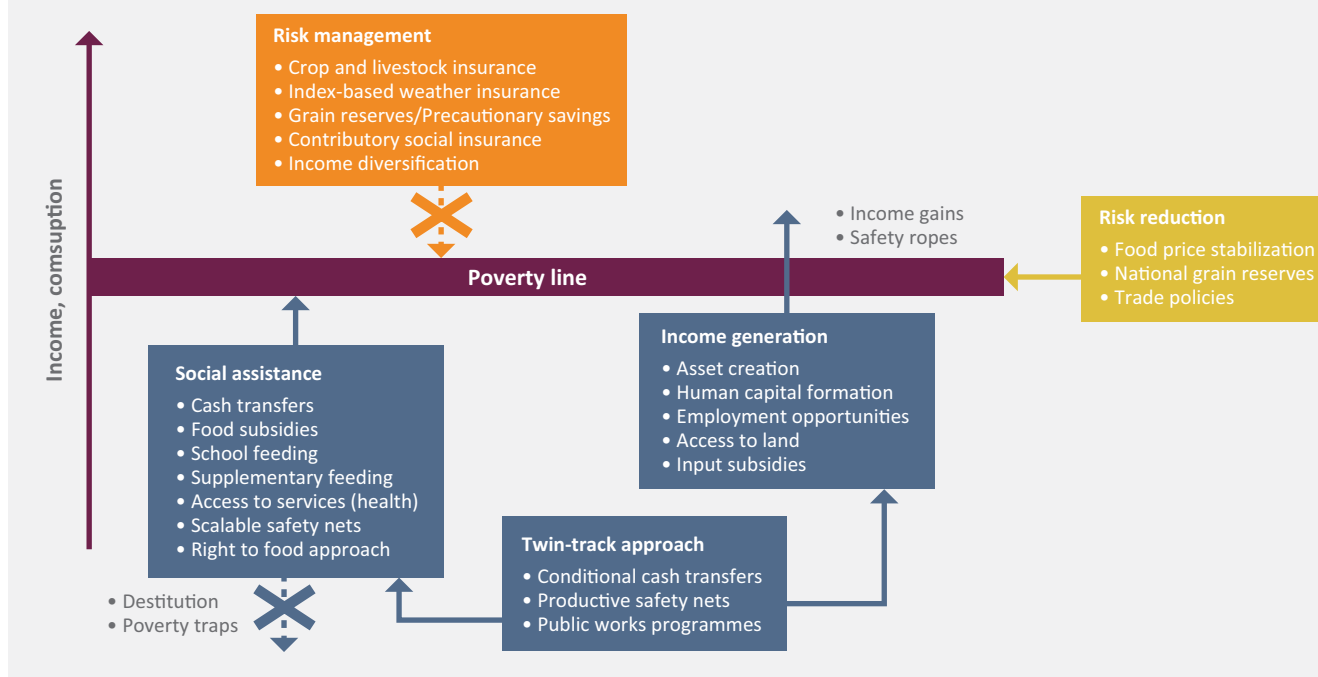
The juxtaposition of five social protection instruments alongside five food security instruments highlights a transition in development policy discourse that had started in the 1980s, when subsidies to food producers and consumers, as well as government interventions to stabilise

food prices through price banding or grain reserve management, were attacked and effectively dismantled by ‘Washington consensus’ thinking. No report titled “Social Protection for Food Security” written in the 2020s would include food subsidies or grain reserves. The shift was essentially away from sector-level interventions and towards individually targeted interventions. Governments were discouraged from interfering with market forces and instead were encouraged to boost people’s access to goods and services with food transfers (food-for-work, school feeding) and income transfers (social cash transfers).

The 2012 HLPE report classified social protection and food security instruments in terms of their functions. Unconditional cash transfers, school feeding, food subsidies, and supplementary feeding were clustered under ‘social assistance’ (see Figure 1). Input subsidies were assigned to ‘income generation’, and conditional cash transfers and public works were classified under ‘twin-track approach’, since they combine social assistance and income generation. Crop or livestock insurance, and contributory social insurance, were clustered under ‘risk management’. This cluster is placed above the poverty line, being comparable to ‘social insurance’ which prevents people from falling into poverty following an income shock. Finally, food price stabilisation and national grain reserves were assigned to the ‘risk reduction’ cluster, which is placed to one side in Figure 1 because these are sector-wide interventions that do not target individuals or households.

Figure 1 remains a useful organising framework for illustrating the roles that different social protection mechanisms play, how they relate to each other, and the need for an array of instruments to build a comprehensive social protection system, rather than a single instrument such as social cash transfers. One size does not fit all. Nonetheless, it is striking that the ‘risk reduction’ cluster has almost completely disappeared from the social protection and food security policy toolkits.

FIGURE 1: Social protection at a glance



Source: HLPE 2012: 26.

Social assistance instruments

Unconditional cash transfers were piloted in many countries with the support of international development agencies during the 2000s, and became the dominant social assistance instrument during the 2010s. Social cash transfer pilot projects were extensively evaluated and found to reduce the poverty gap (but not necessarily the poverty headcount) and to improve food security indicators but not necessarily nutrition outcomes (see below). Apart from direct consumption effects, cash transfers are also invested in agriculture and livelihood activities that generate income for food purchases.

School feeding programmes have been supported by agencies led by USAID and WFP since the 1960s, initially using American and European food aid but more recently switching to local procurement modalities. School feeding has two objectives: reducing child hunger, and building human capital by incentivising children's access to education. The nutritional impact of school meals is limited to the extent that food consumed at school is additional to food consumed at home. School meals do increase school enrolment and attendance, but the educational

impacts are determined by the quality of teaching, which is beyond the control of school feeding initiatives. Home-grown school feeding, which replaces imported food aid with locally purchased food, also benefits local farmers and traders.

Food price subsidies aim to protect consumers against high and volatile food prices. Generalised food subsidies are fiscally expensive and benefit the non-poor more than the poor. Targeted subsidies are popular in South Asia, with India's Public Distribution System (PDS) being the best-known. Households living below the poverty line receive ration cards entitling them to buy subsidised rice and other food items at 'fair price' shops. Like other 'market-distorting' interventions, donors generally advocate against food subsidies, but they remain popular with governments as a means of ensuring food security for poor populations.

Supplementary feeding has virtually disappeared from the social protection discourse since the 2012 HLPE report was published.

Twin-track approach

Conditional cash transfers spread rapidly through Latin America in the 1990s,

following evidence that requiring carers to send children to clinics and school does enhance children's access to healthcare and education services. This investment in human capital is expected to reduce the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Impact evaluations found significant improvements in caloric availability, dietary diversity and diet quality in beneficiary households. However, conditions increase the demand for education and health services, so they are less effective where these services are inaccessible or low quality. Conditions also violate the human right to social protection.

Public works programmes have a long history in Africa and Asia, as a way of delivering assistance to working adults. Advantages include: the work requirement makes them self-targeting, and the assets created can be useful for the poor. An innovative variant is the rights-based Employment Guarantee Scheme, which offers 100 days of paid work every year to every rural household in India, at local minimum wage rates. Public works is the main component of 'productive safety net' programmes in Ethiopia, Rwanda and Tanzania. They are also controversial, because the benefits are low and reduced

by the time and energy expenditure required, the infrastructure created is low-quality and not maintained, and the most vulnerable populations (people with disabilities and elderly people) are excluded.

Income generation

Agricultural input subsidies are generally beneficial for agricultural production, farmers' incomes, and household and national food security, which makes them politically popular with governments and farmers. However, they are expensive, regressive (they benefit better-off farmers most) and distort markets and trade, which makes them unpopular with donors. Under pressure from development partners, many governments phased out input subsidies or replaced them with targeted 'smart' subsidies, often at great political cost. This left a vacuum which was partially filled by social cash transfers, which were promoted as pro-poor and stimulate markets and trade.

Risk management

Crop and livestock insurance was promoted as an appropriate form of protection against shocks for crop farmers and pastoralists, whose livelihoods can be devastated by disasters such as droughts. An innovative modality that was introduced 12–15 years ago was 'index-based' insurance, which triggers payouts when rains fall below a threshold level. Despite some successful pilot projects in the Horn of Africa, take-up by farmers and pastoralists remains disappointingly low, partly because of concerns regarding basis risk.

Risk reduction

Grain reserves were a popular mechanism for stabilising food supplies and prices until they were phased out under structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s. Government agencies purchased grain at low prices after the harvest, stored it for 6–8 months until market supplies dwindled and prices started rising, then released grain onto the market to ensure that staple foods were accessible and affordable to the poor. Similarly, **food price stabilisation** has almost disappeared as a food security or social protection mechanism, because it involves direct market interference by governments. Governments would legislate a 'price band' for staple

foodgrains—floor prices for food sellers and ceiling prices for food purchasers—to support both poor farmers and poor consumers.

Social protection systems

By 2012, attention was already shifting from single instruments and stand-alone projects to systems-building, recognising that countries must ensure comprehensive coverage for all residents throughout the life-cycle, and better coordination and linkages across programmes and sectors, to upgrade programmes from discretionary to claims-based with framework legislation, and to build institutional architecture to administer large-scale national programmes efficiently and equitably.

This shift in focus was evident from influential strategy documents released in 2012 by three dominant social protection agencies. ILO's "National Social Protection Floors" recommendation (ILO 2012) urged all governments to introduce four 'guarantees': universal access to health care, and income security for children, working age adults and older persons. UNICEF's "Social Protection Strategic Framework: Integrated Social Protection Systems" made a case for strengthening civil registries, management information systems and monitoring and evaluation of social transfer programmes. The World Bank's "Social Protection and Labor Strategy" argued for linking social protection to human capital formation, access to labour markets, and pro-poor employment.

Similarly, the 2012 HLPE report stressed the need for "cross-sectoral linkages" from social protection to "basic health care services, clean water and sanitation, and appropriate information, education and skills training" (HLPE 2012: 51), as well as support to agriculture and employment creation, all underpinned by government-led investment in services and infrastructure, to maximise and sustain the benefits of social protection. The report also argued for "vertically integrated programmes" that aim to move participants on a pathway from reliance on programmes to self-reliance, by combining social assistance with livelihood support (e.g. the Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction graduation programme in Bangladesh, or the Zero Hunger programme in Brazil).

Recommendations from the HLPE (2012) report

The HLPE report proposed five recommendations to policy-makers (HLPE 2012: 16–17):

1. All countries should put in place a comprehensive, nationally owned social protection system that contributes to realising the right to adequate food for all.
2. A 'twin-track' social protection strategy should be pursued, with essential assistance in the short-term and livelihoods support in the long-term, for optimal impacts on food security.



Photo: Marcel Crozet/ILO. Agricultural worker sorting grains. Ethiopia, 2003. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“... social protection programmes can be designed and deployed to reduce or eliminate individual- and household-level food insecurity and hunger.



Photo: IMF Photo/Kim Haughton. Tea pickers. Rwanda, 2023. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

3. Social protection must address vulnerability to poverty and hunger more effectively, by being accessible to everyone who needs assistance, whenever they need it.
4. Social protection should be underpinned by the human rights to food and social protection at every level, from global to national to programme delivery.
5. Social protection should support agriculture-based livelihoods, given the high concentration of food insecurity among smallholder farmers, farm workers, and (agro-)pastoralists.

Progress towards achieving these recommended outcomes since 2012 has been variable across countries and regions.

Recommendation 1: There has been a surge in countries with a national social protection policy (NSPP) or strategy (NSPS), as social protection systems have been institutionalised in numerous countries throughout the Global South. More than half the countries in Africa, for instance, now have a NSPP or NSPS, up from only a handful in 2010.

Recommendation 2: Social assistance programmes have continued to expand in numbers and coverage. ILO (2021) estimates that 3.6 billion people (47 per cent of global

population) are covered by at least one social protection programme. The success of ‘graduation model’ programmes and related efforts at achieving economic inclusion of poor households with labour capacity, has developed the livelihoods track of the proposed twin-track strategy. Programmes like the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia and the Vision Umurenge Programme (VUP) in Rwanda include both components within their design. But the linkages between social assistance and livelihood promotion remain poorly developed.

Recommendation 3:

This recommendation urged governments to ensure that social protection is responsive to needs. Efforts have been made to improve the timeliness and reliability of social transfers, but this remains a challenge for systems everywhere.

Recommendation 4: Probably the least progress has been made in terms of upgrading social protection to a right that can be claimed by citizens (as rights-holders) from their states (as duty-bearers). The 2012 HLPE report emphasised that the right to adequate food and the right to social security both exist in international law, and that some countries—case studies are provided of Brazil, India and South Africa—have legislated these rights and made them justiciable.

Not many countries have followed these examples since 2012, to our knowledge.

Recommendation 5: Some of the world's largest programmes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in India and the PSNP in Ethiopia, have been offering work and income to millions of agriculture-dependent households for almost 20 years. If anything, food insecure urban households have been relatively neglected, an oversight that was highlighted by COVID-19.

Developments since 2012

Conceptual thinking and evidence generation have advanced significantly since 2012, not least in terms of the two-way linkages between social protection and food and nutrition security.

Food security floor

One controversial proposal in the 2012 HLPE report was for a 'food security floor' to complement the 'social protection floor' (SPF), which was adopted by the International Labour Conference in the same year (ILO 2012). The SPF argues that everyone—all children, working-aged adults, and older persons—should enjoy income security and access to essential social services such as health, education, water and sanitation, and that these guarantees should be underwritten by the state. The SPF combines the life-cycle approach and the rights-based approach to social protection. Despite vigorous advocacy, the SPF has not been fully implemented in many countries. One reason for this might be because ILO has limited financial resources and in-country presence, while another is that governments are reluctant to grant economic and social rights to their citizens that could be prohibitively expensive to deliver.

Whereas the SPF aimed to establish the right to social protection in national policy frameworks, the 'food security floor' had the same objective for the right to food. The food security floor has three levels. The first level is a set of 'emergency assistance' programmes that should be scalable or shock-responsive during food crises, such as price-indexed cash transfers

or food vouchers. The second level is a 'social protection safety net', including seasonal public works or employment guarantees for annual hungry seasons as well as weather-indexed insurance, to prevent vulnerable people falling into hunger and destitution. The third level comprises measures to promote agriculture-based livelihoods—subsidised access to seeds, fertiliser and financial services—recognising the paradox that agriculture-dependent families are often the most food insecure in low-income countries (HLPE 2012).

A controversy arose because ILO argued that a fully implemented SPF is sufficient to guarantee food security, but the 2012 HLPE report contended that additional measures might be needed to ensure or protect individual access to food, even in contexts where an effective and comprehensive SPF is in place. To resolve this debate, ILO commissioned a Working Paper from the team leader of the HLPE report, subtitled 'The contribution of national social protection floors towards food security and the realisation of the right to adequate food for all' (Devereux 2015). The paper is organised around three insights: *income security is not sufficient to ensure food security; food security is necessary but not sufficient to ensure nutrition security; and cash transfers are not sufficient to ensure nutrition security.*

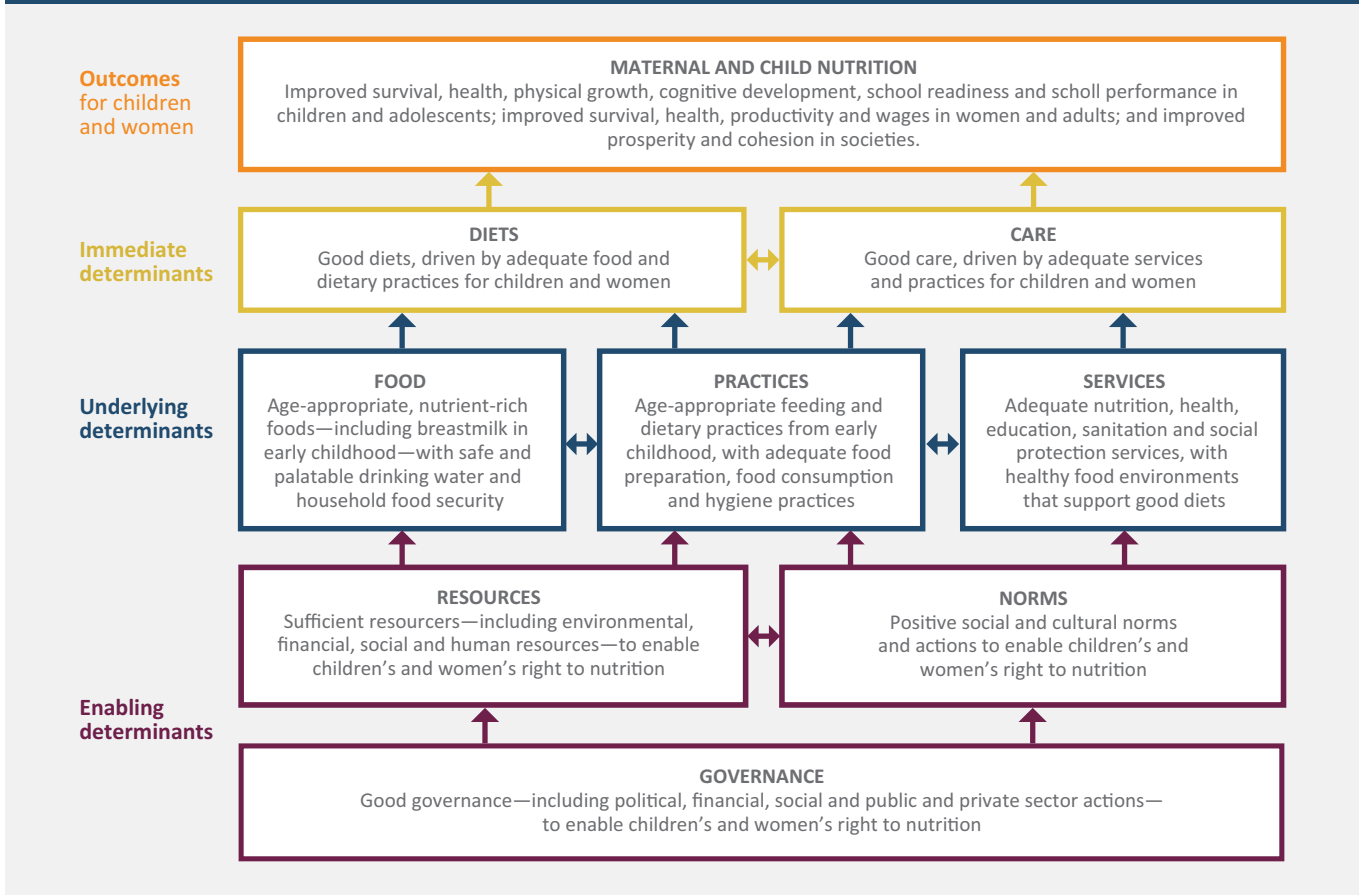
- **Income security is not sufficient to ensure food security**
There are several reasons why food security cannot be guaranteed by cash transfers alone. "They might not be sufficient to purchase adequate food at all times, due to inflation, price seasonality or price spikes. Families might not use cash transfers to purchase adequate food, because of competing needs for cash. Cash transfers might not be equitably distributed to all household members, or might be diluted among many unintended secondary beneficiaries" (Devereux 2015: ix). For these reasons, income security is an elusive concept, difficult to quantify, constantly shifting, and arguably impossible to operationalise.
- **Food security is necessary but not sufficient to ensure nutrition security**
Also during the 2010s, as thinking

on security extended to incorporate nutrition security ('food and nutrition security' or 'food security and nutrition'), an important insight was derived from numerous impact evaluations of cash transfer programmes: *food security is necessary but not sufficient to ensure nutrition security.*

Cash transfers were consistently found to improve standard food security indicators (e.g. household spending on food, meals consumed per day, and dietary diversity) in almost all evaluations where these outcomes were measured, but rarely showed statistically significant impacts on anthropometric indicators of nutrition status (e.g. child wasting, child stunting, and adult body mass index (BMI) (Manley et al. 2022). Even if individuals consume adequate food, this might not translate into nutrition security if transfer levels are small (and thus, only change dietary intake modestly), the disease environment undermines effective utilisation of food, or if feeding and caring practices are inappropriate. A person can therefore be 'income secure' and 'food secure', but 'nutrition insecure'.

- **Cash transfers are not sufficient to ensure nutrition security**
This paradox can be understood by considering UNICEF's conceptual framework for the causes of child malnutrition (UNICEF 2021), which identifies two 'immediate determinants' (inadequate diets, and inadequate care) and three 'underlying determinants' (inappropriate food, inappropriate feeding and dietary practices, and inadequate services with unhealthy food environments). If cash transfers are adequate, they can ensure that food security indicators improve, through the 'diets' and 'food' pathway. However, cash is unlikely to have much effect on childcare practices (such as breastfeeding behaviour), health services, or access to potable water and hygienic sanitary facilities. Put crudely, a child can be consuming an adequate nutritious diet but lose all these nutrients through diarrhoea because of unclean water—i.e. the child is food secure but 'nutrition insecure'.

FIGURE 2: UNICEF conceptual framework for causes of maternal and child malnutrition



Source: UNICEF (2021: 3).

Devereux (2015: 30) concluded by arguing for an integrated systems approach, with a social protection floor being closely coordinated with other social and economic sectors. “Moreover, standard social protection instruments such as social transfers must be complemented by appropriate food security instruments ... to enhance the availability, access, stability and utilisation of food.”

Cash or food?

The 2012 HLPE report noted the issues associated with the provision of assistance in the form of cash or in the form of food. But the state of the empirical literature at the time was unsatisfactory—extant studies typically relied on observational data where not only did transfer modalities differ, so did the frequency, timing, and levels of transfers, making it difficult to assess whether differences in impacts were due to differences in modality (cash v. food) or due to other confounding factors.

A growing evidence base over the last 10 years has addressed these concerns. In brief, they show that both cash and food transfers increase dimensions of food security, but in different ways—food provides more calories, but cash allows for greater diet diversification. Second, providing food transfers is more expensive, so all other things equal, the decision to provide food implies reducing the number of households that can be assisted. While findings such as these have encouraged some donor agencies, most notably the World Food Programme (and to a lesser extent) USAID to expand their use of cash or voucher-type payments, a continuing tension exists between this shift in donor preferences and what beneficiaries actually prefer. Using data from Ethiopia’s PSNP, Hirvonen and Hoddinott (2021) show that even though most payments are made in cash, and even though the (temporal) transaction costs associated with food payments are higher than

payments received as cash, most beneficiaries stated that they prefer their payments only or partly in food with higher food prices inducing shifts in stated preferences toward in-kind transfers.

‘Cash-plus’ and ‘big push’ approaches

Following a period when cash transfers were advocated as sufficient on their own to achieve a range of social protection objectives, thinking and practice evolved to situate cash transfers as one central modality among the array of instruments available to social protection systems. One reason for this change has been the concern that the beneficial impacts of cash transfer programmes may fade out after the programme ends. The evidence is inconclusive. In some cases, programme gains dissipated rapidly, but in other cases attributable improvements in assets, earnings, and children’s well-being persisted 18 to 24 months after the programme ended.

By the late 2010s, this new thinking produced the idea of ‘cash plus’ (Roelen et al. 2017), recognising that the power of cash can be amplified if it is linked to other services and sectors, both social services (access to health, education, etc.) and economic services (livelihood support, financial inclusion, etc.). Relatedly, one of the most studied ‘big push’ approaches, Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP) (a multi-pronged intervention that provided ultra-poor households with a productive asset grant, training and support, life skills coaching, temporary cash consumption support), was found to improve asset accumulation and household economic wellbeing up to 10 years post-intervention in Bangladesh and in India (Banerjee et al. 2020).

Food systems

As global concerns about malnutrition expanded from hunger (mostly affecting poor people in low-income countries) to include overweight and obesity (affecting people across the world, including in middle- and high-income countries as a consequence of the nutrition transition), it became clear that food systems—food supply chains, food environments and consumer behaviour—strongly influence these adverse nutrition outcomes. Analysis of the complex role of food systems revealed that a range of context-specific interventions is needed that enables physical and economic access to healthy diets, including by empowering or incentivising consumers to make healthier food choices (HLPE 2017).

The 2017 HLPE report ‘Nutrition and Food Systems’ (HLPE 2017) includes a conceptual framework that illustrates the relationship between food systems and nutrition and health systems (Figure 3). The report identifies social protection measures as important for boosting access to food directly (e.g. school feeding) or indirectly (e.g. cash transfers), and for protecting consumers against food price spikes and volatility. The report acknowledges that conditional and unconditional cash transfers can lead to improved nutritional outcomes, but also finds evidence from Mexico that these programmes could contribute to overweight and obesity.

Ways forward

What does the future hold for social protection and food security? Mindful that in a rapidly changing world, any prognostication is likely fraught with error, we note the following.

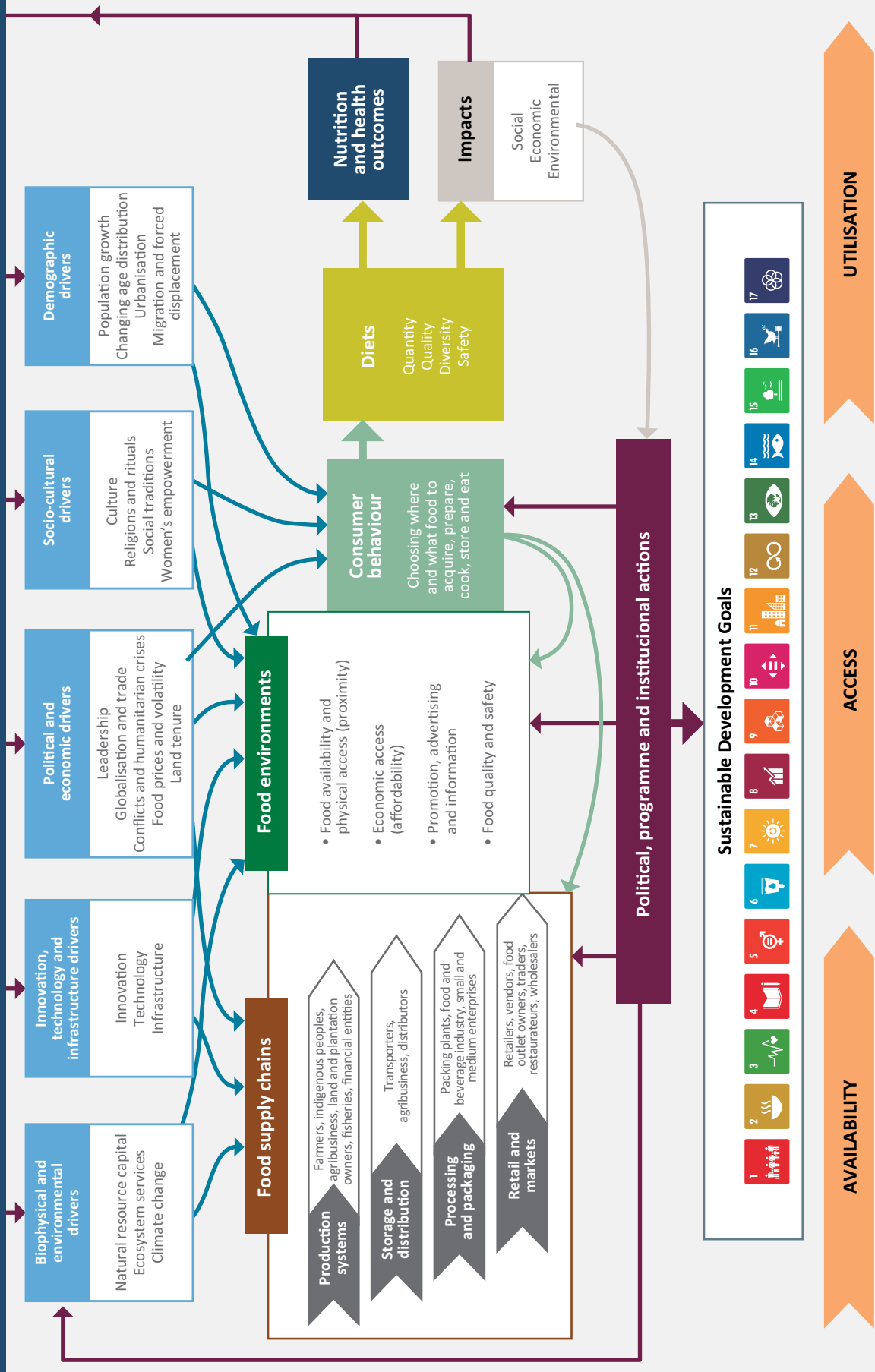
First, either through deliberate planning or through serendipity, social protection and food security will become increasingly intertwined. In terms of attempts to protect household food security during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that social protection was the only game in town. But we perceive that countries with existing programmes in place were better placed to respond to the pandemic than those that had to hurriedly create new ones. Over time, therefore, we expect to see the ‘surge’ noted in section 2.3 to continue. A consequence of this is that countries



Photo: GPE/Translieu. Students eating at a school that is part of the school feeding programme. Ethiopia, 2023. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“... an important insight was derived from numerous impact evaluations of cash transfer programmes: food security is necessary but not sufficient to ensure nutrition security.

FIGURE 3: Conceptual framework of food systems for diets and nutrition



Source: HLPE (2017: 26).



Photo: EC/ECHO/Anouk Delafortrie. Food assistance through cash transfers for the poorest families. Burkina Faso, 2013. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“... standard social protection instruments such as social transfers must be complemented by appropriate food security instruments ... to enhance the availability, access, stability and utilisation of food.”

will move towards creating a food security floor, but without explicitly committing to doing so.

Second, as noted above, the 2012 HLPE report identified 10 social protection instruments. We expect to see expanded use of unconditional cash transfers, continued use of school feeding and, on a more sporadic basis, consumer food subsidies. Food transfers will continue but will be increasingly confined to humanitarian crises where food markets have been badly disrupted. The early 2000s enthusiasm for conditional cash transfers has waned, most notably in Mexico which has ended its long-running CCT. Public works will likely continue to some low-income country settings, but given their drawbacks, we think it is unlikely that their use will expand. Input subsidies have proved to be expensive, and not always well-targeted. Crop and livestock insurance have been shown to be effective, but expansion of these outside of east Africa will require increased involvement of private sector financial firms at scale; something that we have yet to see. As grain marketing boards continue to (slowly) disappear, governments lack the ability to engage in food price stabilisation or accrue or disperse grain reserves.

Lastly, we foresee at least four ‘big’ issues for the 2020s and beyond. First, the expansion of social protection interventions will require financing. Increasingly, this will need to come from governments in low- and middle-income

countries and not from external sources. The willingness and ability of these governments to raise domestic resources may well shape the scope and form of social protection interventions. Second, we have noted above the interest in ‘big push’ and ‘cash+’ interventions. Proponents of these see them as a promising means of helping poor households permanently escape from food insecurity. But they are expensive and thus, by necessity, available to only a small number of households at any one time (with, relative to an intervention which provides a smaller amount of money to beneficiaries, many more households excluded). This is the ‘targeting’ versus ‘universal provision’ issue on steroids. Third, there will be increased interest in the application of AI and big data techniques to social protection. This has already begun to take place—particularly in terms of assessing whether these approaches can improve targeting, though the results to date have been underwhelming. Fourth, low- and middle-income countries are urbanising rapidly. How best to reach growing numbers of poor people living in cities will be a significant challenge. ●

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3. The authors of this article were two of the five co-authors of the HLPE Report (Devereux was Team Leader), the others being Wenche Barth Eide, Nora Lustig, and Kalanidhi Subbarao.

Enhancing the contribution of social protection to improving nutrition

Harold Alderman, Derek Headey and Kalle Hirvonen¹

Progress in reducing undernutrition in the 21st century prior to the COVID-19 pandemic had been steady. The proportion of children in low-income countries who were neither wasted nor stunted rose from 44 per cent in 2000 to 54 per cent in 2015 (Victora et al. 2021). A range of nutrition programmes and platforms facilitated these improvements. However, simulations of the potential impact of these programmes also point to their limitations. One projection reported in 2013 indicated that successful scaling up of 10 proven effective nutrition-specific interventions would only reduce stunting by 20 per cent and decrease child deaths attributed to malnutrition by a third (Bhutta et al. 2013).

Fortunately, other 'nutrition-sensitive' complementary components of an integrated nutrition strategy also contribute to improving nutrition outcomes, including agricultural and social protection programmes (Ruel and Alderman 2013). However, although social protection programmes have significantly contributed to poverty alleviation, their contribution to reducing stunting, while significant, is less than what many of their proponents may have envisioned. For example, a recent meta-analysis of 129 studies of cash transfer programmes estimated an average reduction in stunting of only 1.35 per cent (Manley, Alderman, and Gentilini 2022). Nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions can only be supported, designed, and implemented effectively when there is a favourable enabling environment with political and socioeconomic contexts prioritizing nutrition.

One example of the challenges that must be addressed by nutrition sensitive social protection is the gap between incomes in poor households and the cost of a healthy diet. Several recent studies have estimated the cost of healthy diets that have been recommended based on dietary guidelines for balanced diets rich in fresh

foods. These guidelines factor in nutrient contents of different foods, taking into consideration their impacts on reducing risks of undernutrition as well as the potential for elevating the possibility of non-communicable diseases (Headey et al. 2024). Using this approach, the 2022 SOFI report concluded that around 3 billion people could not afford a healthy diet (FAO et al. 2022). Such estimates unavoidably require assumptions on household demographics, activity levels, seasonal price variation, and the cost of basic non-food necessities. As such, there is variation among the estimates of the share of a population who cannot afford to purchase a healthy diet. Nevertheless, all proposed estimates of the number of individuals unable to afford a healthy diet far exceeds the number of extremely poor people based on an outdated poverty line originally anchored on the cost of calorie adequacy (Headey et al. 2024).

The estimated gap between the income per capita of the average diet-poor person and the resources available in a typical social protection transfer is often well beyond what the programme can offer. For example, a typical individual in a low-income country with a poor-quality diet would require a transfer of USD 1.95 per day to be able to afford a healthy diet, ambitiously assuming they spent the entire transfer on healthy foods (Headey et al.

2024). In lower-middle-income countries, this transfer gap is somewhat smaller, at USD 1.39 per day for those currently unable to purchase a healthy diet. Such gaps, however, are well outside the range of most transfers. For example, while most countries mobilised additional resources to ameliorate the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, such measures typically provided poorer households in lower-middle-income countries in Asia around USD 15 per month (Ecker et al. 2023). A transfer of this magnitude for a household with 5 members thus provides only USD 0.10 per individual, compared to the USD 1.39 required to close the healthy diet gap; or one-fourteenth of what is needed. Thus, while that scale of a transfer could have positive impacts on preventing hunger or addressing poverty, it will only have a limited impact on diet quality. The costs of non-staple healthy foods are relatively high, and the modest resources are spread thin across household members, food and non-food expenses, and different types of staple and non-staple foods.

There is therefore a clear fiscal challenge to making social protection more nutrition sensitive. Typically, budgets for cash transfer programmes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are in the neighbourhood of 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).



Photo: UNICEF/Mackenzie Knowles-Coursin. Preventing famine in Somalia, Somalia, 2017. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.



Photo: 2019 European Union/Peter Biro. Mothers and their children learn how to prepare a fortified porridge. Bangladesh, 2019. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Results from cross-country regressions of the relationship between diet poverty and GDP imply that if LMICs were able to increase social protection budgets to 2 per cent of GDP, the number of diet-poor individuals would decline by 3.5 per cent to 5 per cent (Headey et al. 2024).

Such scenarios are based on existing targeting priorities and delivery mechanisms. However, this reflects the various objectives of social protection programmes and does not necessarily reveal the full potential of nutrition-sensitive social protection. Not all transfer programmes share the primary objective of addressing undernutrition. Social protection programmes that focus on nutrition generally include design features that can enhance their nutritional impacts, including targeting transfers at nutritionally vulnerable populations, providing fortified or nutritious foods, offering behaviour change communication (BCC) interventions, establishing linkages to health services, and including women's empowerment activities, or any combination of the above (Alderman 2022).

BCC is often a central feature of nutrition-sensitive social protection, consistent with the evidence that child caring practices are a pillar of child development and growth. BCC can also assist with female empowerment influencing household welfare in dimensions in addition to its impact on health and nutrition (Ahmed et al. forthcoming). Promotion of exclusive breastfeeding as well as age-appropriate introduction of nutrient-dense complementary foods can complement resource transfers.

Indeed, BCC may be essential for nutritional impact; one randomized controlled trial (RCT) in Bangladesh found the combination of BCC and cash led to a 7.8 percentage point reduction in stunting while cash alone had no impact (ibid.). Other studies on the impacts of BCC and cash interventions are mixed. There are many possible reasons why BCC or BCC plus cash interventions fail to achieve nutritional improvements, but one programmatic concern is the quality and intensity of BCC interventions, especially when delivered by frontline workers who may lack time, resources, or other capacities to deliver effective BCC. Moreover, relatively few studies delve into the operational details of interministerial management and coordination of BCC delivery with transfer programmes at scale.

From the perspective of age targeting, it is worth noting that many cash transfer programmes have a primary goal of poverty alleviation, and thus target elderly individuals. Others aim to increase human capital by encouraging school participation. These programmes may achieve their primary objectives yet produce diluted results when assessed through the lens of nutrition. Still, even within the subset of programmes whose explicit objective is to reduce stunting, carefully considering the age of beneficiaries as well as the duration of support can increase effectiveness—age influences nutritional impacts, depending on both the start date and the duration of a programme (Alderman 2022). Notably, programmes that can offer both monetary assistance and additional services from

early pregnancy onwards appear to be most effective; since stunting is cumulative, it is advisable that support be provided continuously through the 1000-day window from conception to the child's second birthday.

Age targeting can also dovetail with one other design feature of nutrition sensitive programmes—combining family-based cash transfers or in-kind support with targeted food supplements for child and pregnant women. While there is a clear trend towards cash distribution in social protection programmes, in-kind distribution programmes have not disappeared. Although the provision of nutritious foods for vulnerable populations is a long-standing feature of nutrition-specific programming, the foods that are intended for infants are often shared with the entire household. Family-based support, complemented with BCC and judicious choice of targeted food supplements, may reduce the tendency for such sharing. Programmes using blended grain products as well as lipid-based nutritional supplements (LNS) have proven effective in terms of achieving the lowest cost per percentage point reduction in stunting (Dewey et al. 2023; Alderman 2022).

Nutritionists have recently made a strong evidence-based case for the provision of small quantities of LNS targeting children aged 6–24 months for the purpose of preventing undernutrition (Dewey et al. 2023). Such LNS supplement programmes are not intended to replace programmes designed to promote proper infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices. Rather, the delivery of small quantities of LNS is advocated for poor households that cannot afford recommended IYCF because of their low incomes and the high cost of nutrient-dense complementary foods. LNS advocacy is usually presented in terms of nutrition-specific support, not necessarily paired with transfer programmes. Nevertheless, the proposed prioritisation of preventative LNS supplementation is fully consistent with the evidence on the significant challenges of making healthy diets affordable for poorer populations.

To date, there have been few studies of cash transfers coupled with LNS. However, explorations of the most practical mix

of family and individual assistance, as well as the most feasible duration of support, could guide future programmes. This research could address multiple issues under debate, including questions of whether supplementation programmes promote or hinder the adoption of healthier diets, whether supplements, cash, or in-kind transfers exacerbate obesity, and whether products targeted at children are shared within a household or sold to neighbours. These questions are subsets of operational and implementation research studies that can assist in improving the design of nutrition-sensitive social protection and enhance its role within the toolkit of measures to improve maternal and child nutrition. At a more macro level, all of these questions are couched within the broader need to understand and promote a favourable enabling environment for nutrition in general, and nutrition-sensitive social protection specifically. In that regard, there are newly emerging success stories in a number of LMICs that merit further study and policy emulation. ●

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“ One example of the challenges that must be addressed by nutrition sensitive social protection is the gap between incomes in poor households and the cost of a healthy diet.



Photo: Joe Nkadaani/CIFOR. At a food fair, women displayed diverse and nutrient-rich forest foods they regularly forage and cultivate. Zambia, 2017. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The role of social assistance in transforming livelihoods and increasing resilience in conflict-affected settings: Are we expecting too much?

Jeremy Lind,¹ Lars Otto Naess²
and Meghan Bailey³

In recent years, there has been growing interest in using social protection—including social assistance and social insurance—to address vulnerabilities associated with climate shocks and stressors and to strengthen resilience. There are two major aspects to this:

First, thinking around shock-responsive social protection has explored how *ex-post* interventions can strengthen the capacities of individuals, households and communities to better *absorb* climate shocks. This approach involves vertical and horizontal expansion of existing social protection programmes to meet deeper and wider needs, piggy-backing on the administrative structures and capacities of social protection programmes to deliver separate shock responses, and aligning humanitarian assistance with current or future social protection systems (O'Brien et al. 2018).

Second, there is increasing momentum behind efforts to expand the scope of social protection to enhance capacities for anticipating, adapting, and transforming livelihoods in the context of a changing climate. This expansion has largely manifested through integrating scalability mechanisms in response to, and more recently in anticipation of, climate shocks, public works programmes focused on developing disaster-resilient assets (e.g., embankments, drainage systems, reforestation) and a wide variety of climate-oriented complementary supports.

There is a body of work aimed at experimenting with and generating evidence on how *ex-ante* social protection interventions can support the *anticipatory* capacities of individuals, households and communities affected by climate shocks and stressors. For example, combining

social protection with climate services and disaster risk reduction activities, such as early warning systems, is thought to increase resilience outcomes (Solórzano and Cárdenas 2019; Agrawal et al. 2019).

Despite the increasing attention to using social protection to address climate-related vulnerabilities, we still understand little about how these interventions could build capacities to adapt to long-term climate shifts, or even support transformative change when the status quo is no longer viable (Naess et al. 2022). *Adaptive* and *transformative* capacities are complementary to capabilities to anticipate and absorb shocks. Thus, all four capacities—adaptive, anticipatory, absorptive and transformative—are inseparable parts of *climate resilience* (Béné et al. 2014).

In this article, we extend the discussion of social protection and climate resilience to conflict-affected settings. The opportunities and potential limitations of linking social assistance and adaptive capacities are particularly pronounced in these contexts. The primary aim of a significant share of social assistance to conflict-affected populations is to protect food security and nutrition—in other words, to establish or sustain the absorptive capacities of households and individuals. However, given that many conflict-affected populations endure protracted situations where conflict persists for years, we question whether social assistance could do more to strengthen and promote livelihoods. We explore whether adding objectives to build adaptive capacities might be too ambitious for social assistance programmes that are already overstretched in conflict-affected areas.

Linking social assistance and adaptive capacities in conflict-affected areas

While programming attention in the field of social protection has predominantly focused on supporting absorptive and

anticipatory capacities, the importance of strengthening adaptive capacities has been recognised through the adaptive social protection agenda for more than a decade (Bowen et al. 2020; Davies et al. 2008). When provided predictably, reliably and over the long term, social assistance—particularly cash transfers—can be a crucial component of interventions that enable adaptation in both conflict and non-conflict settings. The increasing use of cash transfers in humanitarian assistance reflects—at least in part—a recognition that individuals are experts of their own lives and can make the best choices that address their own needs. Cash assistance expands the “response space” or “the set of options open to actors trying to enact multiple livelihood and development outcomes” (Osborne et al. 2010, 1-2).

There is evidence that recipients spontaneously invest some of their surplus transfers in productive activities (Taylor 2012). Long-term studies of cash transfers in Kenya have documented that upgrading roofs is one of the most common expenditures. This not only reduces long-term roof maintenance costs, but also makes shelters more resilient to extreme weather (Haushofer and Shapiro 2018).

Recognising that social assistance can both protect and promote livelihoods, many agencies have sought to combine social transfers with complementary support such as mentoring and skills training, and improved access to health and financial services and institutions. These ‘cash plus’ approaches could strengthen people’s capacities to respond to both long-term, gradual climate changes and immediate climate shocks by providing opportunities in settings where productive livelihoods are feasible (Lind et al. 2023).

However, livelihoods in many conflict-affected areas are shaped by predatory

practices, discriminatory regimes and ongoing violence. This presents a significant challenge for cash plus programmes, which by design focus on individual shortcomings rather than addressing structural drivers of vulnerability and exclusion (Lind et al. 2023). Although the rationale for using social assistance to strengthen adaptive capacities is clear, there has been little explicit consideration of how these linkages could be established in conflict-affected settings. The next section examines three fundamental limitations to making these connections.

Limitations

There are three fundamental limits to how social assistance could be used to strengthen livelihoods and adaptive capacities in conflict-affected settings.

First, the ‘baseline’ for building the adaptive capacities of households and individuals is very different where conflict-related processes continue to shape poverty and vulnerability. These processes include the collapse of basic services, destruction of public infrastructure, land occupation and predation, restrictions on movements and access to key resources, displacement, and market distortions. Conflict often acts as a transformative influence on livelihoods and production systems. For example, the impacts of war in Darfur, which began in 2002 and stretched over several years, led to a rapid, if traumatic, de-agrarianisation. Many of Darfur’s displaced population ended up in large internally displaced persons (IDP) centres, and their lands were occupied by other populations (De Waal 2009). Such transformative impacts of conflict on livelihoods obscure consideration of ‘adaptation’. In these contexts, strengthening livelihoods and resilience often require rebuilding people’s capacities to manage risk at a very basic level. In the short-term, particularly during the immediate post-conflict recovery period, adaptation and transformation may be unfeasible.

A second limitation is that social assistance programmes often face enormous strains in conflict situations. This is due not only to increased and diverse needs but also to the disruptions and distortions caused by the conflict in the operational setting. The infrastructure



Photo: ILRI/Susan MacMillan. Farmhouse at a village farm in the drylands of Ukambani, Kenya, 2012. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

necessary for implementing programmes may be destroyed or severely damaged—such as non-operational banking services, displaced lower-level staff, and damaged offices and vehicles. Few social protection programmes are “conflict sensitive” (Birch et al. 2023), while humanitarian cash assistance is often inconsistent and short-term. Additionally, funding for these programmes may remain static or even decrease, especially if programmes are implemented by States involved in the conflict, while international donors might redirect resources to humanitarian aid managed by non-State actors.

And finally, especially in conflict-affected areas, where State social protection systems may struggle to function or reach all populations in need, people often rely on their own resources and mutual support networks rooted in kin, religious and ethnic affiliations, as well as support from non-State political actors and movements. However, State and aid agency assistance programmes are frequently poorly linked—if at all—to these non-State forms of social provision. Some services, including humanitarian assistance, actively discourage ‘benefit-sharing’ and prefer strict adherence to targeting criteria. Building adaptive capacities ultimately requires finding ways to support and add value to inclusive forms of non-State social provisions, which will persist long after humanitarian actors have departed and during periods of crisis when other providers may be unable to offer support.

Conclusion

The best-designed social assistance programmes will be attentive to how contextual factors shape their ability to promote livelihood transitions and support adjustments to climate-related trends over the long term. Emphasising resilience should not detract from the core, *protective* purpose of social protection, especially in areas where violence and displacement are, and will continue to be, key drivers of vulnerability. Still, the core intent of social assistance in conflict settings—ensuring food security and nutrition—is also an inseparable part of what it means to support adaptation and resilience in the long term. Food security and good nutrition are foundational to building adaptive capacities, and strengthening these through periods of conflict is an investment in future recovery and rehabilitation when the focus shifts towards securing livelihoods. When transfers are sufficiently high to allow recipients to make informed choices on how best to manage their risks, sustaining regular provision can help populations manage recurring climate risks in the short and medium term.

Thus, incorporating climate-oriented components into social assistance programmes as part of an agenda to support adaptive capacities must not come at the expense of investing in and sustaining routine provision. In fact, the need to scale systems for shocks may itself indicate that routine support levels are insufficient. A better understanding is required of the routine support needed for



Photo: UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran. Women in rural areas of Darfur, Sudan, 2010. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“... the core intent of social assistance in conflict settings—ensuring food security and nutrition—is also an inseparable part of what it means to support adaptation and resilience in the long term.”

those receiving social assistance in conflict settings to have sufficient shock-absorptive capacities to manage climate risks and the intersecting impacts of conflict. Smaller operational adjustments, such as integrating climate risk vulnerability indicators into routine data collection for social registries, may be more feasible and supportive of core system delivery than large-scale scalability mechanisms. ●

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Linking nutrition-sensitive social protection with food waste reduction in Chile

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Healthy diets are a cornerstone of well-being, yet ensuring access to nutritious foods for the entire population so that countries can reach Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)—Zero Hunger—targets remains a challenge. In Chile, government-supported micro food banks have emerged as an innovative social protection measure. This initiative facilitates access to dietary essentials such as fruits and vegetables for vulnerable populations, contributing to food security while also helping to reduce food waste in street markets.

Setting the scene: food insecurity alongside food waste

Chile faces formidable public health challenges stemming from poor diets, which are among the leading causes of death and disability in the Chilean population (Martínez-Sanguinetti et al. 2019, 653). According to the most recent National Health Survey from the Chilean Ministry of Health (Minsal), three-quarters of Chile's population over the age of 15 has overweight or obesity (Minsal 2017, 34). In addition, only 15 per cent of the population meets the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation of consuming at least five portions of fruits and vegetables per day (Minsal 2017, 30), despite Chile's extensive agricultural industry. These figures are of great concern because the WHO highlights inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption as one of the most important risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (WHO 2004, 2), while obesity is linked to a series of NCDs that can have a significant effect on quality of life. It is also associated with premature mortality.

Rates of obesity and poor dietary trends in Chile are significantly influenced by social determinants of health, which contribute to worse diets and health outcomes among populations of lower socioeconomic status (SES). According to the Nutritional Map published by the Ministry of Education's National School and

Scholarship Assistance Council (Junaeb), in Gran Santiago, students in the first SES quintile (lowest socioeconomic level) had a 28 per cent higher relative risk of obesity compared to their counterparts in the fifth SES quintile (highest socioeconomic level) (Lira 2022, 46).

Alongside elevated rates of overweight and obesity, the estimated percentage of the Chilean population experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity (lack of physical, social, or economic access to safe, nutritious food in sufficient amounts) rose to 19.4 per cent amid the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2020 (Ministry of Social Development et al. 2020, 2). This percentage varied significantly according to socioeconomic level: among households in the lowest socioeconomic level, 29.5 per cent faced moderate or severe food insecurity, compared with 5.9 per cent of households in the highest tier (Ministry of Social Development et al. 2020, 2). Over the three-year period from 2020 to 2022, the estimated prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Chile averaged 18.1 per cent (FAO et al. 2023, 156).

This food insecurity coexists with Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates indicating that a third of the food produced globally for human consumption is lost or wasted every year, contributing to approximately 8 per cent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions (FAO 2015, 1). Among street market vendors in Chile, 76 per cent indicate that it is common practice for all leftover items in street markets to be thrown away, including unsold food still fit for human consumption (FAO 2023, 15).

Nutrition-sensitive social protection

The disparity between food production, consumption, and waste has adverse effects on both health and environmental outcomes, highlighting the urgent need for solutions that simultaneously mitigate food waste and enhance food security, especially for low-income vulnerable groups. Consequently, innovative measures to facilitate access to nutritious foods and

address both problems concurrently within a nutrition-sensitive social protection approach have garnered significant interest from the Chilean government.

The conceptual breadth of social protection can encompass interventions in areas such as education, employment, and social assistance. However, for measures in these areas to succeed, maintaining a healthy nutritional status across the life course is essential. It is challenging for students to learn, individuals to work effectively, or senior citizens to maintain a decent quality of life if they suffer from food insecurity or malnutrition.

The transfer of food falls into the social assistance category of social protection instruments as defined by the World Bank (2018, 5), with the objective of providing food security and improving nutrition (World Bank 2018, 40). The Chilean government has implemented numerous large-scale food-based interventions that have been in place for several decades, including Junaeb's School Meals Programme for Vulnerable Students and Minsal's Complementary Food Programme for Senior Citizens.⁵

Micro food bank programme

The micro food bank programme is a more recent strategy being implemented by the Chilean government aimed at increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables among vulnerable populations, ultimately improving diet quality and preventing the development of NCDs. This multisectoral initiative is coordinated by the Choose to Live Healthily Secretariat in Chile's Ministry of Social Development and Family, which provides funding and technical support, in collaboration with the Food Market Observatory Corporation (CODEMA) and civil society organisations. These entities work in street markets to collect fruits and vegetables that are still in good condition and fit for human consumption. Collected products are then redistributed to non-governmental organisations that assist vulnerable populations lacking access to sufficient nutritious foods, such as individuals experiencing homelessness.

In its preliminary stages, the programme selected its areas of intervention based on two criteria. The first criterion is the total number of inhabitants that do not consume healthy nutritious foods, an indicator measured by the Ministry of Social Development and Family's National Socioeconomic Characteristics Survey. The second is the presence of active street markets selling fruits and vegetables, along with a willingness on behalf of the fruit and vegetable vendors to participate. A key element of the programme is Chile's long-standing tradition of year-round street markets offering local seasonal products across all regions. The pilot programme launched in 2021 entailed the implementation of nine micro food banks in two regions of the central zone of the country.

As of early 2024, 82 micro food banks had been implemented in 15 of the country's 16 regions, which collectively rescue and redistribute approximately 280 tonnes of food annually. Among the beneficiary population, 32 per cent receive between five to seven servings of fruits and vegetables per week, while 45 per cent receive between two to four servings per week, and 12 per cent receive one serving per week. Overall, 76 per cent of those benefitting from the micro food banks are individuals experiencing homelessness.

In 2024, the programme is projected to provide assistance to over 65,000 people nationwide, the target population being individuals experiencing poverty who

do not consume sufficient nutritious foods. Efforts are under way to continue expanding the coverage of the initiative to additional neighbourhoods and communities. By 2027, the programme is expected to benefit over 156,000 people, contingent upon the continuation of the funding plan and yearly increases as outlined in the yearly budget law.

To ensure sustained financial and political support for the micro food bank initiative, the programme underwent an *ex ante* evaluation in 2023 within the Ministry of Social Development and Family's Subsecretary of Social Evaluation. Its favourable assessment established the initiative as a permanent programme of the Chilean State, eligible for yearly funding through the government's budget law. This ensures its continuity in the coming years, helping to safeguard it against shifts in political will and priorities.

Building multisectoral linkages

Multisectoral coordination between the government and civil society is the foundation for the micro food bank programme, with NGO workers, volunteers, street market vendors, and public servants all playing essential roles. In addition, the expansion of the micro food bank programme has been accompanied by its interlinkage with other governmental initiatives, such as the Ministry of Health's Sectoral Plan for Climate Change Mitigation, which aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 while reducing vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change.

Micro food banks contribute to this plan by reducing food waste, thus diverting food from landfills and helping to reduce emissions. Furthermore, the micro food bank programme is integrated within the Ministry of Agriculture's Sovereignty for Food Security Strategy due to its contributions to reducing food insecurity.

Such integrated approaches help reduce duplication in public policymaking and enable different parts of the public sector to join forces and collaborate to achieve their objectives. For example, micro food banks have been added to the evaluation criteria for applications to the Programme for Street Market Development, a fund offered by the Ministry of Economy's Service for Technical Cooperation. This programme aims to strengthen street markets as a key sector for the economy, food security, and cultural heritage of the country. Applicants to this fund are encouraged to include activities with positive environmental impact that contribute to sustainability, including micro food banks, in their project design proposal. Thanks to this criterion, 10 street markets in four regions that had operational micro food banks were able to receive additional financial support from the Ministry of Economy, which serves as an incentive for vendors to continue to participate in the micro food bank programme.

Roadblocks

Implementation has not been without roadblocks. Scaling up the initiative to



Photo: Max Valencia/FAORLC. Healthy school feeding at a public school in Santiago, Chile, 2015. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

“ It is challenging for students to learn, individuals to work effectively, or senior citizens to maintain a decent quality of life if they suffer from food insecurity or malnutrition.

“ Multisectoral coordination between the government and civil society is the foundation for the micro food bank programme ...

the national level and implementing the programme in radically different climates and territorial realities across one of the longest countries in the world has presented challenges in delivery and expanding coverage. The micro food bank model is based on voluntary contributions of unsold fruits and vegetables from vendors in street markets, meaning the capacity to increase programme coverage depends partly on the size of the street markets. In remote and difficult-to-reach areas such as the southernmost region of Magallanes and Chilean Antarctica, existing street fairs are not as extensive as those in regions farther north that are more well-connected, where transporting fruits and vegetables to the street markets is comparatively easier.

Moreover, Chile is highly vulnerable to climate change due to characteristics such as its extensive low-lying coastline, susceptibility to drought and desertification, and exposure to natural disasters, amongst others (Ministry of the Environment 2011, 20). Additional hazards include earthquakes and volcanic activity, which have the potential to disrupt the implementation of the micro food programme, affecting both the availability of fruits and vegetables and the day-to-day functioning of the street markets. These vulnerabilities underscore the importance of interventions aimed at enhancing the resilience of food systems to shocks even further.

The current state of nutrition and food security poses numerous daunting challenges; however, they are not insurmountable. Innovation in social protection systems, coupled with continued multisectoral collaboration, will be critical in advancing towards a world where poverty and food insecurity are relics of the past, and where the implementation of nationally-appropriate social protection systems for all ceases to be a Sustainable Development Goal and becomes a reality. ●

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The food security and nutrition challenge: What role for social protection in the Sahel?

Ana Ocampo,¹ Paul Quarles van Ufford² and Aline Coudouel³

Countries in the Sahel face many challenges related to food security and nutrition. The region is characterised by high levels of extreme poverty, low human development, and limited access to basic services. Additionally, the Sahel has a very complex risk profile, particularly affected by climate change and environmental and land degradation. The region also suffers from conflict and forced displacement, which severely affect the lives and livelihoods of its most vulnerable populations.

The food security and malnutrition situation in the Sahel has been rapidly deteriorating in the past five years. In 2024, 11.6 million people are expected to face a food security crisis or worse during the next lean season, a threefold increase compared to 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even after the peak of the lean season, an estimated 7.9 million people will be food insecure from September to December. The growing need for support is compounded by effects of conflict and other external shocks, which exacerbate underlying structural vulnerabilities. The scale of these needs far exceeds the capacity of the humanitarian sector to respond fully, underscoring the need for a new approach.

While poverty and food insecurity do not perfectly overlap, they mutually influence and reinforce each other. In the Sahel, the lean season particularly affects the poor (Lain et al. 2021). An analysis of food

insecurity trends across historical data by the World Food Programme (WFP)'s Regional Bureau for Western Africa reveals clear patterns of recurrence, both seasonally and year-round, which can be tied to underlying patterns of vulnerability and multiple shocks. At the household level, there is a strong correlation between underlying vulnerability and food insecurity, with poor and extremely poor people being disproportionately affected. It is also notable that some households can fall into food insecurity without any apparent shocks, suggesting that deprivation can be a major driver in these cases.

The magnitude and complexity of the issue, combined with the limitations of purely reactive seasonal responses, underscore the need for a more integrated approach that combines structural and conjunctural strategies. In this scenario, social protection systems play a critical role in addressing underlying vulnerability, strengthening resilience, and improving the effectiveness of seasonal responses through better channelling.

A renewed role for social protection in the Sahel

Social protection has globally emerged as a key investment not only to address vulnerability and poverty but also to tackle large systemic shocks. By leveraging existing programmes and delivery systems, social protection can provide timely support to the most vulnerable populations through temporary expansions. This dual and interlinked role, often referred to as “adaptive” or “shock-

responsive” social protection, is essential in the Sahel. An adaptive approach to social protection includes the core piece of a strong foundational programme, typically a flagship social assistance programme that is permanent in nature. The existing evidence on the impacts of such programmes justifies their position as the cornerstone of an approach that uses social protection to respond to high levels of chronic and seasonal food and nutrition insecurity. The evidence is overwhelming regarding the impacts of social protection across various dimensions, including food security (Tirivayi et al. 2017; WFP 2021).

In terms of access to nutritious foods, regular social assistance benefits demonstrated positive impacts on food security, including improvements in food security indicators such as food consumption scores and diet diversity. The consumption-smoothing impact of these programmes reduces household reliance on negative coping strategies. Impact evidence also points to improved access to services for health, nutrition and education. These human capital impacts have potential to improve food and nutrition security in the short term while also addressing the drivers of intergenerational transmission of poverty and vulnerability.

In terms of food availability, regular social assistance support—particularly regular cash transfers—has demonstrated positive impacts on household productivity. This is achieved through improved access to inputs and investments in both on- and off-farm activities that facilitate asset accumulation, such as small livestock or agricultural equipment. These impacts have the potential to enhance the production of nutritious foods. Additionally, the evidence points to multiplier impacts on the local economy: programmes systematically benefit non-participants, improve market access and foster local economic and productive activity. Emerging evidence also suggests that cash transfers may help build social capital and social cohesion.

BOX 1

In Chad, social cash transfers reduced the probability of a household often going a day without food by 38 per cent. In Niger, during a drought, beneficiary households maintained their consumption levels, whereas non-beneficiaries had to reduce consumption by 24 per cent. In Burkina Faso, 12-15 months after social cash transfers ended, participating children had a school enrolment rate that was 14.3 per cent higher than that of non-participants).

Source: World Bank SASPP programme 2023.

BOX 2

In Mali, 18 months after the end of the programme, participants were 57 per cent more likely to save and 46 per cent more likely to invest in productive assets than non-participants. In Mauritania, social assistance beneficiaries engage significantly more in social support and collective action within their communities than non-participants. In Senegal, considering the impact on local economies, 13 per cent of the poverty reduction observed between 2011 and 2019 can be attributed to the flagship social assistance programme.

Source: World Bank SASPP programme 2023.

Better availability and access both create a strong platform for enhancing the quality of food consumed, through productive and economic impacts as well as improved access to services. Several countries use social assistance programmes as platforms to reach participants with information or additional services, or referrals to these. These approaches can deepen the impact already achieved through transfers alone.

An important lesson from the impact evidence is that programme design matters. Regular, predictable, and accessible social assistance leads to more sustained and deeper impacts, resulting in more resilient households and individuals. Multi-year programmes with adequate transfer values produce better results because households can make investment decisions that help them better manage risk in the medium to long term, including when facing a shock.

In short, a strong evidence base points to the potential for social protection to contribute to addressing food and nutrition security challenges. This raises the question of how to seize this opportunity in the fragile context of the Sahel. We argue that this requires tackling three main bottlenecks: Expanding the coverage of routine social assistance programmes, ensuring the continuity of social protection delivery and expansion in response to shocks, and establishing linkages with agriculture and nutrition services, with a focus on women.

Taking social protection to scale in the Sahel: building a continuum

Optimising and expanding the use of social protection instruments, particularly social assistance, is critical to addressing chronic and conjunctural food and nutrition insecurity in the

Sahel. This involves expanding routine social protection coverage to build resilience. This creates a larger platform for temporary expansions in response to shocks. These expansions can be vertical, by increasing benefit levels for programme participants, or horizontal, through adding new recipients to the programme. A stronger role for social assistance translates into a more robust effort to address structural drivers of food and nutrition insecurity. Combined with a solid base for temporarily expanding support to cushion the impact of shocks, this approach has the potential to reduce reliance on humanitarian assistance.

In the region, however, where it is most needed, social protection systems remain largely nascent. A recent review by the World Bank found that across institutional, data, programme, and delivery pillars, adaptive social protection is either nascent or latent in all countries (Coudouel et al. 2023). While governments have committed to expanding social protection systems, significant bottlenecks persist, including governance and coordination issues that lead to fragmentation, and limited levels of both domestic and international funding—particularly when integrating the disaster risk dimension. This results in low coverage of routine social protection, especially in relation to extreme poverty rates in the region. In Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger, regular cash transfers cover no more than 5 per cent⁴ of the population. Government budgets in these countries allocate limited domestic resources⁵ to these programmes, which are heavily reliant on external finance. Fiscal space options are constrained: structural reforms to enhance tax revenues are difficult to implement in a fragile context, and available resources

compete with other priorities, including military and security expenditure. A key system-level bottleneck is the absence of permanent national flagship social assistance programmes capable of absorbing significant levels of additional external or domestic finance.

With the notable exception of Mauritania, most countries in the Sahel still lack an operational flagship social assistance programme that operates at scale. Burkina Faso has made significant progress by adopting a national programme (PAMPV), which is yet to be operationalised. For the most part, safety nets operate as projects with no plans for achieving national coverage, even though national social protection policies typically contain ambitious coverage targets. Typically, the social protection landscape is fragmented, with a relatively large number of small initiatives operating within and alongside the national system. In several Sahelian countries, the historical focus on responding to seasonal food insecurity through annual national response plans has resulted in a fragmented institutional setup, where social protection programmes and institutions are not adequately integrated and at best simply coexist in parallel. Consequently, social protection interventions are usually not central to the national response plans, though some improvements have been observed since the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is key that the emergency response planning and coordination system, which is well-structured in the Sahel under the Charter for Food Crisis Prevention and Management (PREGEC Charter),⁶ more firmly integrates the role of social safety nets (both regular and shock-responsive) into the response package. While social protection is increasingly becoming more shock responsive, it remains marginal in the context of food and nutrition security management. Many parallel approaches persist to reach those in crisis, and largely do not yet leverage social protection systems.

At the same time, national social protection policies or strategies do not yet provide a clear direction for how social protection instruments can optimally address the structural drivers

of vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity while also responding to acute crises. To overcome this significant bottleneck and optimise the role of social protection, a set of institutional reforms is required. These reforms include developing national social assistance programmes that are well-integrated into government administrative structures and can align with both domestic and external finance; ensuring that existing coordination mechanisms for social protection and emergency responses include the necessary range of actors and institutions; combining short- and long-term interventions to more effectively address the impact of food insecurity on poor and vulnerable households; and leveraging programmes and tools from social protection systems to link interventions. Such reforms can build on progress that is being made with strengthening social protection systems, such as with the expansion and institutionalisation of social registries or the on-going revisions of national social protection policies.

Beyond expanding regular social protection coverage, establishing national programmes and integrating social protection instruments more strongly into emergency responses, addressing delivery challenges in fragile contexts such as in the Sahel is crucial. This involves ensuring continuity of delivery during or immediately after a shock, as well as maintaining delivery of regular social protection services in a context where national systems face capacity constraints and government actors may lack access to certain areas.

Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic response have been critical in this regard. Despite the global and regional momentum for using social protection in mitigating the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, timely programme expansions sometimes encountered capacity and preparedness issues within national delivery systems. These constraints included a lack of standard operating procedures, insufficient capacity to quickly scale up existing arrangements for targeting, payments, or grievance redressal mechanisms, and human resource limitations at both central level

and in frontline service delivery. The absence of national social assistance programmes as platforms for horizontal or vertical expansions further exacerbated these issues. In the Sahel, these challenges were compounded by security issues that limit government access to certain regions, raising the question of how to ensure timely responses without relying on less sustainable parallel humanitarian solutions.

With support from UNICEF and WFP (funded by Germany) and the World Bank, social protection systems in the Sahel were leveraged to respond to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, as well as of subsequent droughts and other shocks. A so-called “twin track approach” was adopted by UN agencies to address capacity constraints. Under the overall guidance of the government, this approach delivers social protection through national systems and, when capacity or access constraints prevent this, through non-governmental implementing partners (UNICEF and WFP 2023). For example, in Niger, the adaptive social safety net project—supported by the World Bank and implemented by the Niger government—tested various modalities to respond to shocks with earlier or more long-term interventions. This approach was expanded using the twin-track method when the government could not intervene directly. Additionally, the World Bank supported the expansion of national programmes, the strengthening of national delivery systems, and the development of national institutions and coordination mechanisms necessary for these systems and programmes to reach their full potential.

There is momentum in the region to better address food insecurity and malnutrition. It is widely recognised that emergency responses alone cannot adequately resolve these issues, as poor food and nutrition security indicators in the Sahel result from a vicious combination of chronic poverty and acute vulnerability due to multiple shocks. In this context and given that the effectiveness of food security interventions is central to discussions under the PREGEC, it is crucial to advocate for increased investments in social protection systems. This involves

increasing the coverage of regular social assistance and leveraging its programmes and delivery tools to build a continuum of responses to food and nutrition insecurity. Such an approach, with a focus on the most vulnerable populations, can lead to greater effectiveness, sustainability, and efficiency.

Social protection has demonstrated its capacity to make a difference in the Sahel, with large impacts on beneficiaries and local communities, and it is high time to harness its potential to address food insecurity and malnutrition. ●

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3. Lead Economist, Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program (SASPP) Manager, World Bank.
4. Authors’ estimate based on the number of households enrolled in the main social cash transfer programmes in these countries in 2023.
5. A notable development was observed in Burkina Faso, where domestic resources were allocated to the newly created “National Programme for the Autonomisation of Poor and Vulnerable Households” (PAMPV for its acronym in French). Although the programme has been established by decree and funding has been allocated, it is not yet operationalised. Elsewhere in the region, Mauritania and Senegal largely fund their regular cash transfer programmes from the domestic budget.
6. The PREGEC Charter was adopted in 2021 by 17 West African countries and their partners to improve the coordination and effectiveness of food security responses.

Building synergies and convergence across nutrition and social protection to address child malnutrition and poverty

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Malnutrition and poverty are inextricably linked and should therefore be tackled together. The debilitating physical and cognitive effects of all forms of malnutrition jeopardize the health and development of children, as well as their future earning capacities, life opportunities, and contribution to socioeconomic growth (Hoddinott et al. 2013). In turn, poverty drives child malnutrition by creating a barrier for families to access nutritious foods, engage in optimal dietary and childcare and feeding practices, and access essential nutrition and public health services (Siddiqui et al. 2020).

This interconnection between poverty and malnutrition implies that they must be considered together in policy and programme solutions. While this relationship is widely recognised, there is relatively limited experience, consensus, and guidance on what tackling poverty and malnutrition together at scale looks like in practice. Studies and operational research often show mixed results on the impact of social protection on malnutrition (De Groot et al. 2017; Roelen et al. 2017a; Roelen et al. 2017b). However, these mixed results are in part due to the variation in the design and implementation of programmes and how they are evaluated. There are also other bottlenecks in policies and programmes which potentially limit the impact of social protection and nutrition programmes on child nutrition, poverty and ultimately human capital.

Even when mutually reinforcing policies with potential to foster synergies between nutrition and social protection exist, they do not necessarily translate into the necessary implementation capacities. Many programmes are not implemented at scale, are not sufficiently adaptive in the context of shocks, and few are

implemented with explicit linkages to interventions in the food system to ensure sustained access to nutritious foods.

This article suggests a need to focus on these four bottlenecks, which, if addressed, can lead to significant opportunities to make sustainable reductions in child malnutrition at scale, which in turn contribute to human capital development and long-term reductions in poverty.

This is based on the learning and evidence that informed the development of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Programming Guidance "[Building synergies between child nutrition and social protection to address malnutrition and poverty](#)" (UNICEF 2024).⁶

Beyond policies: building synergies between programmes at local and community levels

Many governments have enacted comprehensive policies across both social protection and nutrition areas that reflect mutually reinforcing commitments to address poverty and malnutrition. For example, the Government of Ethiopia's 2018 National Food and Nutrition Policy⁷ includes social protection as a key strategy to help families access adequate and nutritious foods, and the 2016 National Social Protection Strategy⁸ includes the reduction of food insecurity and child malnutrition as a principal objective. Mutually reinforcing policies in nutrition and social protection help provide an important enabling environment for building synergies between programmes. However, they must also be supported by investments in the systems themselves and in programme design and implementation capacities that directly influence practice and delivery. This means, for example, that social transfers are designed to reach people at the most nutritionally vulnerable stages of their life course, including during pregnancy and breastfeeding and in early childhood (first-1,000 days). It also means that, in practice, there is a need for

a convergence of support for facilitated access to health and nutrition services—including through health insurance or fee waivers and strengthened workforce capacities—so that the same families receiving social transfers also receive nutrition information, counselling and support, support for improved access to nutritious foods, and access to essential nutrition and other essential services. This concept of convergence places women and children at the centre around which multiple interventions and services meet to address multiple underlying causes of malnutrition and poverty (UNICEF 2024).

Effective implementation requires investments in local capacities, specifically social service workforce capacities, and in administrative systems through interoperable information systems combined with a strong local governance framework to facilitate coordination and joint planning and implementation at a decentralised level. For example, the Modelling Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection Interventions pilot project in Rwanda (2019-2021)⁹ was able to deliver a package of integrated services to vulnerable households through regular coordination meetings between multiple sector community-level workforces and village coordinators. In addition, effective synergies between programmes often depend on investments in workforce capacities. In Nepal, Female Community Health Volunteers were trained to deliver health and nutrition messages during monthly women's health group meetings, which also reinforced how to access and use the national Child Cash Grant to improve child health and nutrition. The digitalisation of registries can further facilitate synergies between nutrition and social protection at the local community level. For example, in Malawi, the Management Information System (MIS) of the country's flagship social cash transfer programme includes a linkage and referral mechanism that is used by extension workers to facilitate Social



Photo: UNICEF Ethiopia. Ingredients for teaching women to prepare nutritious porridge from local products. Ethiopia, 2015. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Cash Transfer Programme beneficiaries' access to nutrition services. Impact has increased through the combination of use of digitalized information systems and work done to address constraints in supply of services (Ayliffe and Mvula 2019).

What does it take to move from small-scale trials to national systems?

Many countries have put in place well-designed, small-scale programmes at sub-national level that demonstrate these necessary synergies—many of which have led to positive outcomes through well-designed monitoring systems. For example, the evaluation of the Cash and Care Model (nutrition information and case management) applied to the Child Grant under two programmes in one province of Mozambique (2018–2021) found positive changes in multiple child dietary indicators (UNICEF 2022). While many of these programmes have positive impacts on the populations they do reach, sustained changes for the wider population requires the intentional expansion of social protection¹⁰ and nutrition programme coverage reinforced by the adoption of these approaches into national policies, budgets and systems, combined with investments in building synergies between social protection and nutrition across multiple levels. This is particularly relevant in countries facing persistently high levels of child malnutrition.

Many of these small programmes face challenges to scaling up. The shift from small-scale trials to nationwide coverage must be intentional from the outset. This

requires a commitment to documentation and learning, not only regarding results but also in terms of process and willingness to invest in national systems to achieve desired coverage and sustain the necessary programme synergies. Effective, at-scale coverage of a national programme requires building on existing structures and systems as well as joint ownership by the responsible Ministries. Scale-up implies assessments to strengthen spending for investments in both nutrition and social protection sectors, including at local level. Joint advocacy to Ministries of Finance to ensure adequate budget allocations, with options for incremental expansion within a realistic and deliberate financing strategy, is also needed. Bringing a national programme to full scale may not necessarily occur in a linear manner, and opportunities for influencing policy and expanding programmes may arise unexpectedly. These should be seized as soon as they emerge, including during humanitarian crises.

Building synergies with the food system to enhance and sustain access to nutritious foods

Most young children are not fed according to global recommendations. In many contexts, this is driven by lack of availability of and access to nutritious foods (UNICEF 2021). Providing social protection and nutrition services are not necessarily sufficient to address poor nutrition if nutritious and affordable foods are not available at local markets. Therefore, in most contexts, fostering synergies between nutrition and social protection

implies interlinkages with relevant interventions in the food system as well.

Three different types of responses may be relevant to strengthening synergies with the food system, depending on the context. First, in contexts of severe food insecurity, where nutritious foods are not available, it may be necessary to provide a nutritious food supplement in addition to the social transfer to support child diets. Where foods are available on local markets but are still unaffordable, a cash top-up or food voucher may be required. Second, interventions to support sustained access to nutritious foods can include initiatives such as savings and loans schemes, nutrition-sensitive agriculture support, or nutrition-responsive income-generating activities. For example, Burundi's Merankabandi programme (2018–2022),¹¹ supported by the World Bank and UNICEF, covered extremely poor households with regular cash transfers, nutrition education and enrolment in solidarity groups for access to community savings, financial literacy training, agricultural extension and job creation support. Third, in some contexts where there is a proliferation of unregulated sale of unhealthy, low-quality and ultra-processed foods, nutrition information and counselling is necessary but may prove insufficient to improve children's diets without bolstering regulations to support a healthy food environment. This includes measures such as front-of-package labelling, marketing restrictions, public food procurement, school food environments and food-related fiscal policies. Context-specific actions within food systems to support the availability and access to nutritious foods for children are crucial to enhancing and sustaining changes in nutrition.

Putting prevention at the core of social protection and nutrition programming, especially in the context of increasing and compounding shocks

Building synergies between child nutrition and social protection to safeguard nutrition and prevent malnutrition and worsening poverty is crucial in the context of shocks. The increased frequency, diversity¹² and multiplicity of shocks negatively impacts efforts to reduce child poverty and malnutrition (FAO, UNICEF, and WFP 2024). Regardless of the type of shock, preventing malnutrition and

deepening inequalities requires that both social protection and nutrition programmes and systems are made resilient to shocks, are agile, adaptive and able to scale up in response to triggers such as early warning information. This remains a challenge in many countries (O'Brien et al. 2018).

Where national systems are nascent or, in the context of fragile and crisis contexts, suffer from constrained capacity that hinder the expansion of existing national social protection coverage, scaling up may necessitate an approach that combines support for strengthening the national system with a complementary mechanism to meet increased needs. For example, following the further deterioration of the precarious humanitarian situation in Sudan in 2023, the existing national Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus programme evolved into a Humanitarian Cash Transfer modality, yet remains poised to transform back when stability, capacity and security allow. In the Sahel region, the Joint WFP-UNICEF Sahel Social Protection Programme implements a 'twin-track approach' by supporting governments to scale up the delivery of cash transfers through national social protection systems or partners when national systems are overstretched or have limited access due to security constraints. This approach seeks to have a catalytic effect on social protection coverage, by aligning interventions with national systems and providing an operational strategy to expand programmes in capacity- or security-constrained environments.

In the context of shocks, the effective use of trigger mechanisms, based on information from early warning information systems and analysis tools such as the Integrated Phase Classification system, is important. Furthermore, policies and systems that allow for prompt decision-making and finance drawdown mechanisms to allow for increased resource allocations are also important. Where resources have allowed, many countries have demonstrated the capacity to scale up social transfers either horizontally or vertically. For example, the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) provides cash transfers to poor households in counties vulnerable to drought in the arid and semi-arid lands of Northern Kenya. The HSNP expands horizontally to cover additional households during droughts,

following the Vegetation Condition Index, which is funded by the national Catastrophe Deferred Drawdown Option of the National Drought Emergency Fund.¹³ For optimal impact on malnutrition and poverty, these social protection responses must be simultaneously combined with the capacity to scale up preventive nutrition interventions such as the large-scale inclusion of fortified nutritious foods or increased capacity for early detection and referral to services at the community level to ensure that the impact of the shocks on malnutrition are mitigated.

Significant progress has been achieved in building evidence and a better understanding of the pathways to leverage both social protection and nutrition to address persistent malnutrition, food insecurity and poverty. Many governments are putting in place relevant policies that reflect mutually reinforcing commitments across social protection and nutrition. However, to ensure effective delivery at scale at the local level, greater efforts and investments are needed in strengthening workforce capacities, and information systems that underpin convergence of interventions to the poor and most nutritionally vulnerable. Promising practices delivered on a trial basis need to be scaled-up with the necessary rigor and evidence to inform expansion. Intentional synergies and convergence with interventions in the food system, to ensure the availability and access to nutritious foods, remains a priority. In all contexts, policies, resources and decision-making

mechanisms that enable both social protection and nutrition programmes to be scaled up in anticipation of and in response to shocks, are equally critical to prevent the further deterioration of vulnerability and malnutrition. These investments will undoubtedly contribute towards greater impact on addressing malnutrition, poverty, inequalities and ultimately supporting children to grow and develop to their full potential. ●

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Photo: EC/ECHO/Anouk Delafortrie. Malnourished child receives care in the Sahel region. West Africa, 2014. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.



Photo: Marisol Grandon/DFID. A man holding his benefits card outside his home. Kenya, 2011. CC BY 2.0.

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Linking social protection food and health systems to reduce food insecurity and the double burden of malnutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean¹

Santiago Rodas-Moya,² Giulia Baldi³ and Carla Mejía⁴

Despite a slight recent recovery, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) continue to grapple with urgent challenges due to climate change, local and global political and socioeconomic conflicts, and the persistent economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the multi-agency State of Global Food Security and Nutrition report, the rate of moderate to severe food insecurity remains higher than in the years prior to the pandemic. These crises have led to restricted access to food, food inflation and increased rates of food insecurity and malnutrition. Currently, over 206.6 million people (31.3 per cent of the of the population) in LAC experience moderate or severe food insecurity, exceeding the global average of 29 per cent (FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2024).

As a result of these multifaceted crises and food insecurity, LAC faces a paradoxical nutritional situation: both hunger and obesity are on the rise. Hunger affects over 43.4 million people (6.6 per cent of the population), while rates of overweight

and obesity are alarmingly high. At the same time, stunting in children under 5 years of age and iron deficiency anaemia (and other micronutrient deficiencies) in women of reproductive age remain unresolved. This has resulted in the double burden of malnutrition (Figure 1), which significantly impacts LAC countries' annual growth, leading to an annual loss of up to 16.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) due to productivity loss, increased mortality rates, and burden on food and health systems (CEPAL 2020).

Limited access to nutritious foods and the increased consumption of cheap, ultra-processed products (UPPs) and sweetened drinks exacerbate these issues, especially in populations facing poverty (Matos, Adams, and Sabaté 2021; Popkin and Reardon 2018). This is partly due to the prohibitive cost of a healthy diet in LAC, which is the highest globally at USD 4.6 per person per day (FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2024), and the overwhelming availability of UPPs and soft drinks (UNICEF 2023; Popkin and Reardon 2018).

Addressing food insecurity and malnutrition is a challenge in LAC

and requires a multisectoral approach to increase effectiveness. The World Food Programme's Regional Bureau for LAC embarked on a joint research endeavour with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to review existing evidence and frameworks to assess how social protection systems (SPSs) and programmes, in conjunction with food, health, and education systems, can contribute to food security and nutrition (FSN). The evidence has also been used to develop a policy and operational framework to systematically guide policymakers and programme implementers in designing robust, nutrition-sensitive social protection policies and programmes with a systems integration approach encompassing food, health and education systems.

Methodological approach

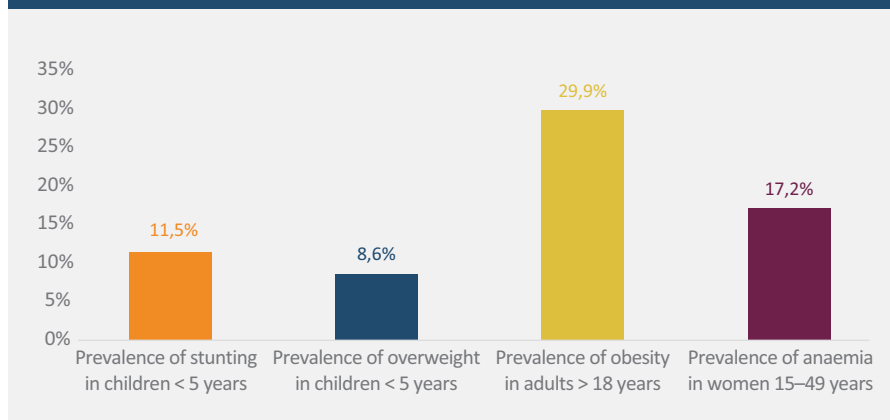
A team of experts in social protection, nutrition, food systems, policy, and programme design and implementation was assembled.⁵ The evidence review adopted a 4-step approach as described by Nisbett (2022) in Figure 2.

Main outcomes

The reviewed social protection programmes (SPPs) primarily focused on reducing poverty and improving women's empowerment. Some, such as school feeding programmes, also served as platforms to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. However, conditional cash transfer programmes were the most studied type of SPP in LAC, followed by school feeding programmes and health insurance. Notably, despite the link between extreme poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition, few studies focused on nutritional outcomes (Nisbett et al. 2022).

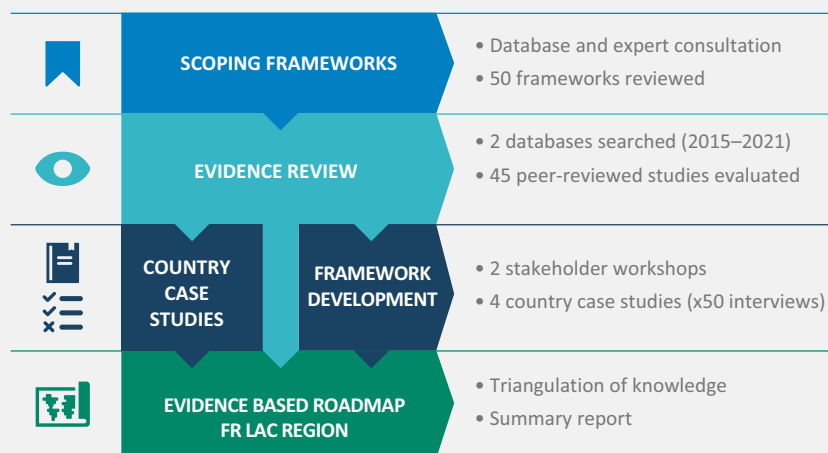
The few studies that reported nutrition outcomes primarily emphasised

FIGURE 1: The double burden of malnutrition in LAC



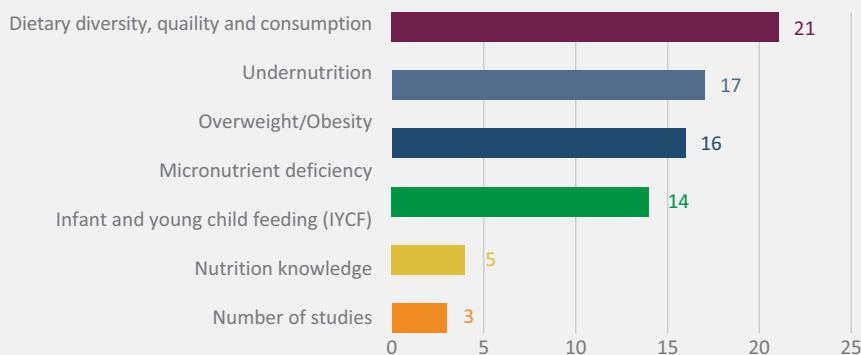
Source: Authors' elaboration based on FAO, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO (2024).

FIGURE 2: Summary of processes for data collection and reporting



Source: Nisbett (2022).

FIGURE 3: Summary of nutritional outcomes found in the studies shown in percentages and numbers



Source: Authors' elaboration.

TABLE 1: Summary of positive and negative outcomes of SPPs in food security and nutrition identified in the revised literature



POSITIVE OUTCOMES

- Improved purchasing power—more food security
- Increased household resources—purchase of higher quality foods
- Increased access to health services
- Increased female bargaining power and empowerment
- Increased access to nutrient-dense foods
- Improved nutrition knowledge and cooking skills



NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

- Increased purchasing power—purchase unhealthy foods (UPPs, soft drinks, and alcohol)
- Externalities—unhealthy food environments

Source: Authors' elaboration.

undernutrition in children under five years of age, diet diversity and quantity for school-aged children, or dietary diversity measured at the household level, ignoring the double burden of malnutrition. To a lesser extent, the studies reported outcomes such as infant and young child feeding practices and nutritional knowledge (Nisbett et al. 2022, Nisbett 2022). Figure 3 summarises the number of studies that reported each nutritional outcome.

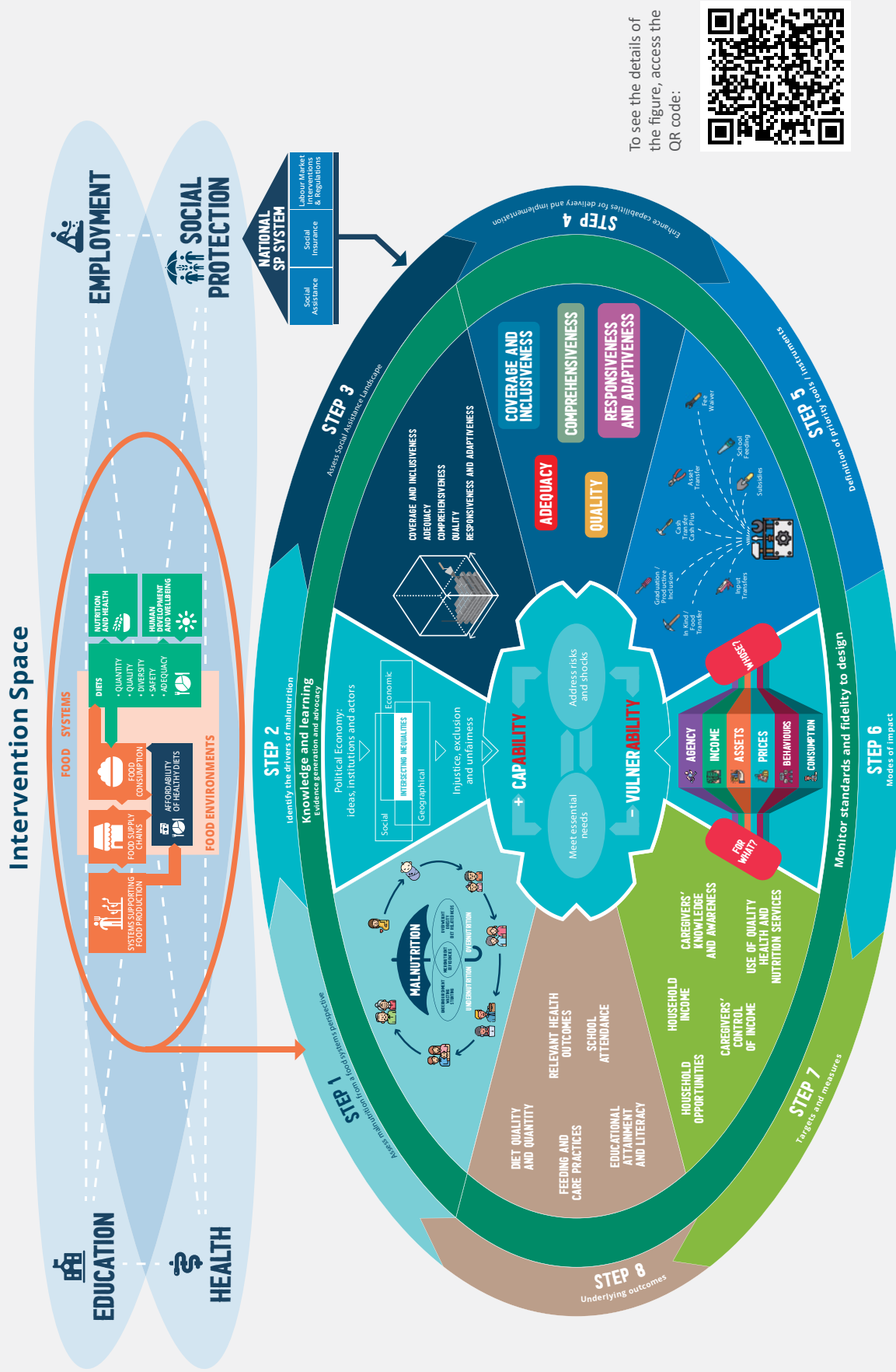
The analysis found that SPPs can increase individual and household income and consumption choices by improving food access, availability, and nutritional knowledge through social and behavioural change communication. However, in some cases, the increase in household income resulted in an increased consumption of UPPs, soft drinks, and other undesirable products. Table 1 summarises the most salient positive and negative outcomes.

Overall, the review found that an integrated approach to creating a comprehensive support system, involving SPPs alongside other health, education and nutrition programmes is lacking. Additionally, a significant factor influencing a programme's success is its relevance to the local context. It is crucial to design programmes tailored to national, regional, and local sociocultural dynamics. For example, understanding and addressing the unique challenges, barriers, and empowerment opportunities faced by indigenous women, including their distinct languages, cultural practices and eating habits, are essential to effectively achieving FSN and health outcomes.

Key issues in SPP design and implementation

SPPs have the potential to improve the FSN of vulnerable groups. However, this analysis identified four shortcomings that can limit their impact: (1) failure to address the double burden of malnutrition in their design; (2) lack of or inadequate design of impact pathways, which hinders the identification of activities leading to positive or negative outcomes; (3) insufficient monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) systems, which challenge effective programme management and delivery; and (4) insufficient integration with other systems, particularly food and health systems.

FIGURE 4: Operational framework for nutrition-sensitive social protection programming



Note: To see the details of the figure, visit: <https://socialprotection.org/sites/default/files/PIF-Art7Figure4.pdf>.

Source: Nisbett et al. 2022.

To address these shortcomings, two conceptual frameworks were developed: a policy framework for high-level decision-making and an operational framework for guiding the design and implementation of nutrition-sensitive SPPs. Both frameworks were based on the review’s findings and the growing body of evidence in the social protection and nutrition field.

This article presents the operational framework, a useful tool that supports programme design, delivery, and MEL. It provides concrete guidelines for translating policy into action to achieve nutrition and social protection goals, including addressing poverty, social exclusion, food security, and the double burden of malnutrition among vulnerable groups throughout their life cycle.

The operational framework

The operational framework (Figure 4) consists of eight steps that involve assessing all forms of malnutrition and identifying its root causes. It also guides the exploration of the architecture of the SPSs and SPPs, the available social protection instruments, and the potential modes of impact to improve intermediate and long-term outcomes. The framework employs a systems integration approach that encompasses SPSs, health, food, and education systems and provides insights for constructing an effective MEL system. Below, the eight steps are explored in more detail.

Step 1 involves assessing the double burden of malnutrition across the population’s lifespan and identifying the underlying causes. These causes include, among others, the food environment’s

influences on food choices—such as pricing and retail settings—which impacts dietary diversity. Other underlying causes of malnutrition include limited access to antenatal care and support for infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices, and safe water. Additionally, this step should include an in-depth analysis of the intervention space, including potential and actual interactions with food, health, social protection, and education systems and/or programmes, and all forms of malnutrition across the population’s life cycle. This analysis helps conceptualise a comprehensive nutrition-sensitive social protection programme with a systems integration approach, aimed at effectively improving social, nutritional and health outcomes.

Step 2 focuses on identifying the root causes of malnutrition, including social exclusion and marginalisation. These often result from intersecting forms of socioeconomic and geographic inequalities limiting people’s capabilities to meet their needs and address the risks and shocks they face. These diagnoses are crucial to understanding how SPPs can be used as equity levers to improve FSN.

Step 3 involves exploring the social assistance landscape and identifying gaps in coverage, inclusiveness, adequacy, comprehensiveness, quality, responsiveness, and adaptiveness (see Table 2 for definitions).

When these dimensions are considered for programme design, they can improve social protection and FSN outcomes more effectively.

Table 2: Dimensions and definitions of social protection programmes

Dimension	Definition
Coverage and inclusiveness	Coverage across populations and different population groups, particularly the most vulnerable
Adequacy	Do payments and transfers adequately address living standards and (rising) costs?
Comprehensiveness	Which needs and risks are covered by benefits and services
Quality	Are people represented, participating in programme design and evaluation and able to hold programme implementers to account for effective programmes? How do MEL systems ensure this?
Responsiveness and adaptiveness	Resilience and capacity to respond to people’s changing needs, risks and vulnerabilities

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

“Addressing food insecurity and malnutrition is a challenge in LAC and requires a multisectoral approach to increase effectiveness.”

“ It is crucial to design programmes tailored to national, regional, and local sociocultural dynamics.



Photo: Kendra Helmer/USAID. A man sorts peanuts to produce nutritious peanut butter that combats malnutrition. Haiti, 2011. CC BY-NC 2.0.

Step 4 involves applying the dimensions listed in Table 2 to design programme parameters, such as target beneficiaries, timeliness and frequency of support, linkages to services, complaints and feedback mechanisms, and MEL systems. Additionally, other considerations may also emerge when delineating the programme's impact pathway, and these should be taken into account to ensure programme quality.

Step 5 focuses on evaluating the characteristics of various social protection instruments and programmes, including benefits or transfer modalities such as cash transfers, in-kind food distribution, school feeding programmes, and others displayed in Figure 4. This evaluation explores their pros and cons for addressing the needs and risks of targeted population groups, considering the potential benefits they can provide.

Step 6 involves identifying the potential modes of impact that the programmes may have on the target populations. In Figure 4, 'agency' is placed at the top, highlighting the centrality of supporting the ability of poor and marginalised individuals to make their own choices and act independently. Agency is a key goal and is enhanced through various forms of support, such as assets, income, price adjustments, consumption or behaviour change towards specific goals. It is also essential to determine who the impacts are intended for, as this has crucial implications for implementation and MEL,

including evaluating nutritional outcomes attributable to those impacts.

Step 7 identifies intermediate targets and measurements for the types of impacts selected in Step 6. This step is crucial for building the knowledge and learning base by establishing key indicators to assess programme performance and fidelity to design, inform programme management, and improve effectiveness.

Step 8 highlights the importance of measuring the expected programme outcomes to assess whether the interventions are having the desired impact. These outcomes will depend directly on the programme objectives and may include aspects such as dietary diversity, nutrition and health, school attendance, education outcomes, and others.

The eight steps guide programme practitioners in a logical sequence for programme design and implementation, and for constructing an effective programme impact pathway.

There is a complex interplay between poverty reduction, economic stability, FSN, and health. While SPPs have the potential to alleviate poverty and improve access to food, their effectiveness heavily depends on a robust programme design based on a situational analysis, which includes a nuanced understanding of local contexts and the multifaceted nature of malnutrition. Using tools for programme design, such as the proposed

operational framework, is paramount for creating robust programmes and understanding how activities lead to outputs and intermediate and long-term outcomes.

This research also underscores the critical need for integrated and multi-sectoral approaches that align social protection with health, education and food systems. Such alignment is essential to holistically address the dual burden of malnutrition across the population's life cycle and foster sustainable economic prosperity. By integrating these systems, we can create synergies that enhance the effectiveness of interventions, ensuring that they are more comprehensive and impactful. For example, social protection programmes can be designed not only to provide financial support but also to improve access to nutritious foods, healthcare and education. This holistic approach can help break the cycle of poverty and malnutrition, leading to better health outcomes and increased economic productivity.

Strengthening local food systems is also a critical component of programme design. It ensures that communities have access to affordable, nutritious food, which is vital for maintaining good health, preventing malnutrition, and improving local economies. FAO reported that agri-food systems employed approximately 1.23 billion individuals worldwide (FAO 2023), highlighting the significant linkages between food systems, labour and



Photo: EC/ECHO/I.COELLO. A woman beneficiary of humanitarian aid. Colombia, 2012. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“ This research also underscores the critical need for integrated and multi-sectoral approaches that align social protection with health, education and food systems.

nutrition. Similarly, the synergy between SPSSs, food systems and education systems is crucial, especially in the context of school feeding programmes that serve over 80 million children in LAC (Inter-American Development Bank 2023). School feeding programmes not only provide essential nutrition to children but also encourage school attendance and improve educational outcomes. These programmes can be leveraged to deliver nutrition education, promote healthy eating habits, and address micronutrient deficiencies, thereby contributing to the overall well-being and development of children.

We believe adopting the proposed framework offers a significant opportunity to enhance social protection policies and programmes, improve FSN outcomes and bolster the well-being and resilience of communities across the LAC region. ●

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Connecting meal quality and children's diets: Unlocking the multiple benefits of school meals through the data chain¹

Aulo Gelli²

Malnutrition³ during childhood and early adolescence has long-term consequences for development and health, and for girls, it can affect the survival and well-being of their children (Norris et al. 2022). Inadequate diets during these formative years can contribute to deficiencies that affect brain structure and function (Bryan et al. 2004). Diet-related risk factors are estimated to account for 20 per cent of global mortality (Afshin et al. 2019). Obesity prevalence in children and adolescents has increased from less than 1 per cent in 1975 to 6 per cent for girls and 8 per cent for boys in 2016 (NCD-RisC 2017). Changes in food systems have led to a rapid shift toward unhealthy diets and reduced physical activity, contributing to the increase in rates of overweight and obesity (Popkin et al. 2020). Moreover, current dietary and population trends will exacerbate risks for both humans and the planet (Willett et al. 2019).

School feeding programmes, or school meals, are a widely implemented safety nets with documented impacts across social protection, education, health and nutrition dimensions (Alderman et al. 2024). Globally, these programmes reach over 418 million children with a total investment of USD 48 billion annually (World Food Programme 2022). As school meal programmes operate in nearly every country, they provide a platform to reach school-age children at scale (Hawkes et al. 2020). Moreover, by being most effective for most disadvantaged children, school meal programmes can “level the playing field” in education, health, and nutrition (Bundy et al. 2018).

Experiences in high- and middle-income countries, including over half a century of programming in the USA and more recent experiences in large-scale programmes in Brazil and India, link school meals to

food system transformation, where food procurement for school meals is used as an outlet for commercial farmers (FAO 2021). National governments in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have also shown interest in explicitly linking food system transformation with the school feeding market through ‘home-grown school feeding’ (HGSF) (Espejo and Galliano 2009). In HGSF, the ‘structured demand’ for school food and related services is channelled to smallholders and other supply chain actors to stimulate agricultural productivity, increase incomes, improve diets, and reduce food insecurity (FAO, ABC and UFRGS 2021).

However, there is limited rigorous evidence on the effects of participation in school meal programmes on smallholders (Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler 2011). The evidence on the effects of school meals on school-age children's diets and food-related behaviours is also thin. Additionally, there are gaps in methods, measurement, and data on diets and nutrition of school-age children (Kupka et al. 2020). Furthermore, while school meals programmes are increasingly designed to include objectives related to environmental boundaries and sustainability, these links have yet to be extensively studied (Singh and Fernandes 2018).

Crucially, the body of evidence on the effectiveness of school meals highlights that the link between them and the potential benefits across social protection, education, health and nutrition, agriculture, and the environment depends on the quality of school meals as actually delivered to school children (Alderman et al. 2024). In other words, the quality of implementation is key. In practice, there are significant gaps and challenges in programme design and delivery, including gaps in the data on the quality of school meals

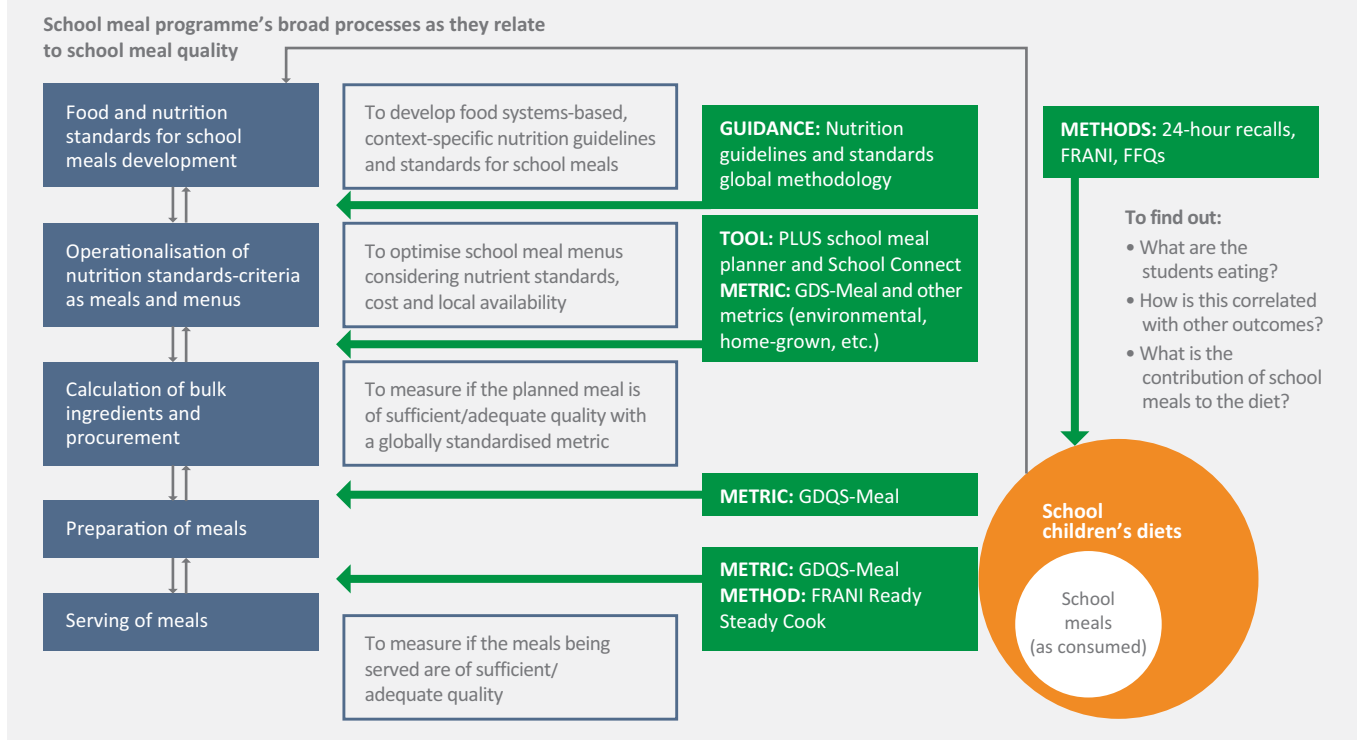
programmes as planned and as actually delivered, as well as on the diets of school children. Addressing these data gaps has the potential to catalyse programme implementation and improve cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Linking school meal quality and children's diets

Designing and implementing school meal programmes that focus on the quality of children's diets broadly involves the following steps (see Figure 1). First, clear food and nutrition standards must be established for school meal service delivery. Standards typically include food- and nutrient-based targets. Food-based targets build on food-based dietary guidelines designed to promote healthy food choices (WHO 2021), while nutrient-based approaches involve the use of nutrient reference values (NRV) used to assess the adequacy of intake in population groups and design interventions to address gaps (Allen et al. 2019). In addition, standards can also include targets for food safety, costs, smallholder sourcing, and environmental sustainability. In practice, this process requires cross-sectoral coordination in planning and implementation to manage the complex trade-offs involved (Bundy et al. 2009).

Once standards are set, the next step is to operationalise them through school meal menus. This involves building recipes based on nutritious foods that reflect local preferences, acceptability, preparation time, and costs (Fernandes et al. 2016). It includes developing a food list and database with information on food composition and food groupings, seasonal availability, food prices, transportation and storage costs, and cooking facilities. Key considerations also include food safety measures and equipment (e.g., refrigeration), metrics on viability of smallholder sourcing,

FIGURE 1: Stylised view of key school meal planning and implementation processes as they relate to meal quality and children’s diet, and example metrics and methods for measurement



Notes: GDQS: Global Diet Quality Score; FFQ, Food frequency; FRANI, Food Recognition and Nudging Insights.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on IFPRI, Intake, FAO, U. of Ghana (2022).

and environmental footprint. When completed, these menus and meal plans can also provide the basis for optimisation analysis, where linear programming is used to identify solutions that balance the different dimensions covered by the meal quality standards (Eustachio Colombo et al. 2019). Once reviewed and validated by nutritionists and other programme specialists, the menus and meal plans can be operationalised and integrated into the school meal programme implementation. This process typically involves calculating sourcing requirements for food procurement as well as training supply chain actors, including training school caterers and cooks, to ensure effective meal preparation and distribution.

The final key step in the school meal design and implementation cycle centres on monitoring the quality of the meal service provision, including meal frequency, quality and quantity. In practice, this requires daily data collection at both the school (e.g., from cooks and caterers) and child levels

(e.g., meal receipt, quantity and quality of food received). Feedback on programme delivery quality can then be used to address potential service disruptions.

In practice, however, there is a major gap in the data collection and analysis of school meal programme delivery, largely due to the costs and complexity of data collection and analysis. These challenges are further compounded when programmes require evidence on the contribution of school meals to daily food and nutrient intake.⁴ Without this data, addressing programme challenges—such as implementation gaps, changes in prices due to inflation or seasonality, or food safety issues—becomes difficult to manage in a timely and efficient manner.

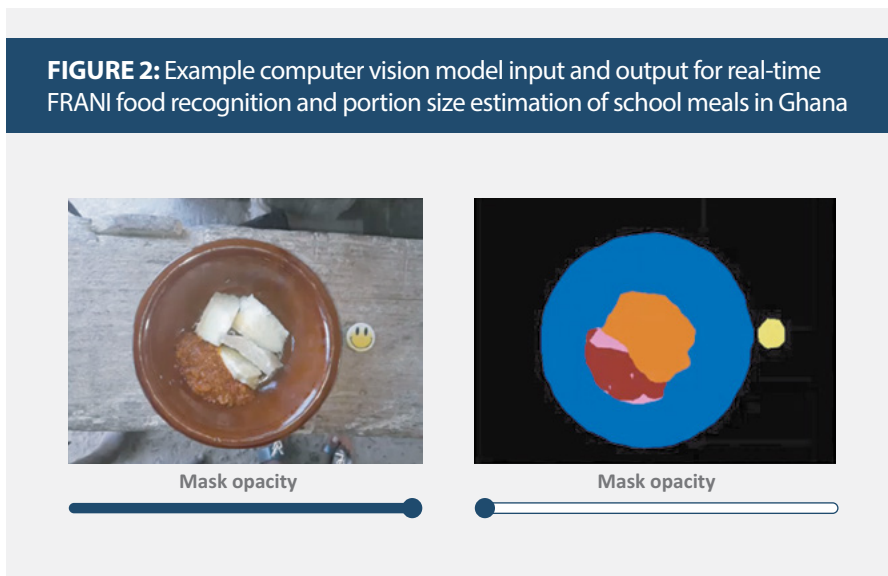
Innovations in school meal planning, metrics and measurement

Designing and implementing effective school meals hinges on a programme’s ability to consistently deliver high-quality service every school day to all targeted children. However, assessing the

quality of meals as delivered daily using traditional data collection methods is complex and costly. In practice, there is limited published data on the quality of the daily service delivery across different programmes and contexts.

Recent innovations offer enormous potential to address these constraints and catalyse system transformation. One notable advancement is a renewed emphasis on balancing nutritional quality with environmental bounds in school meals programmes. Studies have highlighted the enormous potential of linear optimisation techniques to rationalize school meal programme design, managing multiple objectives across nutrition and agriculture while considering environmental boundaries (Eustacchio Colombo et al. 2020). Several approaches and tools have been developed to assist programme implementers in this process. Optimisation has led to planned menus that not only reduce budgets and meet food- and nutrient-based targets (WFP 2024), but also decrease the programme’s

“ Designing and implementing effective school meals hinges on a programme’s ability to consistently deliver high-quality service every school day to all targeted children.



Source: Author’s elaboration.

environmental footprint (Eustacchio Colombo et al. 2020).

Second, efforts have been made to develop indicators for school meal quality that build on diet quality metrics in school-age children and can be used to provide meaningful comparisons across contexts. The Global Diet Quality Score-Meal and Menu metrics (GDQS-Meal and GDQS-Menu) were developed to provide comprehensive information on the quality of meals in institutional settings, including schools (Bell et al. 2023). These metrics were designed to be low-cost, robust, and appropriate for use across different countries and contexts. They can be used to provide a score for both meal plans and meals as prepared and served to school children.

Third, there have been developments in the use of mobile technology to reduce data collection costs. For example, the PlantVillage Food Recognition Assistance and Nudging Insights (FRANI) app can recognise foods, estimate nutrient content and provide feedback in real-time based on a photo taken with a mobile phone. Evidence generated in rigorous validation studies shows that FRANI can estimate food and nutrient intake as accurately as a dietician undertaking a dietary assessment at a fraction of the cost of traditional methods (Folson et al. 2023; Nguyen et al. 2022). A pilot validation study with the Ghana School Feeding Programme supported

by the World Food Programme (WFP) suggests that PlantVillage FRANI dietary assessment is also valid in school-age children and can provide feedback on meal quality in real-time (see Figure 2). Leveraging these new technologies to provide timely and accurate data on programme performance has the potential to enhance public programme accountability and improve cost-efficiency and effectiveness, although this remains an important area of ongoing research.

In conclusion, school meal programmes are effective investments that, when implemented with high-quality, can deliver benefits across multiple domains and level the playing field for disadvantaged children (Kristjansson et al. 2007). We now have the tools to ensure that high-quality school meal programmes are designed and delivered to maximise their benefits for schoolchildren, as well as potentially for smallholder farmers and the broader community. ●

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2. International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

3. 'Malnutrition' refers to deficiencies or excesses in an individual's intake. See: <[t.ly/trDaR](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tjnut.2023.06.001)>.

4. If the focus of the programme is on improving diets, assessing dietary intake at the child level may also be required, as in the case for impact evaluations.

“... school meal programmes are effective investments that, when implemented with high-quality, can deliver benefits across multiple domains and level the playing field for disadvantaged children.”

School meals: Multiplying benefits for people and planet

The Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition

For over a century, school meal programmes have been recognised for their role in alleviating chronic poverty and food insecurity among low-income populations. Recently, however, both wealthy and developing countries have come to see them as a robust social safety net. These programmes have enormous potential to protect vulnerable populations during crises, contribute to long-term human capital development, and drive progress towards a healthier planet.

In response to the Food, Fuel, and Financial (FFF) Crisis of 2008, low-income countries leveraged World Bank emergency agricultural funds to expand the coverage of national school meal programmes, aiming to improve social assistance, health, nutrition, education, and human capital. Soon after, middle- and high-income countries began to follow suit using their own domestic financing. In 2009, the World Bank and the World Food Programme (WFP) published “Rethinking School Feeding: Social Safety Nets, Child Development, and the Education Sector,” which triggered a paradigm shift towards a new way of understanding the role of school meals as a social safety net (Bundy et al. 2009). For the first time, school meals were recognised not only as an intervention to combat hunger but also as a long-term investment in a nation’s future prosperity.

As economic recession following the 2008 FFF Crisis affected countries worldwide, high-income countries such as Spain, Italy and Scotland expanded their school meals programmes specifically as a social protection measure between 2009 and 2010. The insights from *Rethinking School Feeding* were so influential that it was translated into five languages. Some countries, including China, adopted comprehensive school health and nutrition programmes in recognition of the long-term benefits of investing in their school-age children (Schultz and Bundy 2022). In January 2020, WFP reported record levels

of global school meal coverage, with 388 million children receiving a meal at school every day (WFP 2020). Countries saw an economic return of between USD 7 and USD 35 for every USD 1 invested in these programmes (Verguet et al. 2020).

Twelve years after the 2008 FFF Crisis, the world faced another major upheaval with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Governments around the globe responded by closing their schools to curb the spread of the virus. In some regions, such as Uganda and the Philippines, schools remained closed for over two years.

What followed was the largest education crisis in history, accompanied by an equally devastating crisis in child health and wellbeing. The closure of schools revealed the crucial role they played in providing social safety nets. Overnight, 370 million children lost their daily school meal, which was often only guaranteed meal of the day (WFP 2023). In some countries, the absence of school obligations led to girls being forced into early marriages in exchange for money to support their families, whose incomes had been drastically reduced by lockdown measures (UNICEF 2021). Similarly, boys who had been in school were pushed into the workforce, with many never returning to education, therefore radically altering the trajectory of their future (ILO and UNICEF 2021).

The COVID-19 prompted a substantial global response as countries developed strategies to recover from the pandemic’s impact on their children. At the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, several governments announced their decision to form the global School Meals Coalition (SMC), in the shared understanding that investing in their national school meals programme is an investment in their nation’s future (School Meals Coalition, n.d.). As the largest global coalition to emerge from COVID-19, the SMC now includes 103 governments, representing 63 per cent of the global population. These nations are committed to strengthening

their national school health and nutrition programmes, with the goal of ensuring that every child, everywhere, has access to a nutritious meal at school by 2030.

To support the SMC in this ambitious target, member states called for the creation of a dedicated Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition as its first initiative. Endorsed by five major UN agencies focusing on child health, nutrition, education, and well-being (WFP 2021), the Research Consortium was established in 2021 to provide independent, credible evidence and programmatic guidance to SMC member states on the design, cost, implementation, and impact of school health and nutrition programmes.

The Research Consortium operates as a global network-of-networks of academic partners and institutions, coordinated by a small Secretariat hosted by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). Research is conducted through global Communities of Practice (CoPs) of world experts in school health and nutrition, each focusing on a thematic area which corresponds to evidence gaps identified by SMC member states. Currently, the six operational CoPs focus on the following research areas:

- i. *Impact & Evidence*: Assessing the impact of school-based health interventions on key development outcomes through systematic reviews.
- ii. *Analytics and Metrics*: Estimating the value-for-money of school health interventions and their impact on educational outcomes.
- iii. *Good Examples*: Documenting best practices from national school meal programmes across all SMC member countries.
- iv. *Nutrition*: Creating and curating evidence on the nutrition of school-aged children and adolescents, and identifying key nutrition indicators for these age groups.

- v. *Diet & Food Systems*: Examining the relationships across school meals, diet and food systems, and their connections to climate, biodiversity, the environment, and food sovereignty.
- vi. *Early Career Researchers & Young Scientists Network*: Establishing a platform for early career researchers and youth who have an interest in school health and nutrition.

Additionally, a seventh CoP, led by researchers in Brazil, is currently being developed to explore the use of Artificial Intelligence in designing school meal programmes.

To complement the evidence generated by these Communities of Practice, the Research Consortium Secretariat has collaborated with SMC partners, such as the World Bank, to document the intersectionality of issues related to school meals, complementary school-based health interventions, and development. This collaboration includes: an assessment of the uptake of the World Bank's Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) policy tool in low- and lower-middle-income countries, aiming at guiding the design of their national school-based health and nutrition programmes (Schultz et al. 2004); a review of the school meals evidence base in Alderman, Bundy, and Gelli (2024), and a joint paper with the World Bank Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice on the role of school meals as the world's most extensive safety net (Bundy et al. 2024).

The Research Consortium benefits from the support of philanthropic foundations, development partners, and the goodwill of the SMC member states. Committed to equitable partnerships, the Consortium directs the majority of its funding to academic institutions worldwide to lead the research. Meanwhile, the Consortium's Secretariat coordinates activities, convenes global and regional workshops, and helps ensure the quality of outputs. Additionally, the Research Consortium translates research findings into policy insights to support decision-making in this area. Guided by a 10-year research strategy, the Consortium aligns its efforts with the SMC's ultimate goal of achieving universal school meals by 2030.

Encouragingly, in 2022, the combined efforts of the SMC led to a report by the WFP that global school meals coverage has now surpassed pre-pandemic levels, with a staggering 418 million children now receiving a meal at school every day (WFP 2023).

Recently, there has been increasing discussion among SMC member states about exploring the potential of school meals not only as an investment in children's futures, but also as a unique opportunity to drive the transformation of sustainable food systems. Currently, food systems account for a third of all human-induced greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, meaning that the very systems providing our food are also contributing to environmental challenges.

As one of the most extensive subsections of the global public food system, school meal programmes could be instrumental in driving transformation towards healthier and more sustainable food production and consumption. Despite their broad global reach, these programmes are overwhelmingly financed and managed at the national level. This means that policy levers are in the hands of governments, providing a unique opportunity for rapid and significant change at scale.

To help governments identify the most effective policy actions, the Research Consortium's *Diet & Food Systems* CoP produced an evidence-based white paper in 2023 titled "School Meals and Food Systems: Rethinking the consequences for climate, environment, biodiversity and food sovereignty" (Pastorino et al. 2023).

Led by a research team based at LSHTM, in collaboration with 167 experts from 84 organisations worldwide, the white paper uses original mathematical modelling analyses and over 40 case studies to estimate the potential impact of school meal policy changes on both health and the environment across different income settings. It highlights two key policy areas where governments can effect change:

1. **Immediate changes to school meal programmes**: Policies aimed at making improvements to school meals can benefit all young people. Depending on the local demographics, these changes will impact between 15 per cent and 38 per cent of the population in high- and low-resource settings, respectively. The paper identifies four priority areas for achieving the most significant effects on population and planetary health: Menu design, energy use, waste management, and food education. Particularly, equipping children with the tools and understanding needed for a healthy, planet-friendly meal during their formative years helps empower them as *agents of change* in the future.
2. **Demand-driven policies through procurement**: School meal programmes can harness procurement to drive food system transformation. By creating demand for ecologically sustainable foods from local farm



Photo: Lúcio Bernardo Jr/Agência Brasília. Children receive school meals. Brazil, 2023. CC BY 2.0.

“ For over a century, school meal programmes have been recognised for their role in alleviating chronic poverty and food insecurity among low-income populations. Recently, however, both wealthy and developing country have come to see them as a robust social safety net.

systems, these programmes can stimulate regenerative agricultural practices that promote biodiversity, resilience, and food sovereignty.

These policy insights were presented by members of the white paper’s oversight team at the COP28 climate conference in Dubai in December 2023. Kenya became the first SMC country to announce its intention to act on these insights, declaring its commitment to provide nourishing, planet-friendly meals to 10 million children by 2030, an increase from the current 2.3 million children being reached. This was soon followed by commitments from Sierra Leone and Rwanda, who announced their own plans to implement planet-friendly policies when scaling up their national school meals programmes.

To support these efforts, the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition is developing a dedicated a toolbox of existing policy and programmatic tools to assist with the design of school meal programmes that offer significant co-benefits for both people and the planet. Additionally, the Consortium is providing tailored support to countries that have expressed their intention to implement such programmes by producing actionable, evidence-based guidance reflective of local contexts.

As the world continues to face numerous compounded global crises, including climate shocks, conflict, COVID-19, and rising costs of food and fuel, sustainable solutions to safeguard the future of young people are more important than ever. The Research Consortium remains dedicated to supporting countries in developing robust school health and nutrition policies that enhance nutrition, health, education, wellbeing, human capital, and environmental outcomes for school-age children and adolescents. To this end, an Annual Research Statement summarising the policy implications of emerging research in this area is presented to policymakers at the annual SMC Ministerial Meeting every October.

For more information about the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, visit <www.lshtm.ac.uk/shn or e-mail shnconsortium@lshtm.ac.uk>. ●

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The importance of addressing gendered vulnerabilities to food security through gender-transformative social protection

Maja Gavrilovic and Tia Palermo¹

Vulnerability to food insecurity is gendered. Although women play a key role in ensuring food security and nutrition at household and community levels, they are affected by food insecurity at higher rates than men (FAO et al., 2022). This heightened vulnerability has intergenerational effects, as women's malnutrition directly impacts the health and nutrition of children born to them and those under their care. Women's greater risks of food insecurity and malnutrition are driven by systemic gender inequalities and structural factors (Gavrilovic et al., 2023). Due to discriminatory norms and socio-economic structures, women often have lower rates of employment, reduced access to and control over land and productive assets, reduced access to extension and financial services, and greater unpaid care work burdens (Ahmed et al., August 2023). These gender inequalities prevent women from realising their full productive potential and income security, while reducing their ability to meet their own and children's food and dietary needs.

There is increasing recognition that social protection can be designed in gender-transformative ways to help address root causes of gender inequality and empower women and girls. In turn, this would contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to ending poverty (SDG 1) and food security and improved nutrition (SDG2) (FAO, 2023).

Using the four pillars of the food security and nutrition framework—² availability, access, utilisation and stability—in this article we discuss conceptual and practical linkages between gender-transformative social protection and food security and nutrition. We also present some brief evidence of the transformative impacts of social protection on different dimensions of food security and nutrition.

What do we mean by gender-transformative social protection?

Gender-transformative approaches to social protection address discriminatory gender norms and unequal social and economic structures that limit women's work opportunities, social status, and control over resources, and disproportionately burden them with care responsibilities. Through these actions, gender-transformative social protection programming can strengthen women's economic advancement and agency necessary to overcome poverty and food insecurity.

Gender transformative social protection builds on three key principles. First, women's empowerment—the process of supporting women in acquiring resources and agency to make and enact strategic choices—is key to gender equality and food security and nutrition outcomes. Women's empowerment has beneficial impacts on maternal and child nutrition, as women who are empowered are better able to influence decisions related to health and nutrition (Van den Bold et al., 2013). Conversely, one form of disempowerment, namely intimate partner violence experienced by women, is linked to poor child growth and nutrition outcomes (Yount et al., 2011). Second, gender transformative social protection can be promoted at the individual, household and macro levels (Gavrilovic et al., 2023). At the individual and household levels, social protection interventions can empower women and girls to defy discriminatory norms and gender stereotypes. It can also help them build assets (human capital and productive assets) and capabilities to exercise strategic choices and decisions related to work, schooling, time use, and resource allocations. At the macro level, social protection policies and legislation can promote change at scale by addressing structural gender biases to reduce risks that women face in labour markets and

in their access to social security and social services. Third, carefully planned engagement of men and boys is key to promoting gender-transformative changes, enhancing women's socioeconomic status, and ultimately improving gender equitable outcomes in food security and nutrition (Gavrilovic et al., 2023).

What is the nexus between food security and nutrition and gender-transformative social protection?

Availability of food: Although in many settings, women are key producers of food, they often face systemic discrimination regarding the control of productive resources, including land and water, credit, and financial services necessary to optimise food production (FAO, 2023). Inequitable gender attitudes and stereotypes regarding the economic roles and high care-related workloads of women further increase their time poverty and reduce their capacity to grow food and achieve food security. Cash and asset transfers targeting women, and care services can directly reduce these gender gaps by providing women with financial means and more dedicated time to invest in food production. Cash and complementary services, including financial inclusion and livestock extension services, can help women to accumulate assets (e.g., land, livestock, productive tools, and fertiliser), generate savings, and make smart business investments. Control over resources can also enhance women's bargaining power and agency to make autonomous, strategic decisions regarding food production and household dietary diversity.

A recent review and meta-analysis underscored how social protection, especially in the form of cash transfers, unconditional cash transfers and social care services, can improve women's decision-making processes and agency across economic and social domains (Peterman et al., 2024). Even without explicitly

targeting gender equality outcomes, some programmes can still have positive impacts on women's economic achievement and agency. However, tweaking programme design to make social assistance programmes more gender-transformative can potentially have even larger, more sustainable impacts on gender equality outcomes and reductions in poverty and food insecurity. For example, programmes can promote women's financial inclusion and address discriminatory sociocultural norms and attitudes in communities towards women's roles as economic agents and food producers. Finally, social protection legislation and complementary policies can be used to address structural inequalities faced by women in food production, including the right to inherit land and property and/or have access to natural resources, such as land, water and forests.

Access to food: Gender discrimination in the labour market, including gender pay gaps, or structural barriers to increasing food productivity and accessing food markets may constrain women's opportunity to generate sufficient and regular income and afford adequate diets. Even when women earn money, they still may have limited say in household decisions related to spending and distribution of food.

Cash transfers can directly increase households' purchasing power to diversify food choices and increase caloric intake (Hidrobo et al., 2018). A recent review of social safety nets in Africa found some limited positive effects on women and girls' individual food security and nutrition outcomes (Peterman et al., December 2019). Programmes can adopt specific design features, such as designating women as cash recipients and delivering money through digital mechanisms to increase women's ability to control the use of cash transfers. An impact evaluation of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) found that depositing women's wages from public works into their private bank accounts and providing them with training in account use resulted in significant gains in women's financial autonomy and involvement in decision-making over earnings (Field et al. 2021). This change, in turn, enhanced their

participation in the labour market and led to progressive shifts in women's work-related norms. Similarly, an evaluation of a cash transfer pilot in Niger found that women who received their money electronically increased household dietary diversity and children's meal consumption more than those who relied on manual payments (Aker et al., 2016).

Utilisation of food: Food utilisation depends on people's biological capacity to absorb food and nutrients, which is in turn determined by having adequate access to nutritious food, quality care practices, a clean-living environment, access to safe water and quality healthcare (UNICEF, 2021). While the evidence is generally limited on social protection impacting changes in long-term nutritional status for women and girls (Peterman et al., December 2019), programmes such as cash transfers and fee waivers can enable women to obtain necessary micronutrients and healthcare, diversify their diets, obtain safe water and hygiene facilities, and access social health and care services necessary for improving food utilisation outcomes.

In Ghana, the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) 1000 programme aimed to reduce stunting and malnutrition among children within the first 1,000 days of life. The programme targeted pregnant and lactating women in households and provided them with unconditional cash transfers and premium fee waivers for enrolment into the National Health

Insurance Scheme. It increased women's empowerment as measured by savings (Peterman et al., 2022), social support (de Milliano et al., 2021), and enrolment into health insurance (Palermo et al., 2019), which is expected to increase access to services. Additionally, LEAP 1000 also led to a decrease in intimate partner violence (Peterman et al., 2022) and increased children's birthweight (Quinones et al., 2023), an important mediator of subsequent childhood nutrition outcomes.

Simultaneous responsibilities in reproductive and productive activities may limit women's time and optimal investments in breastfeeding and other nutrition-related care practices, contributing to children's and women's malnourishment. By redistributing care burdens from women to publicly-funded services, care services can generate more time for women to invest in self-care, including nutrition, and make strategic choices related to employment, education or food production (Gavrilovic et al. 2023). Social protection can also be designed in a transformative way to promote an equitable division of care work and involve men in nutrition and care tasks. Paternity leave policies, for example, directly promote more egalitarian gender norms around childcare by incentivising fathers to actively participate in newborn care and nutrition (Gavrilovic et al., 2023). Social protection schemes are increasingly incorporating gender-transformative nutrition education and behavioural change communication (BCC) initiatives



Photo: ILRI/Georgina Smith. A livestock farmer takes care of her kids. Ghana, 2020. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

to challenge gender stereotypes upholding that mothers are solely responsible for children's nutrition and care. Men's engagement in care tasks can improve diets among both women and children, and reduce the risk of stunting.

Empowering caregivers to demand time and resources for self-care and the adequate utilisation of food is also a critical aspect of transformative change. A pilot 'cash plus' intervention within Tanzania's Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN)—*Stawisha Maisha* (Nourishing Life)—aims to empower women and subsequently reduce stunting and malnutrition among children (Stawisha Maisha Evaluation Team et al., 2024). Specifically, the programme uses edutainment via radio transmissions as a communication channel to enhance women's knowledge on nutrition and feeding practices for both themselves and their children, as well as to promote women's empowerment, as measured by social capital, social support, group membership, and self-efficacy.

Stability of food: Exposure to shocks and stressors reduces smallholders' ability to produce food in a sustained and resilient manner. The loss of employment, death of a household member, or a health shock can cause economic and food instability through reduced household income and inequitable inheritance practices. Social norms, customs and legislation often deny women the right to inherit property or land upon their husband's death in many parts of the world (UNWOMEN, ND). In addition, women and girls often face increased vulnerability to climate hazards and possessing fewer adaptive capacities to respond to these risks due to patriarchal norms governing their restricted control over productive assets, climate information, and extension and financial services (Hidrobo et al., 2024). This hampers their ability to maintain a stable production of diverse and nutritious foods. A recent review shows that social assistance can reduce women's and girls' vulnerability to climate risks and strengthen their ability to respond to adverse climate events. Social protection can achieve this by enabling women to diversify livelihoods, fostering social cohesion and social support, establishing

infrastructure that protects communities from climate hazards, and reducing maladaptive coping strategies (Hidrobo et al., 2024).

This article has explored the importance of gender-transformative social protection in tackling structural gender barriers to food security and nutrition. Social protection measures can be a powerful vehicle for promoting gender-transformative outcomes and empowering women as a means to achieve food security and nutrition. However, further research is needed to systematically measure the transformative (and sex-disaggregated) effects of different types of social protection schemes on food security and nutrition outcomes and to document good practices in gender-transformative and integrated programme design and implementation. Additionally, more research is necessary to achieve a better understanding of how social protection can facilitate transformative change to enhance women's resilience to the compounding socioeconomic effects of multiple crises, including food and fuel price hikes, hunger, health pandemics, and climate-related disasters. These *polycrisis* situations not only jeopardise people's food security and nutrition but also exacerbate inequalities, including those related to gender. ●

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2. The food security framework was adopted in 2009 at the World Summit on Food Security.

Using food prices to calculate least-cost healthy and nutrient adequate diets helps inform social protection efforts worldwide

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Least-cost diets use the most affordable combination of locally available foods in sufficient quantities to meet a dietary target, such as the balance between food groups specified by national dietary guidelines, or upper and lower bounds on daily intake of macro- and micronutrients. Recent innovations have allowed least-cost diets to be computed and compared across countries and over time, tracking each population's access to healthy diets and nutritious foods to help explain and guide remedies for malnutrition at subnational, national, regional, and global scales. These cost and affordability indicators are used for food security and nutrition assessments, and to steer intervention towards greater availability and use of low-cost healthy diets.

Food security is defined as “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (World Food Summit 1996). By identifying least-cost diets and the number of people in a population unable to afford these diets, international agencies, country

governments and other stakeholders can assess whether populations that consume a poor quality diet do so because more nutritious options are unusually expensive, or because their incomes are too low to afford even low-cost healthy foods, or because low-cost healthy options are displaced by other foods.

Computing least cost diets help decision makers identify where, when, and for how many people a nutritionally adequate diet is out of reach, thus enabling targeted policy and programmes to improve public health and human development. A variety of software tools and data sources have recently been developed and adopted by international organisations and country governments, utilising adequacy of essential nutrients and food-group targets for health based on national dietary guidelines. This new approach to measuring food environments complements traditional metrics of food security and is rapidly being adopted to link the costs of agricultural production and food distribution to nutritional needs for human health (Masters and Finaret 2024). Two different but complementary diet quality standards are used to compute least-cost for global and country-level food security and nutrition assessments: the least cost healthy diet, and the least-cost nutrient adequate diet.

The least cost healthy diet refers to the lowest-cost combination of foods in quantities sufficient to meet national food-based dietary guidelines (FBDG). This can be a country's own FBDG, or an internationally comparable standard—the Healthy Diet Basket (HDB)—designed to reflect the commonalities across most national guidelines (Herforth et al. 2022). Costs to meet the HDB standard are computed using the 11 least expensive locally available food items in quantities sufficient to meet energy targets for six nutritionally defined food groups, as specified in Table 1.

Diets with sufficient quantities of each food group to meet HDB criteria typically also meet requirements for each essential micronutrient (vitamins and minerals) as well as protein, fats, and carbohydrates, but it is usually possible to meet those nutrient requirements at lower cost than the HDB. A least cost nutrient adequate diet refers to the lowest-cost combination of foods in quantities to avoid deficiencies or excesses of those individual nutrients, which requires a more complex mathematical procedure known as linear programming. The mathematical models used to compute least cost nutrient adequate diets may include constraints other than nutrient requirements, and may include goals other than the lowest total cost per day, for example to align solved diets with local dietary habits. These models can also be customized in other ways, for example to use different nutrient requirements for specific subpopulations and lifecycle phases.

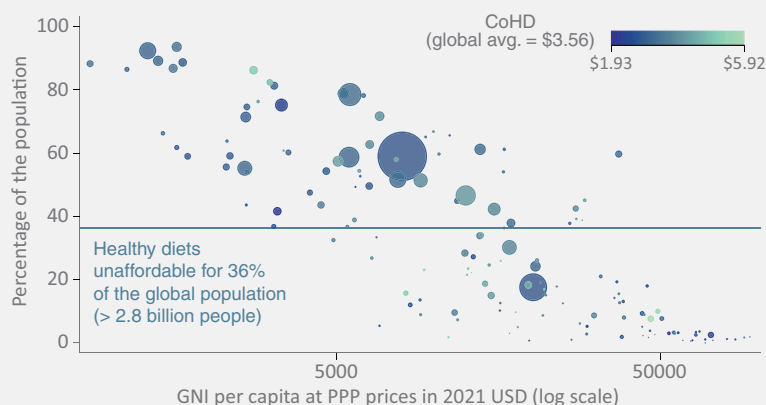
The affordability of the least-cost healthy or nutrient-adequate diet is assessed by comparing diet cost per day at a given place and time with data on income available for food or food expenditure. This comparison measures the number of people in a population unable to afford these lowest-cost diets, placing them at risk of not meeting their health and nutrition needs.

Table 1: The healthy diet basket

Food group	Number of items	Energy content (kcal)	Energy share (% kcal)
Starchy staples	2	1,160	50
Vegetables	3	110	5
Fruits	2	160	7
Animal-source foods	2	300	13
Legumes, nuts and seeds	1	300	13
Oils and fats	1	300	12
Total	11	2,330	100

Source: Herforth et al. (2022).

FIGURE 1: Estimated share of the population who could not afford a healthy diet in 2021



Note: Data shown represent the percentage of the population, globally and within each country, unable to afford a healthy diet in 2021. Marker colour indicates the cost of a healthy diet (CoHD) in USD at purchasing power parity (PPP) prices, per person per day, and marker size indicates the relative number of people unable to afford a healthy diet in each country.

Source: <<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/food-prices-for-nutrition>> and <<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>>.

Global monitoring and within-country analysis of diet cost and affordability

Since 2020, UN agencies have featured indicators for the Cost and Affordability of a Healthy Diet (CoAHD) in their annual UN system flagship report on The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024). Since 2022, calculation of global CoAHD data is done jointly by the FAO and the World Bank, then published simultaneously in FAOSTAT (FAO 2024) and the World Bank Food Prices for Nutrition DataHub (The World Bank 2024a). Those same data are later reproduced in other global monitoring platforms (Food Systems Dashboard 2023; Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser 2023).

The CoAHD suite of indicators is based on least-cost diets computed from national average prices reported by country governments through the International Comparison Programme (ICP). Those diet costs are then compared to income available for food, based on the level and distribution of total household income and non-food expenditure from nationally representative surveys compiled in the World Bank's Poverty and Inequality Platform (The World Bank 2023; 2024b). The internationally standardised price data from ICP take several years to compile and are updated every few years, so the CoAHD

estimates published in 2020 through 2023 used prices from 2017 projected forward from then through 2021 using each country's overall food price inflation. New ICP price data for 2021 were released in July 2024 and used to generate new CoAHD estimates computed jointly by the FAO and the World Bank as in 2023 (Moncayo et al. 2023). Using those data, the number of people for whom healthy diets were unaffordable was 2.8 billion people in 2021 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2024). As shown by the dots in Figure 1, that population is concentrated in low- and lower-middle-income countries, with no systematic variation in diet costs as shown by the colour of each dot, whose size is proportional to the number of people in that country for whom a healthy diet is unaffordable.

This annual global monitoring of access to healthy diets is needed for international and national benchmarks published by multilateral agencies, but other organisations can and do also monitor CoAHD indicators at a higher frequency and for subnational regions. Since January 2024, the Government of Nigeria has published official data on the cost of a healthy diet each month for each region of the country, using their own consumer price data and the global HDB standard (National Bureau of Statistics 2024).

Other applications of the CoAHD method can be used to compute affordability of least-cost diets that meet a country's own national food-based dietary guidelines, as done for example by the Ethiopian Public Health Institute with price data from the Ethiopian Statistical Service (Alemayehu et al. 2023), using technical assistance and software tools in Excel and Stata to compute and present these indicators (Food Prices for Nutrition 2024).

Subnational-level assessments of diet cost and affordability to guide interventions are also conducted as part of the Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) analysis, which has been undertaken in almost 50 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and is led by the World Food Programme (WFP, 2023). FNG analyses involve the computation of cost and affordability of least-cost diet indicators, including the nutrient-adequate diet, using the Cost of the Diet (CotD) data and software developed by Save the Children UK (Deptford et al. 2017) or the Enhance platform developed by WFP. Some countries have also started to include cost and affordability of healthy diet indicators for FNG analyses conducted in collaboration with WFP (Wallingford et al. 2024), and subnational diet cost and affordability analyses using CotD are also conducted by Save the Children (Rana et al. 2023; Save the Children UK 2024).

Diet cost and affordability assessments in FNG analyses and other work is part of a broader process that involves extensive engagement with stakeholders from different sectors to identify context-specific roadblocks to accessing foods that meet the health needs of specific populations. An important part of FNG analyses is the modelling of potential interventions aiming to fill nutrient intake gaps and improve the affordability of healthy and nutrient-adequate diets to understand their potential impact and help stakeholders prioritise interventions. Variation in the cost of obtaining nutrient-adequate diets across demographic groups (Bai, Herforth, and Masters 2022) lends importance to these population-specific FNG analyses, the results of which can help target interventions to groups where nutritional needs are high and affordability gaps are large (Balagamwala et al. 2024).

Actions to make healthy and nutrient-adequate diets more accessible

Recognising the causes of poor diet quality across different contexts can help identify appropriate policy and programmatic actions to improve the accessibility of healthy and nutrient-adequate diets. A recent study of where, when, how, and by whom FNG analyses have been used to guide change interviewed 60 decision-makers in 11 countries, finding influence on action related to school meals, maternal and child health services, cash transfers for adolescent girls, targeted use of fortified rice, and also a shift towards more inclusive policy-making processes due to use of metrics that analyse entire diets needed for each specific population (Knight et al. 2024).

A distinguishing feature of diet cost and affordability assessments is to help diagnose the underlying causes of poor diets, showing where and when:

- prices are unusually high, even for the lowest-cost food items that would meet a population's healthy or nutrient-adequate diet requirements. This can occur when the diversity of foods available is very limited, leaving only a few options and low ability to optimize choices for lower cost;
- incomes are too low to afford even the lowest-cost food items necessary to meet healthy or nutrient-adequate diet requirements, or even just in terms of basic foods (where the affordability gap is very high), after accounting for non-food expenses; or
- healthy and affordable items are displaced by less nutritious food items due to other factors that influence food choice.

All three underlying drivers—prices and incomes that determine affordability, and displacement among affordable foods—interact to determine diet quality in each situation. Where high food prices or insufficient incomes result in unaffordability of healthy and nutrient-adequate diets, responses could include investments to lower the cost or increase the availability of nutritious foods through improved food production, distribution, and trade, or through actions to support and improve the nutritional value of

foods and diets through preservation and storage technologies, micronutrient supplementation or food fortification.

High unaffordability also reveals a need to establish new or augment existing social protection systems, including, for example, by providing a conditional cash transfer and specially formulated nutritious foods to specific members of vulnerable households (Balagamwala et al. 2024), universal child benefit transfers (WFP 2022) or school meal programmes (WFP 2021). In many situations, however, healthy and nutrient-adequate diets may be affordable but not consumed, in which case policy responses to improve diet quality would need to address specific characteristics of local food environments and other underlying causes of malnutrition (Masters, Finaret, and Block 2022).

Continued monitoring of diet cost and affordability over time and across different contexts will be critical to guiding food and agriculture policy and social protection systems to improve access to healthy and nutrient-adequate diets. Identifying the least expensive items that would meet each population's nutritional needs can help guide production and distribution to improve food access, and identifying populations unable to afford those diets is helpful for social protection and nutrition assistance. The approaches described in this article can help diagnose the underlying causes of poor diet quality and guide interventions across a wide range of settings, thanks to deep partnerships between international and local organisations worldwide. ●

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Photo: Catherine Mungai (CAAFS). Fair sets up seed banks to preserve crop diversity and provide quality seeds to farmers. Uganda, 2018. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

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Child poverty and cash transfers: Public opinion endorses an available solution

Merike Blofield,¹ Juliana Martínez Franzoni² and Fabián Borges^{3,4}

Nearly 50 per cent of people in poverty worldwide are under 18 and disproportionately live in the global South (Black et al. 2017; UNICEF 2022a). In Latin America, almost half (45 per cent) of children and adolescents experience income poverty, a rate three times higher than among those aged 65 years and older (ECLAC 2022). Income poverty has devastating effects on children's present and future lives but also represents a missed opportunity for the economic growth and wellbeing of the societies of which they are part.

To respond and overcome this dire scenario, evidence suggests that access to regular cash transfers can offer simple and effective protection against child poverty, particularly extreme poverty, defined as the lack of access to a basic food basket. While helping families meet basic needs,

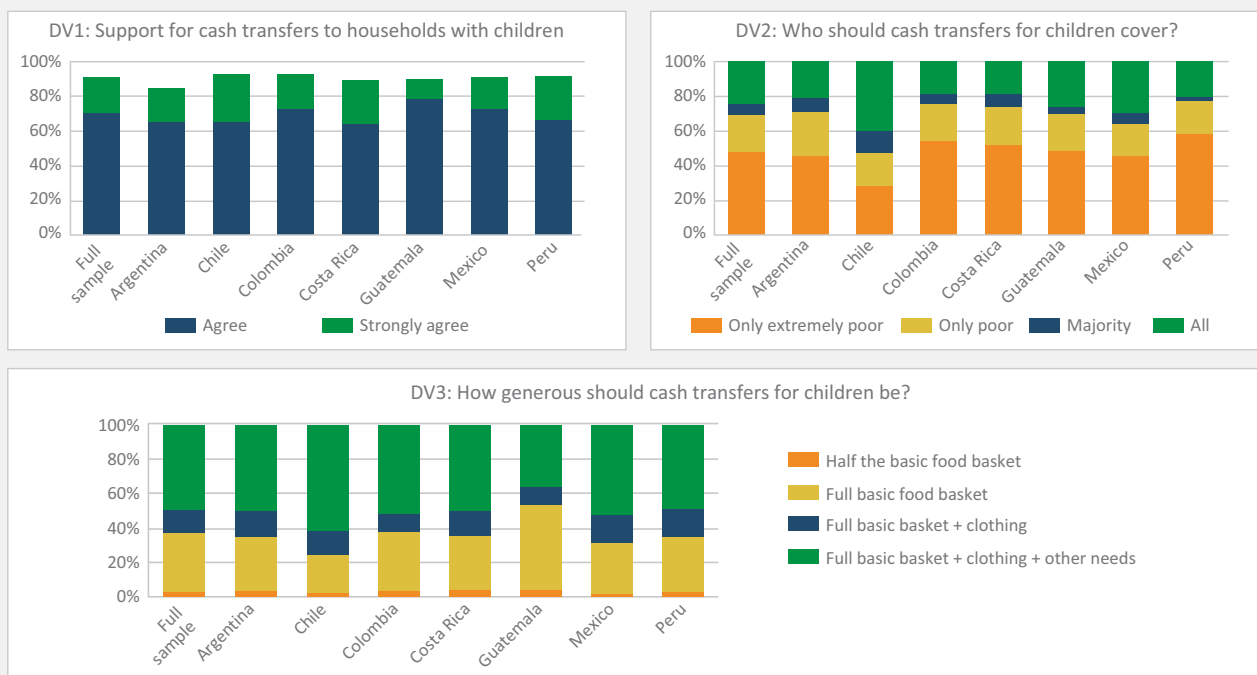
and often linked to healthcare and school services, transfers also improve child health, education, cognitive progress, and overall well-being, making them a highly beneficial investment for families and society in general (Black et al., 2017). Yet, while cash transfer programmes for vulnerable families with children exist across the region, they reach only a fraction of children in need, and most are far from covering the cost of a basic food basket.

Our survey addresses public opinion on cash transfers, a vital dimension of the potential political space under electoral democracies to engage in more robust anti-poverty efforts in the region. Surprisingly, despite these programmes' role as the cornerstone of anti-poverty efforts in the region, none of the most significant regional public opinion surveys, including AmericasBarometer, Latinobarómetro, World Values Survey, and International Social Survey, have addressed this topic.

To address this gap, with the support of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Blofield and Martínez Franzoni created the database "Families and cash transfers" based on nationally representative telephone surveys conducted in seven countries (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru) between April and August 2022.

By relying on phone surveys, we follow the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the most extensive in the region, which conducted phone surveys during the pandemic and confirmed the effectiveness of this data-gathering technique (Zechmeister 2020). Fieldwork was carried out by leading firms based in each country. Through random stratified sampling, 2 samples achieved a 95 per cent confidence level and a sample error of a maximum of +/- 3 percentage points. Sample sizes ranged

FIGURE 1: Dependent variables for overall sample and seven Latin America countries



Source: Authors' elaboration.

from 900 respondents (in Chile) to 1,500 respondents (in Guatemala). To ensure data reliability, the survey comprised 37 mostly closed questions.

These surveys represent the first systematic comparative surveys on attitudes toward cash transfers in the region. Our sample includes Mexico, two Central American countries (Costa Rica and Guatemala), two Andean countries (Colombia and Peru), and two Southern Cone countries (Argentina and Chile).⁵ These countries vary in terms of economic development (from one of the poorest in Guatemala to the wealthiest in Chile), state capacity and social policy legacy (also from weakest in Guatemala to stronger in Chile, Argentina, and Costa Rica), and country size (from Mexico at 128 million inhabitants to Costa Rica's 5 million inhabitants), thus providing a reasonably representative sample of the region's countries.

We have summarised our initial findings in [seven country-based policy briefs](#) outlining the policy context, public support for cash transfers, attitudes on how generous they should be, and which groups of children they should cover (Blofield et al. 2022b).

Public opinion strongly supports cash transfers for children

Regarding support for the existence of a programme, interviewees were asked, "Would you be in favour of or against the government having a cash transfer program for households with children?" Respondents could strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. As indicated by Figure 1, the overwhelming majority (89.99 per cent) of respondents either "agreed" (70.35 per cent) or "strongly agreed" (19.65 per cent) that governments should provide transfers to households with children. There is some cross-national variation in the total share of respondents in favour of transfers, with national averages ranging from 84.64 per cent in Argentina to 92.91 per cent in Colombia.

Regarding the breadth of a cash transfer programme for children, interviewees were asked, "When government cash transfers specifically for children exist, who should receive them?" Respondents were asked to choose from four options: only children living in extreme poverty, only poor

children, the majority of children, or all children. As Figure 1 indicates, opinion on the appropriate reach is more divided: just over half (52 per cent) expressed support for providing transfers to at least all children in poverty (summing up the latter three options: poor children, the majority of children, and all children). Almost half (48.03 per cent) support limiting transfers to those in extreme poverty. Although the majority in four of the seven countries (Argentina, Chile, Guatemala and Mexico) believes that at least all children in poverty should be covered, in three countries (Peru, Colombia and Costa Rica), which share ranges between 40 and 48 per cent support limiting transfers to children living in extreme poverty.

Universal transfers (24.59 per cent constitute the second most common answer. Considering the existing cash transfer programme coverage and the current poverty rates in these countries, the majority supports expansion in most countries.

Finally, regarding the adequacy or generosity of transfers, the survey asked, "When government cash transfer programmes tailored specifically for children exist, what should they cover?" Respondents were asked to choose from four transfer levels: equal to half the cost of the basic food basket (half of the extreme poverty line), equal to the total cost of the basket (the extreme poverty line), equal to the cost of the basket plus the cost of clothing, and equal to the cost of the basket and clothing plus the cost of other basic needs (the poverty line). Across the entire sample, as Figure 1 indicates, an overwhelming majority—over 97 per cent of respondents—support cash transfer values equal to at least the cost of a basic food basket (the extreme poverty line), while less than 3 per cent support restricting them to half a food basket. A plurality (49.34 per cent) prefers the most generous option (the poverty line). Support for the most generous option ranges from 36.3 per cent in Guatemala to 61.6 per cent in Chile. Transfers equal to the basic food basket are the second most common response in the countries other than Guatemala, with average support ranging from less than a quarter of respondents (22.7 per cent in Chile) to nearly half (49.5 per cent in Guatemala).

The overall results indicate overwhelming support for the existence of a cash transfer programme for children,

overwhelming support for higher adequacy of cash transfers where they exist—equal to at least the extreme poverty line that takes care of basic food needs—and significant support, although varying by country, for covering at least all children in poverty. We address respective policy contexts and political space in the policy briefs on each country.

Our analysis also addresses the critical issue of the immediate price tag for policy expansion in each country. Additionally, we produced a cost estimate for a global universal basic income for all children in poverty, equating to roughly 1.63 per cent of global Gross National Income (GNI) (Blofield et al. 2022a). The cost of ensuring coverage for every child in poverty at the level of a basic food basket varies in relation to national gross domestic products (GDPs). Our estimates indicate that the total cost of ensuring a food basket level coverage for every child in poverty would range from less than 0.7 per cent of GDP in Costa Rica and Chile to around 1 per cent in Colombia and Peru, to 1.47 per cent in Mexico. The cost jumps to a staggering 7.5 per cent in Guatemala, given the high share of a very young population living in poverty.

Policy recommendations

These findings indicate that public opinion strongly supports strengthening one of the simplest, most effective, and well-known anti-poverty policies: cash transfers to children. Overwhelming support exists to ensure a value that covers at least a basic food basket. Opinion on the appropriate reach is split nearly in half between those who would include at least all children in poverty and those who would restrict transfers to children living in extreme poverty. Regarding the latter group, we recommend policymakers and advocates adopt communication strategies that emphasise the beneficial effects of cash transfers on child development *before* children experience severe deprivation, particularly food deprivation, and the cost-effectiveness of such transfers over addressing the future consequences of lack of protection. Once children experience extreme poverty, especially over time, much of the health, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural damage may already have been done. Similar arguments can effectively be made regarding fiscal cost, as evidence demonstrates that up-front

“... Findings indicate that public opinion strongly supports strengthening one of the simplest, most effective, and well-known anti-poverty policies: cash transfers to children.



Photo: WFP/Francisco Fión. Beneficiary women produce vegetables for their own consumption along with oyster mushrooms. Guatemala, 2013. CC BY-ND 2.0.

investments such as this more than pay for themselves, given the medium and long-term beneficial development effects.

On this basis, we argue that in the context of electoral democracies, countries in Latin America have both political leeway and economic resources to enact programmes that cover all vulnerable children with basic food basket-level transfers, representing immensely cost-effective investments for future development. While in broad terms there is space to increase progressive tax bases in the region, in the case of countries such as Guatemala—where the fiscal burden is very low and the needed increase in social investment represents several points of the GDP—a protection effort must also entail multilateral support. Children cannot represent themselves politically; therefore, significant political will from adult policymakers is needed to address the child poverty challenge. With this political will, in the context of supportive public opinion, policymakers should be able to establish the fiscal space required to enact a broad protective cash transfer programme to eliminate extreme poverty. ●

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3. California State University, San Bernardino.
4. This article is based on a survey funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the German Foundation for Scientific Research, and the von Humboldt Foundation.
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How income concentration fuels food insecurity: The case for urgent universal social policies

Diego Sánchez-Ancochea¹

“Income inequality increases the likelihood of severe food insecurity, and this effect is 20 per cent higher for low-income countries compared with middle-income countries” warned a UN report in 2019 (UNDP 2024). In a large cross-country study, Holleman and Conti (2020) found that people in countries with a high Gini coefficient have a 33 percentage point higher probability of suffering severe food insecurity and a 42 percentage point higher probability of experiencing moderate food insecurity. Their research also indicates that economic growth is correlated with lower food insecurity and hunger. Additional studies show that inequality can affect the quality of the diet as well as dietary knowledge. Furthermore, malnutrition, particularly in the first three years of life, can exacerbate inequality by impacting children’s educational attainment and health outcomes.

This article explores the structural connections between inequality and hunger and malnutrition. Inequality can lead to lower economic growth, political

instability, violence, and diminished trust—factors that can, in turn, lead to food insecurity and malnutrition. This piece emphasises how income and power are concentrated among the wealthy and advocates for the adoption of universal social policies, including universal social protection, as a means to address inequality and simultaneously combat hunger and malnutrition.

Reducing income concentration at the top to combat hunger

Addressing income inequality should be central to the fight against hunger. In tackling inequality, special attention should be given to the income of the wealthy and its impact on the poor. Groundbreaking research by Gabriel Palma revealed that the income share of the middle class (those in fifth to ninth deciles) remained relatively stable worldwide, while the ratio between the wealthy and the poor fluctuated more significantly (Palma 2011). He concluded that “since the middle classes are normally able to appropriate—and defend—a share of national income that is similar to their counterparts in other parts

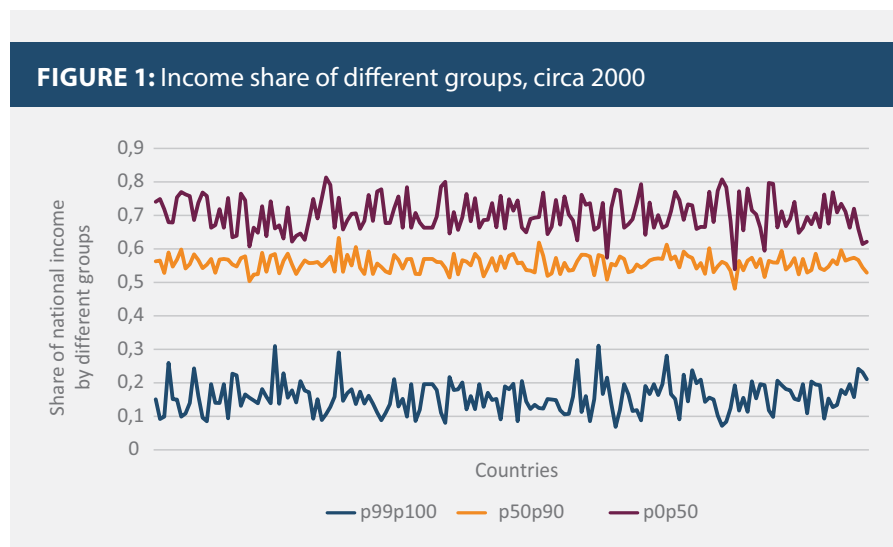
of the world, countries with high inequality are simply those in which the rich are more successful at subsidizing their insatiable appetite with the income of the bottom 40 per cent” (ibid.,121-122).

More recent data from the World Inequality Database confirm Palma’s findings and underscore the importance of income concentration at the very top. Figure 1 compares the income share of three groups: The elite (top 1 per cent), the middle class (deciles five to nine), and the bottom (deciles one to five) globally. In almost every country, the middle class receives between 50 per cent and 60 per cent of total income. In contrast, the variance in the income share of the elite and bottom groups is much larger.

Figure 2 compares the income share of the elite with that of the bottom income group in different countries. It confirms Palma’s findings by illustrating the significant variation in this ratio globally. For example, in Slovakia (marked in red), the income ratio between the wealthy and the poor is just 29 per cent, while in Mexico and Peru (both marked in green), the ratios are 434 per cent and 494 per cent, respectively. The figure also highlights the economic power of the elite, particularly in the Global South. In 94 countries, the top 1 per cent earn more than the bottom 50 per cent and, in 34 countries, they earn at least twice as much.

Latin America illustrates the severe consequences of inequality

To understand the consequences of the high concentration of income at the top of the distribution, the experience of Latin America is particularly instructive: “distributions are mainly characterized by a higher income share among the rich relative to countries in other regions” (World Bank 2003). *The Costs of Inequality in Latin America: Lessons and Warnings for the Rest of the World* outlines the economic, political and social consequences of having powerful elites and demonstrates how

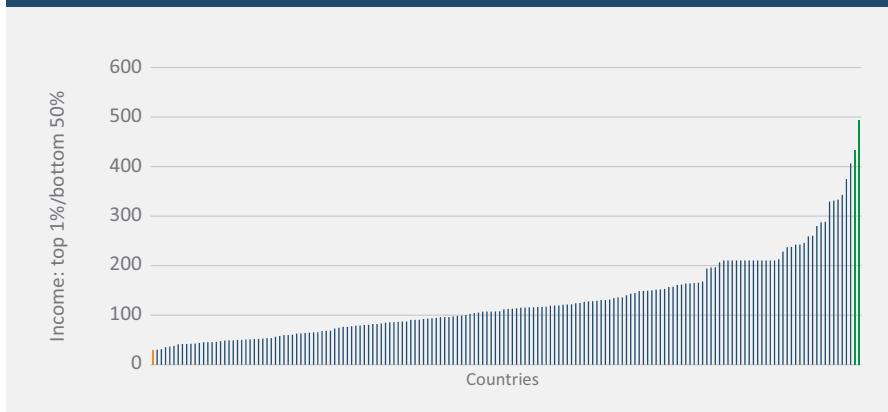


Note: Income distribution is measured as a percentage of pre-tax income based on a combination of household surveys and tax statistics.

Source: Authors’s elaboration based on data from WID (2023).

“ The high concentration of income at the top of the distribution underscores the critical need for universal social policies to redistribute income from the top 1 per cent to broader society ...

FIGURE 2: Income share of the top 1% in relation to the bottom 50%, circa 2020



Source: Author's elaboration based on data from WID (2023).

high inequality creates various vicious circles (Sánchez-Ancochea 2020).

Historically, inequality has led to inadequate investment in education and research and development, resulting in low economic growth, dual labour markets and the perpetuation of inequality over time.

Politically, high inequality has contributed to political instability and frequent changes in political regimes. Between 1950 and 1990, Latin America accounted for nearly half of all political regime changes worldwide. The region has cycled through weak democracies, populist experiments and authoritarian interruptions. Populism, often contributing to economic mismanagement, has frequently worsened income distribution. Military-led coups have had even more severe effects on inequality. For example, in Pinochet's Chile, the Gini coefficient rose from less than 44 in the early 1970s to 59 in 1988 (Palma 2011).

High inequality in Latin America has given rise to two social vicious circles. First, it has led to alarmingly high levels of violence. In 2017, Latin America's homicide rate was three times higher than the global average, with 21.5 per 100,000 people vs. 7.0 globally. Additionally, 43 of the 50 most violent cities in the world are located in Latin America (Sánchez Inzunza and Pardo Veiras 2017). The unequal distribution of violence means that poor neighbourhoods suffer disproportionately, which in turn leads to uneven patterns of investment and development, perpetuating inequality over time.

Second, inequality fosters spatial and social segmentation, reducing the spaces of interaction between the middle class and low-income groups and contributing to a lack of trust. This limited interaction results in fewer opportunities for the type of cross-class coalitions that could support redistribution efforts. In daily life, people hardly interact across social classes, whether in schools, healthcare services, playgrounds, bars, or other social venues.

These vicious circles significantly impact efforts to reduce hunger and malnutrition. For example, low economic growth contributes to poorer nutrition outcomes by exacerbating poverty and unemployment. Political instability leads to excessive policy change in all areas, including food security. Social mistrust and the absence of cross-class coalitions hinder pro-poor interventions, including those aiming at reducing poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Moreover, violence and conflict are also correlated with hunger and malnutrition.

Overall, food insecurity remains high in Latin American countries, despite most being classified as middle-income or higher-middle income. In 2020-2022, moderate or severe food insecurity in the region was nearly ten percentage points higher than the global average—39 per cent vs 29.5 per cent (FAO et al. 2023). The region also grapples with the double burden of malnutrition: 6.4 per cent of children under five years old are stunted, 7.2 per cent are overweight and 62.5 per cent of adults are overweight (Grajeda et al. 2019).

Universal policies to address inequality and hunger

The high concentration of income at the top of the distribution underscores the critical need for universal social policies to redistribute income from the top 1 per cent to broader society and reduce poverty in the process. Universal social policies are designed to cover a majority of the population with similarly generous benefits (Martínez Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea 2016).

Universal social protection—programmes that provide coverage against risks such as unemployment, illness or poverty—are at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These programmes are viewed as a key strategy for eradicating poverty (SDG target 1.3) and for reducing gender, socio-economic and spatial inequalities (SDG targets 5.4 and 10.4).

Universal social policies, including universal social protection, offer several advantages: they avoid the stigma usually associated with targeted policies, can be easier to manage, and may contribute to higher productivity (Martínez Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea 2016). By simultaneously incorporating low-income groups and the middle class, these policies lead to increased spending and more effective top-down redistribution. This is the so-called “paradox of redistribution,” as coined by Korpi and Palmer (1996).

The formation of a cross-class coalition between the poor and the middle class

not only improves access to social programmes but also enhances their generosity and quality. The middle class, possessing greater economic and political resources, tends to have a more influential voice. In addition, State personnel in charge of service provision, who are predominantly from the middle class, have a vested interest in improving service quality if they and their families depend on these services.

Universal social services must be complemented by robust social protection systems. For example, by increasing household income, cash transfers can facilitate children's access to education. These systems are particularly important in the fight against malnutrition, as they provide crucial income at key moments in the life cycles of individuals.

However, there is a paradox: in countries with high levels of inequality, universal policies are both crucial and difficult to implement. Economic elites, who wield significant power, often successfully oppose policies that would require higher taxes.

How can this challenge be addressed? While the solution is complex, some insights from Martínez Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea (2016) can offer valuable guidance. First, timing is of the essence: building universal systems is a gradual process, and both the initial design and ongoing development are important. Research on universal healthcare coverage

indicates that the path “often uses stepping stones. While some reforms create path dependence, others do not” (Cotlear et al. 2015: 6). Effective policy design should ensure that current decisions create incentives for subsequent expansions in coverage and benefit value, addressing essential needs and risks.

Policymakers should focus on creating cross-class coalitions through various strategies. New programmes (e.g., early education and childcare) can be introduced in neighbourhoods where low- and middle-income families live in close proximity. Following the historical example of Costa Rica, social insurance programmes could initially target vulnerable but non-poor people (e.g., low-wage formal workers) and expand vertically to include both higher and lower income groups. This approach can help avoid excessive fragmentation. Additionally, incorporating free or subsidised food provisions into universal education programmes can simultaneously alleviate hunger and bolster support for universal policies.

A second key point addresses the link between social policy and taxation. Traditionally, the elite has successfully opposed tax reforms by portraying the State as inefficient and corrupt. This argument can be countered by tying new taxes to specific social programmes and policy goals. When citizens and residents understand the direct benefits of their increased tax contributions, they are more likely to support such measures.



Photo: Laura Gil Martínez/IAEA. Formal workers. Costa Rica, 2017. CC BY 2.0.

“ ... in countries with high levels of inequality, universal policies are both crucial and difficult to implement.

“ Effective policy design should ensure that current decisions create incentives for subsequent expansions in coverage and benefit value, addressing essential needs and risks.



Photo: PAHO. Children at school. Guatemala, 2010. CC BY-NC 2.0.

Another common argument against public intervention is the perceived need for greater State capacity to implement ambitious programmes. This is undoubtedly the case. Nevertheless, it is not necessary for countries to wait until the conditions are perfect before rolling out universal social policies. Rather, they can simultaneously strengthen State capabilities and expand social policies. The experience of Costa Rica provides another particularly useful example: the country improved its primary healthcare and public hospitals' capacities while expanding social bureaucracy and increasing coverage and generosity. As a result, Costa Rica transitioned from having a relatively underdeveloped public sector to one of the most successful in Latin America (Martínez Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea 2016).

More recently, Latin America has seen a wave of social policy expansion during the 2000s, focusing on social protection. This expansion, which included both contributory and non-contributory programmes, occurred within the context of democratic institutions and high economic growth. These new programmes are, in turn, enhancing the capacity of the social State in many countries. ●

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Bridging poverty reduction, child protection, and state-building: Re-defining the role of social assistance in Sudan

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In 2022, the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) reported 55 active armed conflicts across 38 countries. Countries struggling with protracted conflict, with frequent armed exacerbations, often have high levels of poverty, inequality and institutional fragility. Some conflicts also have geopolitical consequences on global food supply chains. The war in Ukraine for example, has notably resulted in higher food, fertiliser and food production costs globally (WFP and IDS 2023). According to Save the Children, one in six children live in conflict-affected countries, most facing an intertwined vulnerability—the direct threat of conflict on their lives and livelihoods, and the breakdown of institutions that support them. As a universally prioritised mechanism for relief, social assistance efforts within these contexts often consider the potential secondary benefits of cash and food transfers on nutrition, child protection, gender equality, and livelihood strengthening (FAO 2024). However, many fall short of considering longer-term transformation agendas.

Several high-level commitments emphasize the importance of working differently in disasters. Through the 2016 Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain agreements, for example, leading bilateral and multilateral agencies have underscored the importance of disaster risk reduction, diversifying humanitarian actors, and reforming humanitarian financing structures (Metcalf-Hough 2023). Signatories have committed to ringfencing at least 25 per cent of their humanitarian budgets for local actors with capacity to promote transformative social assistance, in recognition that this may effectively contribute to the operationalisation of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (see Figure 1). Recent reports from the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) mirror these commitments, suggesting there are opportunities to bridge relief efforts, peace-building efforts and the longer-term development of local social protection systems.

This article assesses some of the risks, challenges and opportunities of such integration in the context of the ongoing Sudan conflict, highlighting promising

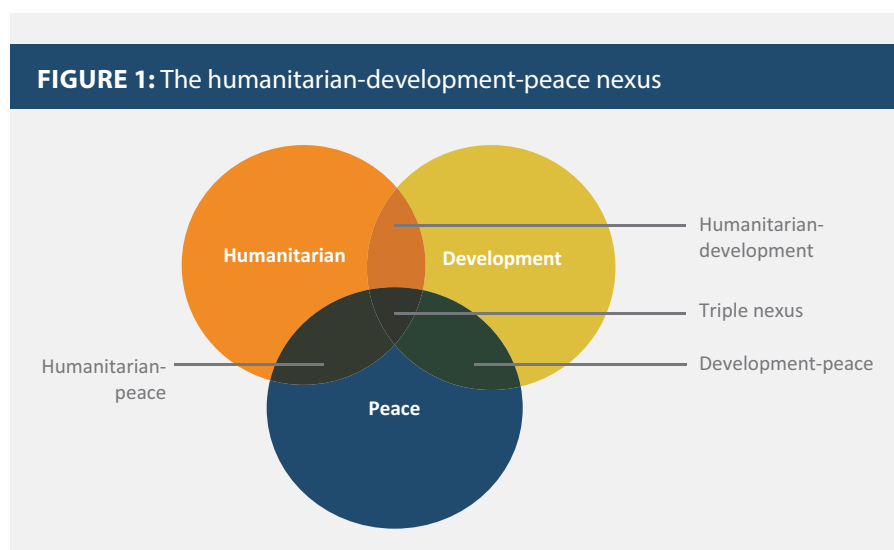
practices from current relief responses led by UN Country Offices and Sudanese communities.

Background: The intersection of conflict, poverty and grave violations against children in Sudan

In April 2023, widespread armed conflict erupted across Sudan between the Sudanese military and the para-military group Rapid Support Forces. This conflict resulted in the breakdown of the national government and the cessation of essential service provision throughout the country. The ensuing hostilities—described as an “unimaginable humanitarian crisis” by the Deputy Director of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—have contributed to alarming levels of food and economic insecurity, at least a three-fold increase in infectious disease outbreaks, and record-high levels of violence against women and children. These elements all compound the critical conditions preceding the conflict.

Sudan now has the highest number of displaced children in the world, with over four million children at risk of acute malnutrition, and an estimated 19 million children—over 90 per cent of all Sudanese children—are currently out of school (UNICEF 2024). Simultaneously, there is indication of societal fragmentation among Sudanese communities, including record-high levels of child soldier recruitment, sexual violence and trafficking (UN OCHA 2023). UNICEF has warned that without urgent immediate relief services, this could be a ‘generational catastrophe’ which threatens the long-term future of the country.

In response to the conflict in Sudan, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported that, as of December 2023, 3.25 million people had received food assistance and 5.98 million had received emergency livelihoods support,



Source: Authors' elaboration.

predominantly in the form of social assistance (UN OCHA 2023). Despite massive efforts to reach these populations, the current conflict is unravelling the social fabric faster than the reach of social assistance is able to address. In the absence of a functioning national government and national social protection systems, food insecurity and socioeconomic vulnerability are likely to persist beyond the acute phase of this conflict, and a future-cognisant outlook will become increasingly necessary.

Humanitarian and social assistance responses across the country may have introduced an access route that presents i) an entry-point for future social protection systems, and ii) a platform for decentralisation of peacekeeping activities.

Applying the humanitarian-development nexus: Promising opportunities for integration

Globally, social assistance often primarily aims to address immediate food insecurity. In Sudan, the majority of social assistance is delivered through cash and food programmes. These programmes usually incorporate secondary objectives such as preventing negative coping strategies and risky behaviours, advancing child protection and gender equality, strengthening livelihoods and resilience, and achieving social justice. These secondary objectives can be reflected in both stand-alone cash transfers and, more prominently, in 'cash plus' programmes.

Evidence across Africa indicates that programmes with both an economic and psychosocial component have transformative impacts on population well-being, especially for women and children. In South Africa, a combination of cash transfers, safe schools, and parenting support improved education, health, and violence outcomes for adolescents (Cluver et al. 2019). In Kenya, 'cash plus' aspirational programmes have demonstrated economic impacts, but have also increased household expenditure on girls' education and nutritious food (Orkin et al. 2023).

While there is limited evidence on 'cash plus' programmes in acute conflict, there is promising preliminary evidence from countries experiencing protracted conflict. In Yemen, building on the remnants of

the national social protection system, the Social Fund for Development Cash Plus Programme delivered humanitarian cash transfers 'plus' agricultural extension services and enrolment in grassroots education programmes, which had positive impacts on autonomy, agency and community-level market stimulation (CaLP 2021). Similarly, a recent systematic review on social assistance focused on Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon suggests that 'cash plus' psychosocial support improved household communication and reduced domestic violence (Oosterhoff 2022). Both studies emphasise the need for more research on the transition away from humanitarian transfers. While it is still unclear if, how and to what extent social safety nets contribute to peacebuilding efforts, recent conceptual models suggest they may help by reducing food insecurity, violence, conflict over local resources, and societal fragmentation (FAO 2024).

This evidence, along with field reports and UN press releases, suggests opportunities to pursue triple nexus approaches in conflict settings. In Sudan, there are several notable examples where cash transfer programmes were adapted to become more conflict-sensitive, inclusive, and integrated with multisectoral service provision:

- **Building food supply chains to West Darfur:** The World Food Programme (WFP), in partnership with International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent local offices in Darfur, was the first to deliver aid to West Darfur in August 2023. By orchestrating a series of access agreements with the Government of Chad, they secured a new humanitarian corridor for food aid into West Darfur, in collaboration with local actors on both sides of the border. This cross-border coordination for aid offers an opportunity for longer-lasting food supply chains. It also presents possibilities for replicating similar arrangements with Sudan's other neighbouring countries, especially in support of inaccessible border towns, remote displacement camps, and hard-to-reach populations.
- **Adaptive 'cash plus' programming for marginalised groups,** including children, girls and displaced people:

UNICEF's 'Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus' programme is one of the few combined programmes that have persisted beyond April 2023. The programme is rolled out in two eastern states of Sudan, Red Sea and Kassala, with expanding coverage across towns and localities. Both states remain largely spared from armed warfare (as of February 2024). This 'cash plus' programme provides support to pregnant women and new mothers through community-based platforms, such as antenatal clinics. Depending on the locality, it is provided with a combination of health services, reproductive health provision, and social and behavioural change communication. It emphasises two important considerations for delivering social assistance: 1) recognising different district-level vulnerabilities to allow more effective localisation of services based on conflict levels; and 2) identifying and strengthening partnerships with local state and non-state actors can strengthen tailored and combined services.

- **Integration of social assistance within other sectoral programmes:** Nada Elazhar, a women-led civil society organisation, has been focused on responding to gender-based violence in Sudan for nearly a decade. This includes delivering emergency medical assistance for rape victims and providing a psychosocial support package. Since April 2023, in recognition of the economic drivers of gender-based violence during the war, this organisation has begun integrating social assistance programmes within their services, including providing economic support (housing, clothing, food, etc.) for displaced victims of gender-based violence and leading community 'tolerance' campaigns to reduce tribal tensions. This approach demonstrates that it is possible to implement humanitarian assistance, child protection, and social cohesion activities simultaneously. It also suggests that meaningful inclusion of civil society networks in both programmes and decision-making can be a key element in sustaining acute relief efforts. Measuring the impacts of such approaches is crucial

in contexts where building evidence is exceptionally challenging.

Models to implement the humanitarian-peace nexus: Sudan's 'Emergency Response Rooms'

Social assistance can provide more than immediate relief; it also offers a platform to address the root causes of conflict. By integrating peace-building elements into social assistance, programmes can help foster community resilience and social cohesion, which in turn may help reduce the spread or spark of further conflict. FAO's latest publication on conflict-sensitive social protection suggests a distinction between 'working in conflict' and 'working on conflict' (FAO 2024), emphasising the potential to incorporate peace-building efforts into relief interventions.

Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) are a notable example of a community-based initiative aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict. Named for their origins in online chat rooms, approximately 30 ERRs have been set up across seven Sudanese states since the conflict began in April 2023 (Sudan Crisis Coordination Unit 2023). These are locally based, nationally coordinated groups that were formed by volunteers leveraging their professional networks and skills. The ERRs have grown exponentially since their inception

This grassroots movement has organised itself into 'Base' ERRs that address highly localised crises, categorising their responses into green, amber, and red colour categories based on the intensity of conflict in their regions. Responses include providing evacuation aid (both cash and in-kind support) during acute conflicts and offering health, food, and/or shelter in townships affected by mass displacement. A notable branch of this movement is the Women's Response Rooms (WRRs), which focus on age- and gender-sensitive assistance. In June 2023, they reported providing communal soup kitchens, peer-to-peer psychosocial support, and trauma-healing programmes for children.

Recent public newsletters from the ERRs outline the development of an internal governance system with plans to establish a democratic process for electing ERR representatives. They have often

been described as an 'emergency local government'. Further research is needed to understand the operations, services delivered, and impact of community-led humanitarian efforts such as those of the ERRs.

In failed states and protracted conflict, UN and grassroots organisations often step in to fill the vacuum left by collapsed national governments—relief programmes in Sudan have illustrated this shift. To future-proof humanitarian responses, it is necessary to consider routes that bridge international and local efforts; including through supporting the development of local relief structures, recognising and strengthening local governance, and ensuring inclusion in service delivery.

Promising models that operationalise the humanitarian-development-peace nexus both inspire action and illuminate questions. Is there a trade-off between providing social assistance at scale versus supporting localised and comprehensive responses? What financing mechanism can ensure support for such organisations? How can humanitarian and development actors provide resources at a scale that matches the needs? In the case of Sudan, there are a few key principles can guide the approach to these challenges:

- Ensure social assistance does no harm and supports long-term development capacity.
- Promote localisation through partnerships with civil society, non-state, and locality-level actors.
- Align social assistance with and within other multi-sectoral programmes to save lives and livelihoods.

This integrative approach can address immediate humanitarian needs while laying the foundation for conflict recovery and sustainable development. ●

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The role of private sector value chain integration in improving the nutrition impacts of social protection: Perspectives from Nigeria and Indonesia

Anthony J. Wenndt, Joyce Akpata,
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In recent years, global and local food systems have faced compounding shocks, making adequately nutritious diets increasingly less affordable for millions of the world's most vulnerable people. With over 3 billion individuals worldwide unable to afford a healthful diet (UNICEF 2024), enhancing the accessibility of highly nutritious foods through social protection systems is crucial for achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2—Zero Hunger—and for ensuring nutritionally sustainable futures for millions of people.

Improving access to nutritious foods through social protection programmes presents substantial challenges for policymakers and development partners across both cash and in-kind transfer modalities. **In-kind food transfer programmes** typically focus on staple grains (Shrinivas et al. 2018), which, if not fortified, are not particularly nutrient-dense. **Cash transfer programmes** may not encourage uptake of nutritious foods if such items are neither sufficiently available nor affordable (Holmes and Bhuvanendrah 2013).

To tackle these challenges, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)² is working to strengthen the capacity of social protection actors to integrate private sector nutritious food value chains and social protection systems. This article explores the unique opportunities and challenges associated with such integration and draws on examples from Nigeria and Indonesia to offer recommendations for enhancing integration in practice. We argue that integrating nutritious food value chains and social protection systems can have resounding positive impacts on nutrition.

Integrating nutritious food value chains and social protection

Social protection systems can exert a broader influence on food systems and local economic development beyond the household level. To harness the transformative potential of social protection for nutrition, it is essential to integrate multiple priorities and development agendas, including strengthening value chain approaches. A food value chain can be defined as “the network of stakeholders involved in the various steps of life of a food,” including producers, processors, sellers, consumers, and regulators (Ferranti 2019). Integrating nutritious food value chains and social protection systems involves multi-sectoral actions by public- and private-sector actors to enhance the provision of, or access to, nutritious foods through social protection programmes. This integration is often achieved through institutional demand pipelines, which can boost the incomes of smallholder farmers (Nehring, Miranda, and Howe 2017) and improve nutrition outcomes (Fiedler et al. 2012).

The quality of integration is influenced by two key factors: the policy environment and the capacity for public-private engagement. Policy aimed at enhancing intersectoral cooperation in social protection can lead to more universal services and specialised support for particularly vulnerable groups (World Bank 2018). Effective implementation of these policies can be achieved through various public-private partnership structures, such as contracts, joint ventures, build-operate-transfer arrangements, and others. Each of these structures requires significant capacity for preparatory work, situation analysis and management.

Exploring value chain integration in Nigeria and Indonesia

GAIN projects in several countries aim to facilitate the integration of nutritious

food value chains with social protection systems. Here, we explore examples from Nigeria and Indonesia to illustrate pathways for value chain integration and highlight the associated challenges and opportunities. The example from Nigeria, focused on school feeding, demonstrates how integrating local value chains can significantly improve the quality of school meals while also fostering local economic development. The example from Indonesia illustrates how value chain integration can create an enabling environment for the effective use of transfers to access more nutritious foods.

In Nigeria, GAIN's Enhancing Access to Safe and Nutritious Diets (ENSAND) project seeks to improve the dietary quality of low-income households by increasing egg consumption among children through school feeding programmes. Our value chain integration approach in Nigeria focuses on improving existing mechanisms that link the egg value chain to the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP). This project works to enable private sector actors, such as the Poultry Association of Nigeria (PAN), to make more effective contributions to the NHGSFP through targeted improvements in finance, logistics and programme management capacities.

Through the project, GAIN's efforts support the provision of up to 40,000 egg crates per week across several states, where over 900,000 school children are enrolled in the school feeding programme. The success of the project depends on value chain integration: without the active participation of value chain actors, providing nutritious meals for schoolchildren would be a daunting—if not impossible—task. Value chain integration is critical for ensuring the smooth flow of local



Photo: Adam Cohn. Indonesian food. Indonesia, 2016. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“Improving access to nutritious foods through social protection programmes presents substantial challenges for policymakers and development partners across both cash and in-kind transfer modalities.

produce through the system, ultimately enhancing children’s long-term nutritional well-being.

In Indonesia, fund transfers to a card known as the ‘Sembako Card’ are expected to reach more than 18 million beneficiaries per year on average, allowing them to purchase rice from designated retail points. Enhancing the nutritional value of rice through fortification could significantly impact nutrition outcomes for these beneficiaries. GAIN is collaborating with the government to establish a policy framework for setting standards for rice fortification—a crucial step towards the long-term goal of mainstreaming the provision of fortified rice to low-income households through Indonesia’s social protection system.

Achieving this goal requires the engagement of Indonesia’s extensive network of private sector rice millers, who play pivotal roles in the social protection system and could serve as essential conduits for the provision of fortified rice. Integrating large-scale private millers with the social protection system is crucial for facilitating the delivery of fortified rice to beneficiaries. These millers are key for ensuring production and supply, developing technology, building capacity, and ensuring compliance. By leveraging their expertise and resources, these actors can help optimise the fortification process, ensuring that the rice meets nutritional standards and reaches beneficiaries in a timely and cost-effective manner.

The way forward: minimising barriers to value chain integration

While substantial evidence supports the potential benefits of multi-sectoral cooperation in social protection, including through public food procurement, further exploration is needed to understand how value chains can be effectively and sustainably leveraged to increase access to nutritious foods for social protection beneficiaries. Drawing from available evidence and field experience, GAIN has identified three key recommendations for minimising the barriers that hinder the sustainable integration of nutritious food value chains with social protection systems:

- **Refine incentives for private sector participation.** Sustainable, efficacious integration requires incentivising private sector involvement. Social protection systems have often prioritised localised involvement of small-scale farmers (who may also be programme beneficiaries). However, increasing the engagement of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and larger private-sector businesses along the value chain can help scale up integration. In the Nigerian context, for example, inadequate financing, delayed payments by the government to contractors, and high farm gate prices drive value chain actors to the open market, where they can sell at more competitive prices. Refining incentive structures—such as offering subsidies to offset the start-up costs of

“ To harness the transformative potential of social protection for nutrition, it is essential to integrate multiple priorities and development agendas, including strengthening value chain approaches.

adopting new practices or standards— would encourage value chain actors to stay engaged.

- **Build the technical capacities of SMEs.** Public-sector social protection programmes are often regulated, requiring products that meet specific standards of quality, nutrition, and safety. In many low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), SMEs dominate the supply, distribution and retail of food products. SMEs involved in nutritious food value chains may need to strengthen their existing capacities to consistently produce products that meet these standards and integrate with social protection systems. In Indonesia, for example, many millers lack the technical knowledge necessary to effectively produce fortified rice. Targeted capacity-building programmes, including training on relevant procedures, could help establish a private sector ecosystem conducive to integration with public-sector social protection systems. Additionally, such capacity-building may also provide value chain actors with advantages in expanding the provision of affordable nutritious foods in the open market, creating a win-win scenario.
- **Identify cost-effective last-mile distribution solutions.** Nutrient-dense foods often have shorter shelf lives and more complex processing, transit and storage needs compared to staple foods. Therefore, it is essential for the public sector to address logistical gaps that could hinder the integration of nutritious food value chains. For example, in Nigeria, only a limited number of schools offer eggs in their meal plans, largely due to transportation challenges that result in significant damage during transit. Addressing these issues may require interventions at various levels, from smaller innovations in product packaging and shipping led by the private sector to larger public-sector improvements in roads and transportation infrastructure. Additionally, promoting hyper-local value chain solutions, such as producing nutritious foods close to distribution sites (e.g. school

compounds), could help mitigate these constraints.

Actions aligned with the three recommendations outlined in this article can create an enabling environment for the sustainable integration of private sector nutritious food value chains with social protection systems, potentially significantly improving access to nutritious diets for vulnerable households. While we have explored ways to enhance value chain integration with social protection systems, the full scope of how value chain integration impacts nutrition remains largely unexplored. Further investigation into this relationship, its underlying determinants, and the corresponding implications for social policy is warranted. ●

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1. Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).
2. GAIN is a Swiss-based foundation established at the United Nations in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, it aims to transform food systems to provide more nutritious foods for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

How the OAS has been supporting countries to address food insecurity in the Americas: The role of social protection and inclusion¹

Betilde Muñoz-Pogossian
and Sara Mía Noguera²

The global food crisis³ has severely impacted Latin America and the Caribbean, where about 131 million people lack access to a healthy diet (WFP 2023). Despite the region's abundant natural resources and agricultural productivity, millions still struggle to obtain nutritious food. The cost of a healthy diet in the Americas is the highest compared to the global average (USD 3.89 per day vs. the global average of USD 3.54) (ibid.). This disparity underscores the complex nature of food insecurity, a challenge exacerbated by systemic inequalities and socio-economic disparities.

The definition of food security has evolved from its initial focus on the “availability of food supplies at the global level” to a more comprehensive understanding that encompasses six dimensions.⁴ Research over the past decade has contributed to a better understanding of how social and economic inequalities impact these dimensions. As highlighted in the report on *Food Security and Nutrition Towards 2030*, “inequality is a significant barrier to agency, access, and sustainability within food systems” (FAO 2020).

In recent years, the Organization of American States (OAS) has intensified efforts to address these issues by recognising access to adequate food as a fundamental human right within the Inter-American Human Rights System. The OAS also emphasises that achieving food security and proper nutrition in the Americas requires not only enhancing agricultural productivity and food access but also addressing underlying inequalities and exclusions through inclusive social protection policies.

Economic and social inequalities as a barrier to food security

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed decades

of progress in poverty reduction, exposing the region's acute vulnerability. The poverty rate increased from 28.3 per cent in 2019 to 30.3 per cent in 2021 (World Bank 2023). Even before the pandemic, the region was among the most unequal in the world (ECLAC 2017), with high levels of income inequality. The report *Regional Situation of the Right to Adequate Food in Latin America-Working Group of the Protocol of San Salvador (GTPSS)* provides insight into how income inequality affects food security (OAS et al. 2019).

The analysis of household income allocation towards food in eight countries reveals stark disparities across income groups. For example, in El Salvador, households in the lowest-income decile allocate nearly 77 per cent of their income to food, compared to just 15.5 per cent for those in the highest decile. Similar trends are observed in Mexico and Ecuador, highlighting the financial strain that basic needs impose on the most vulnerable populations (ibid.).

Inequality in the region should be understood as a “multifaceted phenomenon characterized by a complex web of intersecting socioeconomic disparities, which are compounded by a succession of gender, ethnic-racial, territorial, and age inequalities throughout a person's life cycle” (ECLAC and UNFPA 2021). This complex web of inequalities disproportionately affects marginalised groups such as indigenous populations, afro-descendants, and women. For example, gender inequality exacerbates food insecurity, with 41.8 per cent of women in the region experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity compared to 32.2 per cent of men (OAS 2022). Within households, women often have less decision-making power, leading to unequal food distribution, as they frequently prioritize feeding others before themselves” (FAO et al. 2023). Additionally, they perform about 75 per cent of unpaid care work, spending more time than men

on childcare, elderly care, and domestic tasks (UNDP 2024).

Age is another factor affecting access to food security in the region. Older adults are particularly vulnerable due to reduced income, limited employment opportunities and higher healthcare costs. In 2022, 31 per cent of adults aged 60 and above experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, a rate significantly higher than that of younger adults (FAO et al. 2022). Additionally, children under five remain at risk, with 11.3 per cent of this age group affected by stunting, a consequence of chronic malnutrition. Moreover, “Child undernutrition and overweight are two sides of the same coin” (ibid.), reflecting interconnected issues stemming from factors such as poverty, lack of access to healthy food and systemic inequalities.

Race and ethnicity also play crucial roles in shaping access to adequate food and nutrition. Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities face higher rates of food insecurity and malnutrition due to systemic discrimination and historical marginalisation.⁵ Children from marginalised ethnic groups suffer stunting at rates nearly twice as high as their non-indigenous peers (UNICEF 2023).

The OAS, through its WGPSS, has highlighted that data concerning indigenous peoples, afro-descendants, people with disabilities, and migrants are often completely absent (OAS et al. 2019) from the reports countries submit on their progress in ensuring the right to adequate food and nutrition.

The OAS has also advocated for tailored interventions to address the needs of vulnerable groups, considering their unique socio-cultural contexts while tackling the underlying structural inequalities that perpetuate food insecurity. An intersectional approach⁶ can help understand how gender, age,

“ Addressing food insecurity in the Americas requires a multifaceted approach that combines immediate responses with long-term strategies to tackle underlying structural issues.



Photo: World Bank/Sarah Farhat. Women beneficiaries of social protection and nutrition programmes. Madagascar, 2019. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

race, and ethnicity, influence access to adequate food and nutrition.

The role of the OAS in promoting social protection: A human-centred approach

Social protection is essential for promoting a human-centred agenda that aims to prevent the deepening of inequalities (UNEN 2021) and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (OECD 2019). It directly benefits the most vulnerable populations, connecting two SDG targets: reducing gender disparities and socio-economic and intersecting inequalities. This critical policy sector empowers marginalised individuals, diminishes inequality, fosters social cohesion, enhances resilience, and fortifies the relationship between the State and its citizens.⁷

The OAS has been advocating for social policy measures and advancing universal social protection systems, in line with SDG target 1.3, to build more resilient societies with a strong focus on the right to adequate food and nutrition. The OAS’ efforts focus on three main areas: 1) Promoting policy dialog among social development authorities to define hemispheric priorities and opportunities for technical cooperation; 2) Monitoring Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights (ESCER), including the Rights to Adequate Food and Nutrition; and 3) Systematising regional information on policies, programmes, and initiatives undertaken by governments to address food insecurity.

Policy dialog and cooperation through the Ministerial Meeting on Social Development:

The OAS has been instrumental in facilitating the adoption of these policies through regional coordination processes, such as the Ministerial Meeting on Social Development. At these meetings, countries establish policy priorities in a Declaration and a Plan of Action.⁸ In the Declaration adopted at the most recent Ministerial, OAS member states recognised the need to enhance programmes aimed at eradicating hunger and child malnutrition in alignment with SDG 2. They committed to strengthening intersectoral coordination, promoting experience-sharing and fostering technical cooperation. They are dedicated to advancing inclusive and adaptable social protection systems to reduce poverty and inequalities.

Monitoring Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights (ESCER), including the Rights to Adequate Food and Nutrition:

Eighteen of the 34 OAS member countries have ratified the “Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (OAS 1988), commonly known as the “Protocol of San Salvador.”⁹ To monitor the progress of these countries in upholding these rights, the OAS established the Working Group of the Protocol of San Salvador (WGPSS).¹⁰ Using a standardised methodology with 714 indicators, including 97 specific to the right to food, the WGPSS assesses progress

in the fulfilment of economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights (ESCER). The information gathered allows for both country-specific and broader regional assessments, such as OAS et al. (2019).

Key conclusions and recommendations emphasise the need for States to enhance food production, supply and distribution methods to address economic and structural inequalities. The absence of a comprehensive approach to food security highlights the urgent need for policies that promote economic inclusion, social protection, and access to labour, health and education. While some countries have constitutional or legal frameworks recognising the right to food, additional regulations are needed to ensure food accessibility, adaptability, adequacy, and quality. Although efforts to combat hunger and malnutrition are evident, policies addressing non-communicable diseases remain underdeveloped and should be incorporated into State strategies.

States must adopt a holistic approach to public policy, considering the interdependence of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights while addressing discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status. Despite the existence of programmes for vulnerable populations, their effectiveness remains unclear, often due to the absence of critical elements such as specific legislation. Institutional weaknesses

also hinder the enforcement of the right to food, making the establishment of specialised jurisdictions for food rights crucial. Moreover, national reports often lack progress indicators and sufficient data, underscoring the need for improved information production to enable effective monitoring by civil society (ibid: 35).

Systematising regional information on policies, programmes, and initiatives undertaken by governments in the region to address food insecurity

OAS member states have highlighted the importance of collecting regional information on policies and initiatives addressing food insecurity, particularly those enacted in response to the food crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the OAS Department of Social Inclusion released the report: “Confronting Food Insecurity in the Americas: Best Practices and Lessons Learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic” (OAS 2022), which compiles data from 16 countries. This report highlights various programmes, including those supporting local agriculture, providing school meals to children, and offering cash transfers to low-income families to alleviate poverty and improve access to food, among other policy responses. To support member states in their collective learning efforts, the final chapter of the report, prepared in collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP), offers policy recommendations.

Addressing food insecurity in the Americas requires a multifaceted approach that combines immediate responses with long-term strategies to tackle underlying structural issues. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant gaps in programme coverage and relevance, underscoring the urgent need for robust and inclusive social protection systems capable of providing adequate assistance and upholding fundamental rights, even in times of crisis. Safeguarding social protection budgets and exploring alternative financing mechanisms, such as contingent insurance and international cooperation, are crucial for ensuring resilience (OAS 2022).

To prepare for future crises, social protection systems must incorporate flexibility and proactive planning. Innovations developed during

the COVID-19 pandemic, such as digital identification, payments and monitoring should be expanded and made accessible to all, particularly vulnerable groups. A holistic approach combining cash transfers, school feeding programmes and employment initiatives is also vital. As countries in the region move forward, it is crucial to prioritise the right to food and adequate nutrition, as recognized by the Inter-American System of Human Rights. Regional leaders must adapt institutional frameworks, processes and policies to effectively address both ongoing and emerging food insecurity challenges. ●

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5. “The PAHO emphasizes that rural populations, including Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, face severe food insecurity due to entrenched social and economic disparities. The report also highlights that the prevalence of food insecurity in these groups remains notably higher than in urban populations, driven by factors like poverty, exclusion, and climate change” (ibid).
6. An intersectional approach: “addresses the complex irreducible effects when multiple axes of inequality such as economic, political, cultural, bio-psychosocial, subjective, and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts, producing unique and indivisible effects” (OAS 2020).
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The potential and limitations of community-led urban agriculture in the Brazilian urban periphery¹

Mara Nogueira,¹ Aiko Ikemura Amaral² and Gareth A. Jones³

Food insecurity affects over 64 million people in Brazil, with the majority (84 per cent) living in urban areas (IBGE 2024). Concurrently, the proportion of the population considered overweight has increased over the past decade, reaching 55.4 per cent in 2019 (Mendoza 2021). While hunger is primarily driven by poverty, obesity is often linked to limited access to nutritious, affordable and healthy diets (FAO 2019). Recent research has highlighted that food environments mediate the relationship between inadequate diets and nutrition-related noncommunicable diseases (Cannuscio et al. 2019). The lack of access to fresh food and the prevalence of low-cost, ultra-processed foods disproportionately affect urban areas inhabited by poor and socially marginalised groups (Honório et al. 2021). In response to these combined challenges, urban agriculture has been identified as a promising approach for improving access to fresh food and fostering healthy eating habits, particularly among vulnerable groups (Orsini et al. 2013).

Beyond improved food security and dietary diversity, urban food gardens are seen to contribute positively to a range of challenges, including climate change mitigation, social development and cohesion (Weidner et al. 2019). However, critical voices have noted urban agriculture's limited contribution to enhancing food security among the urban poor (Badami and Ramankutty 2015), questioning its capacity to support self-sufficiency in densely populated cities in the Global South (Martellozzo et al. 2019). Others have emphasised how initiatives are constrained by "social, political, technical, environmental and economic difficulties" (Cunha and Cardoso 2022: 2), necessitating further investment and government support.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, this article explores the potential and challenges faced by an urban agriculture project in the periphery of São Paulo. *Mulheres do GAU* (Women's Urban Agriculture Group) is a women-led social collective that manages an urban garden in União de Vila Nova, a low-income neighbourhood in the city's eastern periphery. This initiative illustrates how urban agriculture can foster social inclusion, economic empowerment, and healthier eating habits in the community. However, achieving these goals requires sustained access to additional income sources, such as government grants and subsidies. We show how the collective's reliance on fixed-term, project-based funding undermines its sustainability and how the garden's dependence on external markets limits its contribution to local food security. The collective played an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic as food insecurity became more widespread, underscoring the importance of local initiatives in mitigating shocks and building more resilient food systems. Finally, we argue that the potential of urban gardens can be enhanced through their inclusion in government-funded social protection programmes that adopt a holistic view of food systems.

Mulheres do GAU: Urban agriculture and female empowerment in São Paulo's periphery

Foundation and maintenance

União was established in 1987 by families relocated to the area after being evicted from nearby land occupations. In the mid-1990s, São Paulo's municipal government moved families from flood-prone areas to União and initiated an urbanisation project in the neighbourhood. After multiple delays, the Housing and Urban Development Company of São Paulo (*Companhia de Desenvolvimento Habitacional e Urbano*—CDHU) completed infrastructure and public service improvements in the late 2000s.

Responding to community demands raised during participatory workshops, the CDHU reserved a green area for a social project aimed at promoting environmental education and income generation. A community vegetable garden was established, which operated for about six years until the funding ended. Subsequently, community leaders proposed a new project and petitioned for the loan of a plot of land that was being used as a dumping ground at the time. This initiative led to the creation of *Quebrada Sustentável*, an initiative offering environmental education to both young and senior citizens. It was also funded by the Municipal Labour and Social Development Secretariat, which provided 10 scholarships for educators to develop an urban garden and a plant nursery. According to Vilma, one of the leaders of *Mulheres do GAU*:

"When the Quebrada Sustentável project and the scholarships ended, we wondered what to do next. Up until then, this place was like this: once the projects finished, everyone left and just one or two people remained. Then we thought of starting the Mulheres do GAU collective, an urban agriculture group led by women and focused on women's empowerment. And here we are now, empowering women, generating income and, especially, providing healthful, natural and organic food for these women, their families and the community."

This experience highlights both the crucial role of government support in providing resources for social initiatives and the challenges in sustaining them beyond the lifespan of funding schemes. While resources are often available to start new projects, funding for maintaining existing ones is rarely provided, hindering their longevity. The creation of *Mulheres do GAU* was possible through support from the CDHU, the legal owner of the land, which



Photo: *Mulheres do GAU*—Urban garden (left), kitchen and social area (right). Brazil.

Source: Mara Nogueira, 2022.

“ The lack of access to fresh food and the prevalence of low-cost, ultra-processed foods disproportionately affect urban areas inhabited by poor and socially marginalised groups.

covered the costs of private security to prevent invasions and utility bills. However, this support was linked to the urbanisation project, and when we last visited the garden in 2023, the funding had ended, placing the collective’s financial viability at risk.

Social inclusion and protection

Most members of *Mulheres do GAU* are migrants from the Northeast region of Brazil—a group that has historically faced discrimination in São Paulo. Many are also older women with limited labour market prospects. In our discussions, they described the garden as a means to reconnect with their regional traditions and identities by working the land and cultivating vegetables typical of the Northeast. As noted by Orsini et al (2013: 701-702), urban agriculture can be particularly beneficial for marginalised social groups (e.g., immigrants, women, unemployed, senior citizens, people with disabilities) as it promotes social inclusion and well-being. The collective has been described as a space for healing, supporting women through struggles with trauma and material deprivation, including domestic violence and reintegration following incarceration.

As of 2023, the project employed nine women whose livelihoods depended on the garden. There was a desire to expand production to a new plot of land lent by the CDHU. However, the limited workforce hindered efforts to rehabilitate the contaminated land, formerly used

as a dump, while also maintaining the original garden and seeking new revenue-generating opportunities. Although the two gardens could accommodate more workers, *Mulheres do GAU* could not guarantee stable income for its members without additional government support. This situation highlights the challenge in balancing multiple objectives: expanding production to improve community access to fresh and organic food is constrained by the need to generate income.

Pandemic breakdown and new partnerships

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the collective’s financial viability was jeopardised by limited opportunities to sell produce to middle-class consumers willing and able to pay a premium for organic vegetables. At the same time, food insecurity increased in Brazilian urban peripheries due to rising unemployment (Nogueira et al. 2020) and restricted mobility. *Mulheres do GAU* initially responded by donating organic food baskets to neighbours, a financially unsustainable initiative for the collective’s members.

These conflicting goals were reconciled through a partnership with the Centre for Recovery and Nutritional Education (*Centro de Recuperação e Educação Nutricional*—CREN), an NGO focused on combating child malnutrition and promoting nutritional awareness. CREN is integrated into the Brazilian federal healthcare system, working closely with governments across the country. In São Paulo, CREN has a long-standing relationship with the municipal

government and operates a base in União, where it provides low-income families with nutritional assistance through educational activities and meal provisions for children, adapting these initiatives into a food donation programme during the pandemic.

For *Mulheres do GAU*, the partnership with CREN was essential for the survival of the initiative during this period. Vilma explains:

“We were here, desperate, not knowing what to do. Everything closed [due to lockdown]. People didn’t come here to buy anything because everyone was at home, very afraid of the pandemic. That’s when this partnership with the CREN through the [NGO] Kairós Institute came up... [During the pandemic, CREN couldn’t assist families at its centre—those with children suffering from malnutrition and obesity. They didn’t know what to do with these families. That’s when they came up with the idea of buying organic produce from urban farmers, putting together food baskets, and donating them to the families who couldn’t go to their centre.”

Through CREN, *Mulheres do GAU* channelled their production locally, helping to alleviate some of the pandemic’s impacts in União. While this shift made a modest contribution to household needs, it illustrates how local agricultural production can remain inaccessible or unaffordable to low-income urban residents, indicating the

“... urban food gardens are seen to contribute positively to a range of challenges, including climate change mitigation, social development and cohesion...”



Photo: *Mulheres do GAU's expansion. Contaminated land (left) and small garden planted for land rehabilitation (right). Brazil. Source: Mara Nogueira, 2022.*

Source: Gareth A. Jones (2022).

importance of partnerships to address these conditions.

Urban agriculture can offer opportunities for income generation and improve access to healthy food in impoverished communities. However, aligning these objectives requires targeted interventions. For *Mulheres do GAU*, the partnership with CREN represents inclusion in a broader network that spans the public and third sectors for food security. This collaboration ensures both stable income for the project and the ability to serve the community. In our conversation, Vilma expressed frustration over the lack of government support in recent years but was optimistic about the return of the National Council for Food Security and Nutrition (*Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*—CONSEA). Established in 1993 but shut down in 2019, this participatory council was responsible for monitoring and coordinating national policy on food security and nutrition. For Vilma, its reinstatement represented a renewed focus and commitment to food security.

Building social protection from below

In this article, we analysed an urban agriculture project in the periphery of São Paulo, focusing on a women-led collective that promotes social inclusion, income generation, and, in their own words, women's empowerment. We demonstrated how initiatives such as *Mulheres do GAU* can positively impact access to healthy food in low-income

areas. While the literature often presents urban gardens as potential solutions for alleviating poverty and enhancing food security, we show that these two goals can sometimes conflict.

Support for urban agriculture projects in peripheral neighbourhoods—including integration into broader social protection networks—is essential to ensure they function as social inclusion hubs and generate income for the community while contributing to a healthier food environment. Without such support, financial constraints can limit their effectiveness in serving the communities they are part of. Partnerships, such as the one between CREN and *Mulheres do GAU*, facilitated by the CDHU, can be integral to a more sustainable social protection network aimed at addressing urban food security through a multi-pronged approach. These partnerships can provide income for the women involved and offer broader opportunities for socialisation. They can also improve food accessibility by supplying subsidised (or free) fresh produce to low-income residents while ensuring that the food provided is both healthy and culturally relevant. ●

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Strengthening Peru's public procurement law implementation for enhanced food security and nutrition: The role of the UN Rome-based agencies

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Peru's 2020 public purchase law⁴ offers an opportunity to strengthen social assistance programmes' contribution to food security and nutrition. The Rome-Based Agencies (RBA)⁵ are helping to identify and overcome roadblocks: a lack of experience with the law's practical implementation at local level and the absence of institutional mechanisms to enable integrated approaches, so that this opportunity can be realised at national scale. Over the long term, overcoming these roadblocks will transform the quality of food-based social programmes and make smallholder farmers the protagonists of a healthier, more equitable and functional food system for all Peruvians.

The article sets out the affordability problem of a nutritious diet in Peru and the impact that public procurement can have, if smallholder farmers are enabled not only to produce but also to sell. It summarizes RBA work in support of national, regional and local governments to better connect sectoral investments in agriculture, production and social protection.

Peru is a country of paradox. It is a country of gastronomical richness and megadiversity and at the same time has the highest levels of food insecurity in South America. It is a country where smallholder farmers supply most of what people eat,⁶ but a diverse, healthful diet is unaffordable for at least 30 per cent of families; indeed, in 2023 a healthful diet cost more in Latin America and the Caribbean than in any other region of the world (FAO et al., 2024). Economic fall-out from the pandemic, inflation and climate change have driven up poverty

and, with it, food insecurity, malnutrition in all its forms, and hunger.

The Ministry of Agriculture's 2021 food systems transformation roadmap envisages a food system in which the population consumes healthy, nutritious foods, whose production safeguards ecosystems, and in which the economic benefits of the food value chain are equitably shared. This vision, as in many countries, is some distance from being realized. Government, however, is actively pursuing.

Despite prioritizing an agro-export model, Peru now also increasingly sees smallholder farmers as key to reactivating the economy and to ensuring affordable, sustainably produced food (including for smallholders themselves, who are among Peru's most economically vulnerable populations). Prioritizing smallholders means that Government must invest not only in smallholders' ability to produce food but also in their ability to sell in terms of quantity and quality. Achieving this means overcoming production and the supply chain inefficiencies and other barriers that keep smallholders from supplying fresh, nutritious foods at affordable prices, to markets.

As much as the affordability of a healthy diet is a central concern for the population at large, it is a particular concern for the vulnerable populations targeted by Peru's national social assistance programmes. Three of these programmes are food-based: *Qali Warma*, the national school feeding programme; *Cuna Mas*, the national early childhood development programme; and *Programa de Complementación Alimentaria*, which provides food assistance to soup kitchens, shelters, and tuberculosis

patients. The Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) currently spends some USD 800 million per year buying food for these programmes.

In this context, the implementation of Peru's law 31071 mandating that 30 per cent of government budgets for food be spent on food originating with smallholders, is not only a legal necessity but also an opportunity to make government budgets work for positive food system transformation. An estimated 200,000 smallholder farmers in Peru could in theory sell their produce to this public market;⁷ virtually none does. The three social assistance programmes mentioned above have large budgets for food but do not buy from smallholders. If smallholders could overcome the barriers that keep them from competing in public markets, they could certainly sell in private ones, which would make fresh foods and protein more accessible to whole populations. Everyone loses as a result of this missed opportunity to better connect public expenditure, and in the course of so doing improve availability and affordability of healthy diets, for everyone.

FAO, IFAD and WFP have worked together since 2020 to support first the design and now the implementation of Law 31071, beginning by commissioning a thorough diagnosis of barriers and what the country needed to invest in order to overcome them (WFP, 2021). On the supply side, main barriers relate to productivity (absence of technical assistance, credit, insurance, limited access to water); the value chain (a lack of facilities for aggregation, storage, processing, and transport); and to farmers' readiness to engaged in a structured way with public markets (organization, formalization, capacity to comply with food quality and safety

standards). On the demand side, social programmes are not yet ready to buy at scale; achieving the 30 per cent target will involve redesigning programmes to include fresh foods, identifying viable sourcing options, and various institutional and normative changes.

Having a common vision for implementation of the law and a common diagnosis of needs and priorities has been important. In 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture established a technical working group with the three agencies on the topic, to study successful experiences elsewhere in locally sourced social protection programmes such as ‘home-grown school feeding’ and analyse their possible application in Peru. Exchanges with Honduras, Brazil and Ecuador further clarified the emerging common roadmap.

Each agency has contributed technically to the national-level normative framework for the law’s implementation. FAO for instance supported the development of the guide to accrediting smallholders with the ‘family agriculture’ label, that certifies the use of best agricultural practices and gives them priority access to various government resources. IFAD helped with the development of the Ministry of Agriculture’s purchasing guide. WFP supported the development what is now the Ministry’s national training curriculum for smallholders.

Major roadblocks remain. While Peru’s policy framework related to the law is sound, there is a lack of experience with the law’s practical implementation at subnational level. Progress will depend on the ministries involved refocusing on the common goal of reaching 30 per cent of public purchases from family farming, yet it is challenging to establish institutional mechanisms that enable integrated approaches across ministries and between national, regional and local levels of government—all of which have a role. Decentralized public procurement models have to be defined.

The RBAs are working together to support regional and local governments to better connect sectoral investments in family farming and social protection

so that farmers can not only produce but also sell, and food-based social programmes can buy. Between 2020 and 2024, the three agencies supported the development and piloting of models in several regions of the country. In Ayacucho and Junín, WFP and FAO, respectively, have worked with local governments to direct local government resources to the purchase of fresh foods for schools, complementing the dry goods that the national school feeding programme provides. These experiences—starting prior to the enactment of the law—have shown, albeit on a very limited scale, that smallholders are ready and willing to supply fresh foods. Activities included support to smallholder farmers to become accredited, and training in food safety and other topics, following the national training curriculum mentioned above. In Ayacucho, WFP supported the local government to establish a certified fresh food processing centre. IFAD has invested significantly in value chains in many regions including Ayacucho, where there are now real opportunities to leverage investments in infrastructure, complementary training of farmers and structured support to access the public market. It is perhaps not a surprise that Ayacucho is the first region with a specific plan for implementation of Law 31071, bringing together six relevant ministries in an integrated plan, and has developed an institutional mechanism for coordination.

The RBAs have supported national, regional and local government with the common objective to generate evidence regarding ‘what works’ to support the implementation of the law at national scale. WFP has just launched a multi-year technical assistance programme in Ayacucho, Cusco and Piura, to this end. FAO continues to support public procurement in Junín and is expanding its assistance in Loreto and Ancash. IFAD will finance additional investments in commercialization by smallholders, through a new project running until 2030. Overall, the common effort should catalyze resources to the sector, and especially where investment has been particularly scarce: in farmers’ ability not only to produce but also to *compete*, to sell in competitive markets. This is

the ‘missing middle’ in the investment to attain Peru’s 30 per cent goal and ultimately to attain Peru’s vision of a healthy, equitable and sustainable food system.

Over the long term, overcoming these roadblocks will transform the quality of food-based social programmes and make smallholder farmers the protagonists of a healthier, more equitable and functional food system for all Peruvians. ●

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1. Representative, World Food Programme (WFP) Peru.
 2. Representative, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Peru.
 3. Head of Multi-country Office for Andean region and Southern Cone, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).
 4. Law No. 31071, also known as the “Law of State Procurement of Food from Family Farming,” was published on November 20th, 2020.
 5. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, and World Food Programme.
 6. 57 per cent (Pintado 2022).

Overcoming food security and nutrition roadblocks in social protection: Contributions to human capital in the Middle East and North Africa

Jane Waite, Amina Tarraf, Omar Abdelgawad, Micheal O'Hiarlathie, Fred Alumasa, Aldrian Mungani and Jasmin Radwan¹

Poverty is closely linked to food insecurity, making the enhancement of food security vital for reducing poverty. The 2020 State of Food Security and Nutrition report emphasised that limited economic resources lead to malnutrition, with diet quality as a key factor (FAO et al. 2020). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, poverty contributes to the double burden of malnutrition—undernutrition and obesity resulting from poor diets (Delisle and Batal 2016). The World Bank (2023) estimates that a 1 per cent increase in food prices pushes an additional 10 million people into extreme poverty. Social protection plays a key role in addressing

poverty and food insecurity, promoting inclusive growth and ensuring a minimum standard of living.

Social protection in the MENA Region: Significance and roadblocks

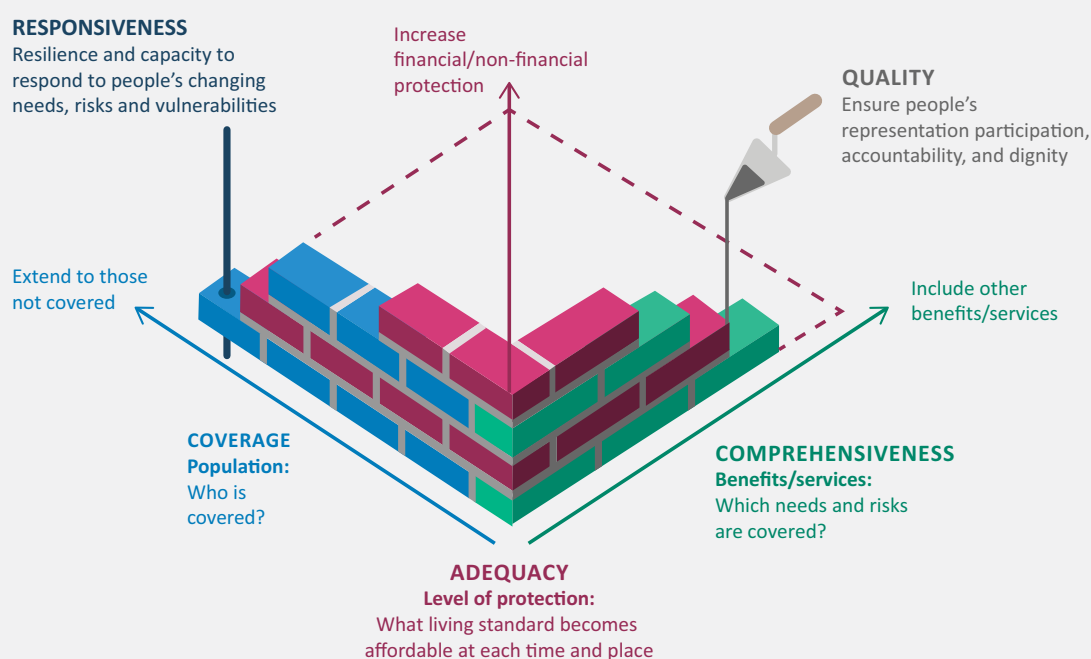
Social protection is defined as a “set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their lifecycles, especially for vulnerable groups” (SPIAC-B n.d.). Social protection serves four main functions:

- **Protection:** Alleviates deprivation and reduces poverty.
- **Prevention:** Averts deprivation through mitigation measures.

- **Promotion:** Enhances income generation and resilience.
- **Transformative:** Addresses social equity and exclusion.

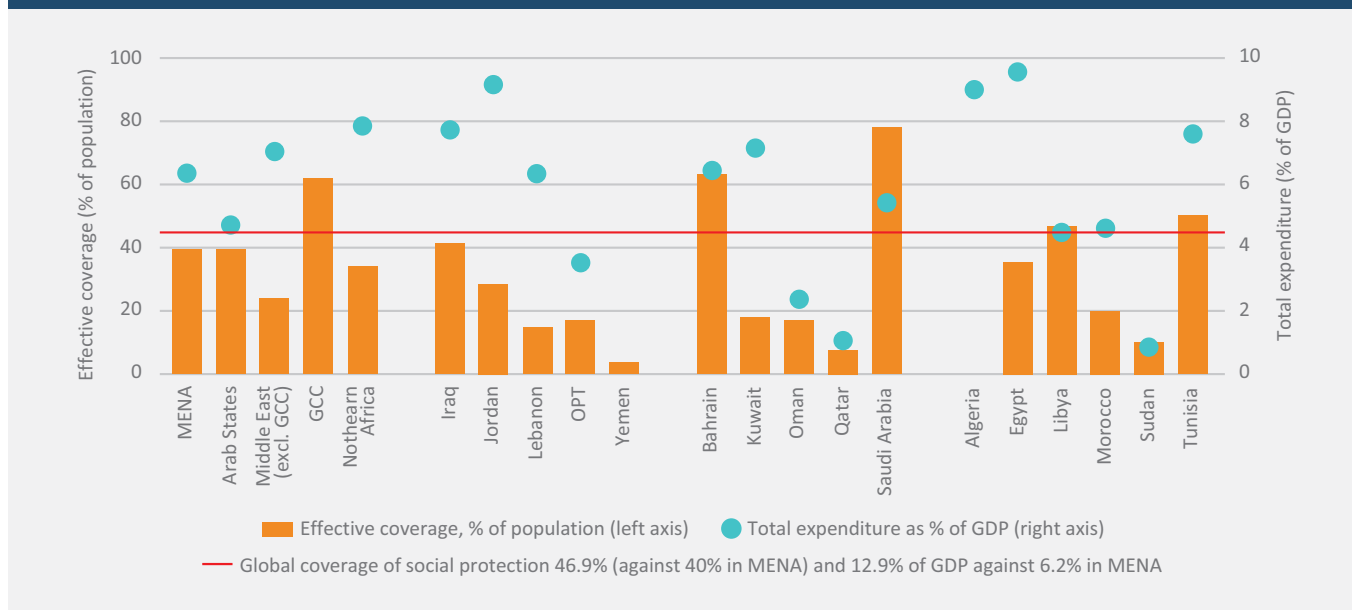
In the MENA region, social safety nets focus on poverty alleviation through cash assistance, in-kind transfers, price subsidies, and access to basic services, increasingly aiming to address growing food security and nutrition needs. A robust national social protection system should enhance coverage, adequacy, comprehensiveness, quality, and shock-responsiveness (Figure 1). Improving these dimensions can enable individuals to meet their essential needs and manage risks throughout their lives, particularly when linked with food systems and other key sectors, such as education and health.

FIGURE 1: Foundations of a social protection system to meet people’s needs and address risks



Source: USP2030 Working Group on Social Protection and Food Systems Transformation (2021).

FIGURE 2: Percentage of the population covered by at least one social protection benefit (2020)



Notes: GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council; GDP = gross domestic product; MENA = Middle East and North Africa; OPT = Occupied Palestinian Territories. Regional aggregates for expenditure are weighted by GDP.

Source: ILO, World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry (SSI); ILOSTAT; national sources. <<https://wspr.social-protection.org>>. ILO (2021).

Social protection in the MENA region has low coverage, with approximately 60 per cent of people lacking access, compared to 53 per cent globally. Income support for poor people is also insufficient. Underinvestment in coverage, comprehensiveness, and adequacy undermines the effectiveness of social protection. Arab states allocate only 6.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) to social protection, significantly below the global average of 12.9 per cent and 16.4 per cent in high-income countries (ILO 2021). The majority of spending goes towards food and energy subsidies, which are poorly targeted and inefficient; energy subsidies alone account for double the spending on social assistance. (Ridao-Cano et al. 2023).

Food security and nutrition in MENA: Significance and roadblocks

The World Food Summit (1996) defined “food security” as being achieved when “all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to nutritious food that meets their dietary needs for an active, healthy life.” It identified four key dimensions: physical availability, access to food, utilisation, and stability of these outcomes (Figure 3). Two additional dimensions—agency and sustainability—

have also been proposed. Achieving Zero Hunger is challenging with nearly 10 per cent of the global population experiencing hunger in 2022, an increase of 122 million since 2019 (FAO et al. 2023)

The MENA region faces significant food and nutrition insecurity, worsened by conflict, climate change, volatile economies, and heavy reliance on imports—70 per cent of consumed food is imported (OECD and FAO 2022). The Ukraine conflict has further added to food price inflation, impacting countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, where inflation exceeded 61 per cent. The World Food Programme (WFP) reports a 20 per cent increase in food-insecure individuals in the region since 2019 (WFP 2024). Additionally, the region grapples with the triple burden of malnutrition: undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies (Figure 4).

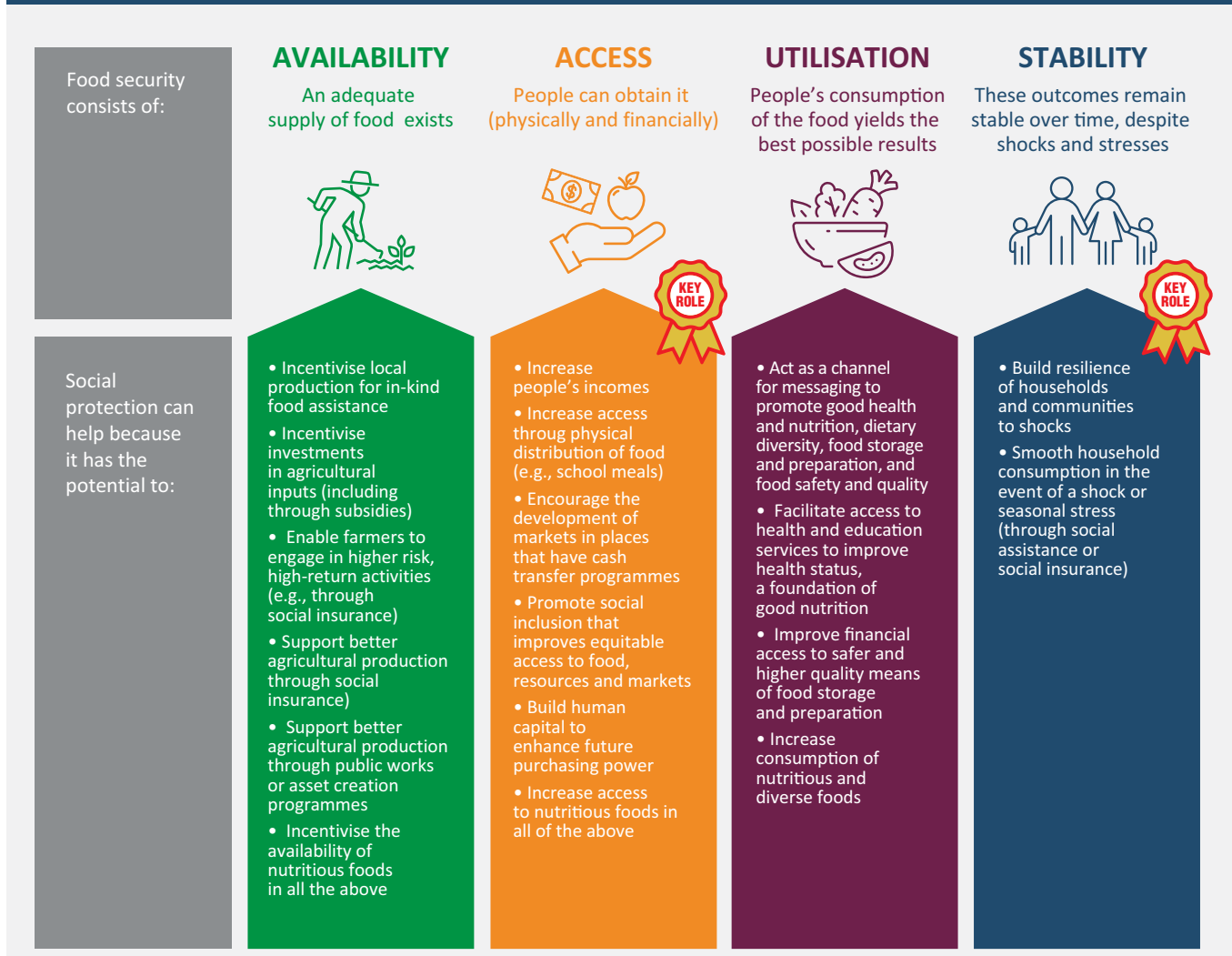
Achieving food and nutrition security in the MENA region is complex due to several interconnected challenges affecting its four dimensions: access, availability, utilisation, and stability.

1. **Conflict and displacement:** The region hosts 70 per cent of the world’s most food-insecure

populations in conflict zones (WFP n.d.), with about 45 ongoing conflicts across 10 countries and 23 per cent of global internally displaced persons. The recent escalation in Gaza was projected to leave over 495,000 people facing catastrophic famine by September 2024 (IPC/CH Phase-5). Conflicts disrupt commodity flows, reduce food availability, inflate prices, and hinder purchasing power, exacerbating malnutrition.

2. **Economic shocks:** Global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine conflict, coupled with domestic issues, have contributed to higher inflation and declining real incomes. These factors push people to adopt negative coping strategies such as reliance on cheaper processed foods, which worsen malnutrition.
3. **Climate change:** The region is vulnerable to extreme temperatures, droughts and floods, which hinder food production and inflate prices, affecting access for about half the population.
4. **Population dynamics:** Rapid population growth of 1.5 per cent annually places

FIGURE 3: The four dimensions of food security and their linkages to social protection



Source: WFP (2021).

pressure on agricultural production, impacting food availability and increasing dependence on imports. Urbanisation has shifted consumption patterns towards processed foods.

- Food systems:** Nearly 50 per cent of MENA's food is imported, including government-subsidised wheat and bread. This reliance contributes to poor dietary diversity and subsequently high rates of stunting and obesity.
- Lack of adequate financing:** The global funding gap for hunger has reached 65 per cent, and recent humanitarian funding cuts for countries such as Yemen and Syria have left millions without essential food assistance, complicating access and stability.

Price subsidies for food and fuel have been a key policy tool aimed at poverty alleviation in the MENA region; however, fuel subsidies disproportionately benefit higher-income groups. Former Egyptian Finance Minister Amr El Garhy noted that unconditional subsidies aid wealthier quintiles five to seven times more than the poor (DMC 2018). While in-kind food subsidies can protect vulnerable populations from rising prices, they lack clear nutrition objectives, contributing to reliance on cheap, calorie-dense foods that worsen malnutrition (Breisinger et al. 2013; UN ESCWA 2019). In response, MENA governments are reforming subsidies to reduce fiscal burdens and improve equity, increasingly shifting towards cash-based programmes for poverty reduction. Integrating food security and nutrition objectives into

social protection is a priority, along with increasing investment in basic services to improve nutrition (Bastagli et al. 2016).

Regional case studies: Efforts to address food insecurity and nutrition through social protection

Egypt: Towards nutrition-sensitive social protection

Egypt is addressing the triple burden of malnutrition—stunting, obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies. The Egypt Family Health Survey (2021) found a 13 per cent prevalence of stunting among children under five years old, rising to 16 per cent in Upper Egypt. Additionally, anaemia affected 43 per cent of children and 28 per cent of reproductive-age women, and only 40 per cent of infants under six months were

exclusively breastfed. The economic cost of child undernutrition was estimated at USD 3.7 billion, or 1.9 per cent of GDP in 2009 (AUC et al., 2014).

In response, the Government of Egypt launched the *Takaful* and *Karama* cash transfer programmes in 2015, supporting 5.2 million vulnerable households. *Takaful* provides conditional cash transfers for families with children under 18 years old, promoting school attendance and health check-ups, while *Karama* offers unconditional support for elderly people, people with disabilities, and orphans.

A key component of *Takaful* is the “First 1,000 Days” nutrition programme developed by the Ministry of Social Solidarity, which has provided cash top-ups and social behaviour change (SBC) initiatives promoting dietary diversity among pregnant and breastfeeding women since 2017. Evidence suggests that combining cash transfers with behaviour

change interventions maximises impacts on child and maternal health. To address key issues affecting vulnerable groups, including maternal and child nutrition, the Ministry launched the *Wa'ai* (Awareness) programme.

An impact assessment of *Takaful* showed improvements in diet quality and increased spending on nutritious foods, positively impacting child nutrition and health, including weight-for-height z-scores (WHZ) for children under two years old (Breisinger et al. 2018). The Egypt Family Health Survey also indicates a reduction in stunting rates among children under five, from 21 per cent in 2014 to 13 per cent in 2021, coinciding with the implementation of *Takaful* and *Karama*.

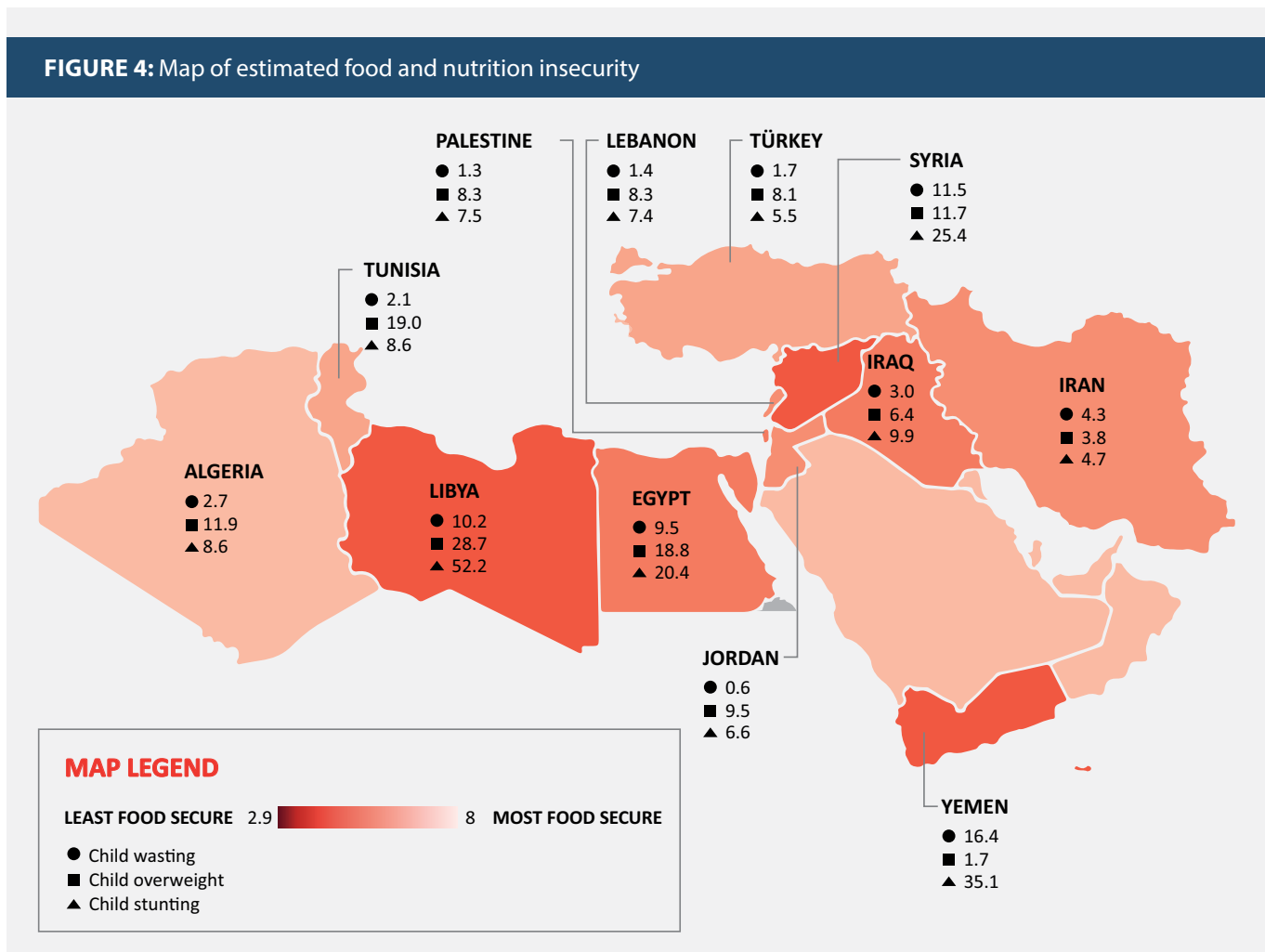
Yemen: Social assistance programmes in conflict-affected states

Addressing food and nutrition insecurity requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates health, agriculture, education,

water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) initiatives, and social protection. This approach enhances development, boosts productivity, and improves incomes while providing school feeding and cash or in-kind assistance.

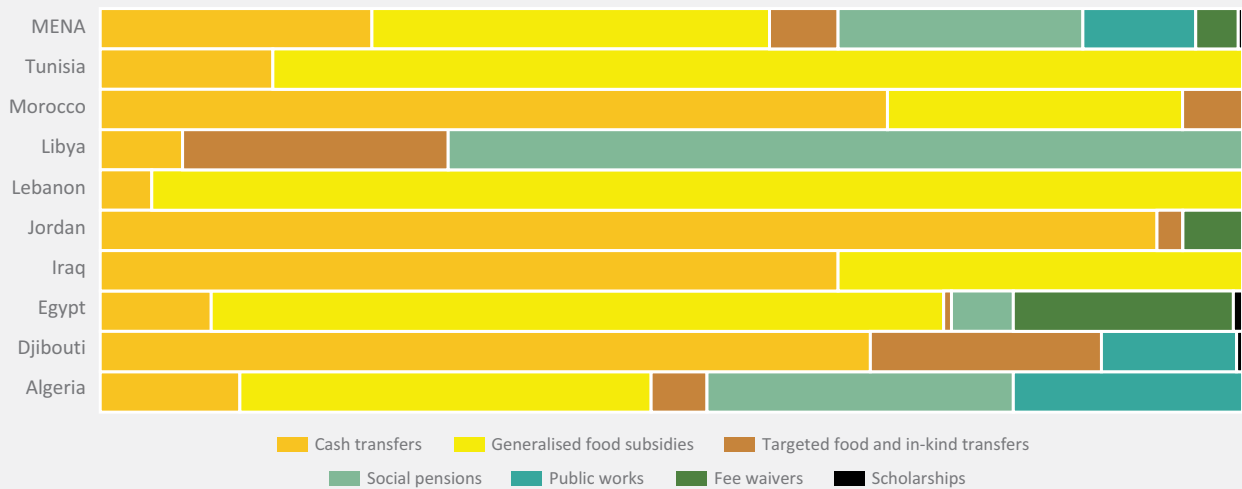
Yemen faces one of the world’s largest humanitarian crises, with severe food insecurity and malnutrition exacerbated by conflict, infrastructure destruction, climate events, and economic turmoil. In response, WFP intensified nutrition, school feeding, and livelihoods programmes.

A key initiative involved a cash-based intervention in seven districts aimed at preventing acute malnutrition in children aged 6-59 months and pregnant or breastfeeding women. From August 2022 to June 2023, 11 rounds of cash assistance (about USD 30 per person per month) were distributed to 35,582 beneficiaries, coupled with SBC



Source: Deep Knowledge Analytics 2022, and UNICEF/WHO/World Bank (2023).

FIGURE 5: Percentage of social assistance spending in 2022



Note: Generalised food subsidies include quasi-generalised subsidies. Targeted food and in-kind subsidies include school meals.

Source: World Bank (2023). Ridao-Cano et al. (2023).

initiatives, improving dietary diversity and nutrition outcomes. Additionally, school feeding and livelihood interventions supported food security and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, benefiting over 592,000 Yemeni primary schoolchildren.

Social protection programmes in the MENA region face challenges related to limited coverage and financing, which reduce

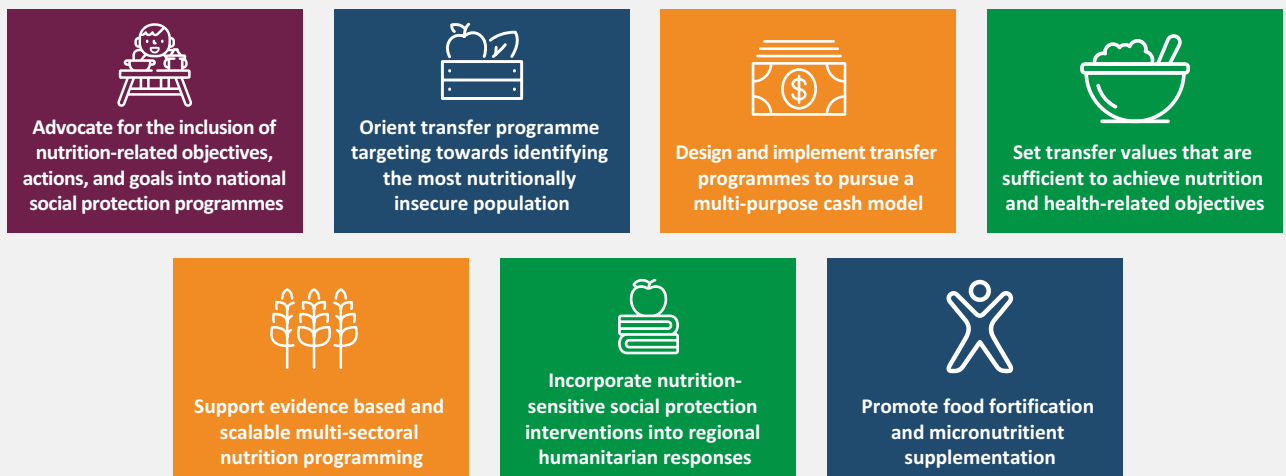
their effectiveness in alleviating poverty and ensuring food security. The 2021 Arab Ministerial Forum on Social Protection identified four key challenges that need to be addressed:

- Enhancing lifecycle-based coverage
- Promoting shock-responsive mechanisms
- Securing sustainable financing

- Strengthening governance and coordination

Collaborative efforts are vital to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1—No Poverty, and SDG 2—Zero Hunger, including expanding coverage and linking access to services to nutrition outcomes. Governments are shifting toward more nutrition-sensitive approaches to address

FIGURE 6: Key actions for nutrition-sensitive social protection



Note: Generalised food subsidies include quasi-generalised subsidies. Targeted food and in-kind subsidies include school meals.

Source: World Bank (2023). Ridao-Cano et al. (2023).

“ Achieving food and nutrition security in the MENA region is complex due to several interconnected challenges affecting its four dimensions: access, availability, utilisation, and stability.

malnutrition, including subsidy reform. Evidence from Egypt and Yemen shows that investing in nutrition-sensitive interventions leads to positive outcomes. Key actions include integrating food and nutrition security into social protection agendas and objectives (Figure 6). ●

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'Food... but no money': Considering social protection and notions of self-reliance for Uganda's refugees

Evan Easton-Calabria¹

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought much-needed attention to the topic of refugees and social protection. Around the world, examples emerged of refugees gaining newfound access to healthcare and other formal government- or agency-led social protection programmes. Yet these positive stories arose against a dire backdrop: refugees were often denied inclusion in assistance provided by host governments, while lockdowns curtailed their ability to access food rations in camps. Tragically, the lack of inclusion in social protection programmes for refugees is longstanding and not a merely circumstantial to crisis; indeed, millions of refugees, as well as other displaced people and migrant workers and their families, lack this protection (ILO 2021a), illustrating a critical gap in the provision of social protection.

This article calls for the adoption of a truly inclusive social protection lens that understands and responds to challenges faced by refugees and other forcibly displaced populations. Such a lens is necessary to identify and address barriers and increase the opportunities to include refugees in formal social protection programmes.² Enabling and bolstering social protection for refugees is necessary to achieving a range of positive outcomes for refugees themselves and to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other targets, including improving food security globally. However, progress will likely be slow, as many of the world's highest refugee-hosting countries have limited or nascent social protection programmes. At the end of 2023, for example, 75 per cent of refugees were living in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR 2024). Recent statistics from 133 low and middle-income countries reveal a striking financing gap in their current ability to fund social protection programmes, highlighting a

critical shortfall that puts universal social protection coverage out of reach for millions of people (ILO 2024).

Drawing on over a decade of work and research with refugees in Uganda, including during and after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article explores the food (in)security of refugees in Uganda at the intersection of social protection, humanitarian assistance, and climate hazards. It provides primary data from past and ongoing research to consider how these interact with and impact notions of self-reliance for refugees in the country, broadly defined here as refugees surviving without humanitarian assistance. In particular, it draws on research on urban refugees in Arua, West Nile District, in 2021 (Easton-Calabria et al. 2022) and refugees in the Nakivale settlement, Isingiro District, Uganda, from 2023 to the present.

Refugees in Uganda

Uganda is a top refugee-hosting country, with over 1.5 million refugees. It has been called a model for refugee self-reliance due to its legal framework and the fact that many refugees are provided with plots of land to farm in settlements. However, in practice, rights are often curtailed by barriers such as limited employment opportunities, small plots of land, and the requirement for refugees to be registered in settlements to receive food assistance. For most refugees in Uganda, humanitarian assistance in settlements provides *de facto* social protection, offering (at least in theory) access to healthcare, education, and some support for food, such as through the World Food Programme (WFP)'s cash assistance. Yet this support is troublingly limited: refugees in the country receive the lowest food assistance in the region (UNHCR 2023).

Limited social protection for refugees

While still limited, social protection for refugees is an emerging topic. The recently

unveiled 'Refugee Self-Reliance Model' for several Ugandan settlements includes it as a foundational element alongside livelihoods promotion, financial inclusion, and social empowerment. The self-reliance model adopts a graduation approach that is market-based, seeking to assist refugees through "push" strategies designed to build participants' skills and capacities for engaging in market-based activities, combined with "pull" strategies aimed at removing barriers and strengthening the inclusivity of national systems, including market, financial, and social protection systems. (WFP 2024)

However, social protection schemes remain out of reach for most refugees. Uganda has low social protection coverage, and there is a dire need for the Government of Uganda (GoU) to increase its spending in this area. In 2021, only 0.7 per cent of Uganda's gross domestic product (GDP) was allocated to social protection (UPFSP 2021), compared to the average of 2.1 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, the continental average of 3.8 per cent (UPFSP 2021; ILO 2021b), and far below the average of 12.9 per cent of GDP that countries typically spend on social protection (excluding health) (ILO 2021b). The low rate of formal employment among refugees means that their access to contributory social insurance programmes is minimal, and most refugees fall below the age range of other social protection programmes, even if they could access them.

Limited options make humanitarian social protection initiatives, such as the Sida-funded NutriCash programme for women and children—a programme jointly implemented by the government, WFP and UNICEF—all the more important. Implemented in eight refugee-hosting districts through government structures, it aims to strengthen both social protection and health systems while delivering a nutrition-sensitive cash plus programme to recipients, comprising 70 per cent nationals and 30 per cent refugees (WFP

2023). The programme will expand to other sub-regions to support 60,000 people through a second phase running from 2025-2029. The aforementioned Self-Reliance Model will incorporate NutriCash into its framework and aims to extend Uganda's Senior Citizen's Grant (SCG—SAGE) to refugees aged 80 years old or above. However, even at this planned scale, such programmes and broader development initiatives aimed at increasing the provision of social services in refugee-hosting regions cannot fill the gaps in wider support.

The added pressure of climate change

Uganda also faces various risks due to climate change, such as flooding and landslides, and is particularly vulnerable to drought. Over 50 per cent of the country's population is exposed to drought due to factors including reliance on rain-fed agriculture; this includes high refugee-hosting areas such as West Nile and Isingiro district. Recurrent climate shocks have increased levels of acute food insecurity and overall vulnerability, with research showing that weather shocks significantly reduce the numbers of meals per day in Ugandan farming households and increase the likelihood of food shortages (see Ogenrwoth et al. 2023).

As my ongoing research shows, refugees have suffered the impacts of drought alongside Ugandans. A Congolese refugee in the Nakivale settlement explained,

“[Food insecurity] has ever been there since we arrived [in 2006]; but it has

worsened over time. Climate change has seriously affected our harvests, leading to hunger. Inflation in the country also reduced the capacity of households to buy food, making the cash support we get from WFP [NutriCash programme], which has been reduced to a minimum year after year, even less significant.”

The importance of cash for subsistence

“Food is available, but there is no money,” a refugee in Nakivale shared, highlighting the challenges of limited income generation opportunities alongside very low amounts of cash for food from WFP. Indeed, my research finds that refugees in Nakivale now commonly perceive small businesses rather than farming as a key means to achieve food security. They explain that they need more money to combat food costs due to inflation, and that businesses are more sustainable in the face of uncertain weather conditions that profoundly impact farming. As one refugee explained:

I really don't control the situation because this matter of food is closely connected to financial resources. One can have control and make decisions over what to eat if he/she has money, saying: “If I ate beans yesterday, let me eat vegetables today and meat tomorrow”. Otherwise, I can't make any decisions as long as I do not have a good job.

Nakivale's economy relies heavily on crop production, representing an interplay

“ ... social protection for refugees is necessary to achieving a range of positive outcomes for refugees themselves and to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other targets ...



Photo: Andy Wheatley/DFID. Maize crops growing in Rwamwanja refugee settlement. Uganda, 2013. CC BY 2.0.



Photo: EU/ECHO/Anouk Delafortrie. Refugee mother and child tuck into a nutritious meal of porridge. Uganda, 2016. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“ ... social protection efforts primarily serve to reduce the most negative impacts of humanitarian budget cuts (saving lives) rather than changing lives.

between subsistence farming and humanitarian assistance. However, this combination has rarely provided widespread food security in recent years. Refugees in Uganda have faced consecutive years of ration cuts (including during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic), and both flooding and drought have decreased agricultural yields. Successive cuts through a ‘prioritisation exercise’ have meant that as of July 2023, 14 per cent of refugees in Ugandan settlements received 60 per cent of their food rations, 82 per cent of refugees received 30 per cent, and 4 per cent no longer received any food assistance (UNHCR 2023). This situation is compounded by land pressure due to increasing refugee numbers and the growth of refugee family sizes, resulting in plots that are generally too small to help entire households achieve subsistence. Some refugees have not even been provided land for farming, making them even more reliant on food assistance and underscoring the urgent need for social protection. When asked about their level of self-reliance, many refugees in Nakivale explain that they depend on food assistance, struggle to feed their families, and cannot farm viably; in short, they feel they are not self-reliant at all.

Takeaways

As efforts to support refugees’ well-being and inclusion in social protection in Uganda continue, several takeaways emerge. The first is a call for cash transfers that could be used to help refugees

purchase more food and address other needs, along with grants that can support business development. This builds on a growing body of literature demonstrating the positive impacts of cash transfers for refugees, while also emphasising the need for sustainable assistance and an enabling policy environment to achieve longer-term effects.

In a context of limited social protection overall in Uganda and decreasing funding for refugees, it is crucial to consider the ‘protection’ inherent in social protection. Currently, social protection efforts primarily serve to reduce the most negative impacts of humanitarian budget cuts (saving lives) rather than changing lives. While the former is undoubtedly crucial, so is sustainable support to reduce food insecurity. The newly unveiled self-reliance model for refugees in Orichungo is ambitious, yet it operates in a context where refugees’ food security has been progressively eroded due to funding cuts over the past four years.

There is immense value in strengthening Uganda’s social protection system more broadly, including extending it to refugees. However, this requires increased political support at all levels of government to utilise social protection as an instrument that includes refugees and addresses climate impacts (e.g., shock-responsive social protection), especially given the current and projected challenges posed by climate change, including on food security.

“ The concept of refugee self-reliance as a means to reduce external assistance cannot be used to legitimise the lack of support for refugees, particularly when such support is lifesaving.



Photo: GPE/Henry Bongyereirwe. Preschool at Kiryandongo refugee settlement. Uganda, 2015. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Finally, the fact that many discussions on social protection for refugees in Uganda occur alongside those on refugee self-reliance is concerning, particularly in light of severe funding gaps. Those of us who champion social protection understand that interdependence rather than self-reliance, is key to human survival. The concept of refugee self-reliance as a means to reduce external assistance cannot be used to legitimise the lack of support for refugees, particularly when such support is lifesaving. To do so is to disguise poverty under the guise of independence, shifting the burden of food security—often in impossible situations—onto the shoulders of refugees.

It is essential for social protection programming and its leaders to be honest about the level of positive impact that social protection for refugees can have in highly constrained circumstances. Acknowledging its limitations does not diminish its overall significance. Social protection is essential for delivering urgently needed assistance and serves as platform for broader conversations about refugees, the climate crisis, humanitarian budget cuts in protracted displacement, and inadequate government financing for assistance that all populations deserve. ●

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2. Formal social protection programmes are generally considered to be actions taken by the public sector (i.e., the government) or in collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donors, or legally recognised private sector arrangements (EUI 2010). Formal social protection contrasts with informal social protection, which refers to actions taken by individuals or communities that are not bound by formal legal regulations (ibid.). However, informal mechanisms play a critical role in the lives of many.

The first 1000 days: Harnessing social protection for improved nutrition and human capital development

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Although the world is currently recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, the repercussions continue to resonate, particularly in countries just beginning to reverse recessionary trends. Inflation rates are still above pre-pandemic levels (IMF 2023), with the global average cost of a healthy diet rising to 3.96 PPP dollars, in 2022 (FAO et al 2024). Coupled with a decline in disposable income, this resulted in 2.83 billion people in 2022, with low-income countries having the largest percentage of the population that could not afford a healthy diet (71.5 percent) (ibid.). Additionally, the increasing frequency and intensity of climate shocks and escalating conflicts are further contributing to increased food prices, the displacement of populations, and the erosion of livelihoods, pushing millions into poverty and increasing the likelihood of malnutrition among the most vulnerable. In 2022, it was estimated that globally 148.1 million children under 5 years of age (22.3 per cent) suffer from stunting, 45 million (6.8 per cent) are wasted and 37 million (5.6 per cent) are overweight (UNICEF, WHO and World Bank 2023). Nearly half of the deaths among under-5 children are linked to undernutrition,⁶ with the likelihood of mortality increasing when children are both stunted and wasted (Thurstans et al. 2022).

This presents a critical challenge for the development of human capital and local and national economies. During the critical first 1,000 days of life, from conception until a child's second birthday, malnutrition can have a detrimental intergenerational impact. Mothers experiencing malnutrition may give birth to low birthweight children, who are more likely to suffer from stunting, a condition marked by short stature and impaired physical growth. These children often experience cognitive and physical developmental delays throughout their

lives, potentially hindering their ability to reach their full potential (Black et al. 2013). Recent studies demonstrate that the incidence of wasting peaks between birth and the first three months of life; early wasting increases the risk of later growth faltering, including concurrent wasting and stunting, thereby increasing mortality. This is reflected in lower educational attainment and economic productivity, which, in turn, hinders economic development (Shrikant et al. 2020).

While social protection programmes are typically geared towards poverty reduction, recent systematic reviews have shown a positive impact on the nutritional status of women and children, including stunting and wasting, dietary diversity, anaemia and the intake of animal-source foods (Olney et al. 2022). By bolstering the purchasing power of households and, particularly if women are the recipients of the benefit (Armand et al. 2020), social protection programmes indirectly address some of the underlying causes of malnutrition, expanding household budgets and improving the accessibility and affordability of food. In fact, social protection programmes can impact nutrition by protecting and improving diets through various pathways. For example, social protection can increase **income** by providing cash transfers to low-income households, reducing the unaffordability gap in accessing a healthy diet. It can also enhance **assets** by supplying agricultural inputs to smallholder farmers for the production of nutritious foods. Additionally, it fosters **agency** by empowering marginalised and disadvantaged groups to make decisions that prioritise their food and nutrition security and access to healthy diet.

Moreover, social protection can stabilise **prices** by creating a stable demand for nutritious foods, encouraging large-scale production and potentially lowering prices for the broader population, thereby improving the affordability of nutritious

options. It can influence **consumption** patterns offering various incentives to encourage the consumption of nutritious foods. More broadly, these programmes can influence **behaviours**, such as the use of health services, which support good nutrition and overall human capital development.

Improving healthy diets can be achieved through increased access to a diversified range of nutritious foods, combined with adequate care practices and the use of complementary services.

Despite the increasing evidence demonstrating the impact that social protection programmes can have on nutritional outcomes (ibid.), social protection systems are not consistently leveraged for improved nutrition security purposes, and key programmatic challenges persist.

This article aims to unpack four programmatic bottlenecks that need to be addressed to enhance nutrition.

Targeting approaches do not systematically include nutrition criteria, leading to the exclusion of the most nutritionally at-risk individuals from social protection schemes. For example, relying solely on poverty measures, especially those limited to income, may overlook crucial nutrition vulnerabilities. Social protection programmes could be made more nutrition-sensitive by prioritising vulnerable households with pregnant and breastfeeding women and girls (PBWG) and children under the age of two, covering the critical 1,000 day window due to its lifelong irreversible impact.

However, a key obstacle in achieving nutrition-sensitive targeting is the dearth of demographic data on household composition, which are relevant for nutrition outcomes, as well as other nutrition and health data that provide information on households

“ Nearly half of the deaths among under-5 children are linked to undernutrition, 6 with the likelihood of mortality increasing when children are both stunted and wasted.



Photo: UN Women/Saikat Mojumder. Woman working in the field. Bangladesh, 2012. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

at greater risk of malnutrition. These data are often lacking from social and beneficiary registries, or there is a lack of interoperability between social protection and health databases.

In Bangladesh, the World Food Programme (WFP) supported the government in strengthening the national Mother and Child Benefit Programme, ensuring that its targeting and registration methodology covered the critical 1000-day window. Previously, pregnant women were only allowed to register annually, but with WFP's support, the relevant Management Information System underwent improvements, enabling women to self-enrol at any time throughout the year. This effort was accompanied by community-level awareness campaigns.

The transfers provided through social protection schemes frequently lack adequate design to enable people to access a balanced and healthy diet. They often fail to address the specific nutrition needs of the most vulnerable groups and overlook the market environment, which may render nutritious options unaffordable. A significant barrier to addressing this issue is the lack of analytical tools used to determine transfer values (such as the Minimum Expenditure Basket), which normally fail to account for nutrition adequacy. Furthermore, the timeliness, duration, and frequency of support provided are often inadequate to yield any noticeable effect on nutritional outcomes (Olney et al, 2021). Evidence shows that nutritional

impact is greater when the transfer is delivered in a predictable, regular, timely manner compared to lump sums, enabling households to smooth consumption of nutritious foods (Ecker, Maystadt, and Guo 2019).

In 2018, WFP supported the government of Ethiopia to strengthen the nutrition sensitivity of the national Productive and Safety Net Programme (PSNP) by improving the nutritional adequacy of the transfer. Aimed at addressing the lack of dietary diversity and ultimately reducing stunting, which stood at 34.4 per cent of children under five in Ethiopia in 2022, a fresh food voucher targeting PBWG and children under the age of two years old was introduced to complement the household ration provided through the PSNP (e.g., cereals, pulses, oil, and/or cash). An impact evaluation found that the minimum dietary diversity (MDD) for children increased from 22.3 per cent in 2018 to 46.5 per cent in 2020, and from 3 per cent to 31.7 per cent for women (MDD-W).

Another example of how the nutritional adequacy of social transfers can be enhanced is WFP's support for the national rollout of fortified rice in all of the Indian Government's food-based social protection programmes. This included raising awareness and creating demand, as well as strengthening capacities to scale up the production of fortified rice and supplementary food products. With a population of 1.4 billion people, India has some of the world's largest food-based

safety nets, making it an ideal platform for addressing malnutrition at scale.

Social protection systems are not systematically leveraged to ensure linkages with other complementary services in support of better nutritional outcomes.

While social protection alone may not suffice to address malnutrition, it is crucial to strengthen linkages with other systems for a multidimensional response that addresses other competing needs individuals may face. Essentially, while social transfers can improve affordability of nutritious diets, they can also promote the uptake of health-based services to address other immediate determinants of malnutrition, including the treatment of acute malnutrition, growth monitoring services, micronutrient supplementation, immunisation, antenatal care, and the treatment and management of infectious diseases such as HIV/TB.

Additionally, ensuring the availability of nutritious food in the market is essential for addressing malnutrition. For example, this can be achieved by systematically linking food fortification efforts to social protection programmes through promoting the inclusion of fortified products in in-kind rations or encouraging their availability, affordability, and accessibility in the market, as well as supporting their consumption among beneficiaries.

Finally, social and behaviour change (SBC) activities that leverage community engagement, mobilisation, nutrition education, capacity building, and

advocacy are necessary to stimulate the demand by recipients of social transfers for healthier choices.

WFP and UNICEF jointly supported the government of Uganda in implementing NutriCash, a sub-component of the Swedish funded national Child-Sensitive Social Protection Programme. NutriCash targets PBWG and children under 2 years old and includes an unconditional cash transfer, combined with SBC initiatives, backyard gardening, financial literacy, and linkages and referrals to the healthcare system, encouraging the utilisation of vital health services, including immunization, antenatal care and nutrition screening.

In Pakistan, the government partnered with WFP to design and implement the Benazir Nashonuma Programme (BNP) to address chronic malnutrition. The BNP provides comprehensive support to PBWG and children under 2 years old who are enrolled in the Benazir Income Support Programme. Beneficiaries receive a cash transfer, conditional upon their utilisation of ante- and postnatal services, immunisations, iron and folic acid supplementation, and a locally produced specialised nutritious food (SNF). Facilitation centres also provide family planning services, deworming, screening and referral for acute malnutrition, growth monitoring, and treatment for pneumonia and diarrhoea. SBC sessions are held on maternal, infant, and young child feeding, optimum hygiene practices, and correct use and storage of SNF.

Social protection systems are often not flexible enough to scale up, adapt, and evolve in response to changes in nutritional needs caused by covariate shocks.⁷ Poor households, which are also typically the most vulnerable to malnutrition (Siddiqui et al. 2020), are particularly susceptible to the impacts of these shocks. In this context, it is crucial to expand or redirect the coverage, adequacy, and comprehensiveness of social assistance to include previously excluded populations who may be at a higher risk of malnutrition due to a shock. Transfers should be adjusted based on the severity of the crisis, the surrounding food environment, and access to services. For example, this might involve changing the modality of assistance, providing larger

transfers, or increasing the frequency of distributions to meet heightened nutrition needs. Additionally, linkages with other services need to be enhanced and tailored to the specific context of the crisis. This could include mobile clinics, strengthened SBC components, and efforts in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) or disease prevention. By doing so, the social protection programme remains relevant and effectively meets the needs of the most vulnerable populations in an ever-changing environment.

Political will and multi-sectoral coordination are crucial for the successful integration of nutrition into social protection programmes. First, strong political will and leadership that recognise the importance of addressing malnutrition are essential for supporting and protecting human capital and economic development. Such political commitment is necessary to elevate nutrition goals on the national agenda and leverage social protection systems to achieve these objectives. Second, collaboration among relevant government ministries is imperative to ensure that all systems work together effectively. Since nutrition-sensitive social protection is inherently multi-sectoral, the involvement of various government departments—such as health, education, agriculture, and social welfare—is critical for cohesive and effective implementation.

In conclusion, social protection can be leveraged as a viable and sustainable investment in human capital and economic development. To effectively reduce and prevent malnutrition, social protection programmes must be intentionally designed with clear nutrition objectives. This includes adequate targeting, appropriate transfer values, suitable modalities, and efficient distribution mechanisms, along with strong linkages to complementary services. Additionally, these programmes must be agile and flexible to respond effectively to covariate shocks. Overcoming these challenges is essential for maximising social protection as a sustainable investment in human capital and economic development. By doing so, social protection can play a pivotal role in enhancing nutritional outcomes, promoting economic growth, and reducing poverty and inequality. ●

“ During the critical first 1,000 days of life, from conception until a child’s second birthday, malnutrition can have a detrimental intergenerational impact.

“ ... social protection programmes can impact nutrition by protecting and improving diets through various pathways.



Photo: Andy Wheatley/DFID. A newly arrived child refugee collecting clean drinking water in a transit camp. Uganda, 2013. CC BY 2.0.

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4. System Strengthening for Nutrition, Team Lead, WFP Headquarter.
5. A measure that compares purchasing power parity across economies.
6. See: <<https://www.who.int/news-room/factsheets/detail/malnutrition>>.
7. Covariate shocks may include slow- or rapid-onset events, one-off or cyclical shocks, as well as natural, political, or economic crises.

Confronting food insecurity in fragile and conflict-affected States: The role of humanitarian agencies in strengthening social protection

Elisa Pozzi,¹ Anneleen Vos²
and Daria Fiodorov³

The new epicentre of crisis: Climate, conflict and extreme poverty driving food insecurity

In recent years, food insecurity and malnutrition have risen significantly. In 2022, approximately 900 million people were severely food insecure, a substantial increase compared to pre COVID-19 pandemic levels (FAO et al 2023). Climate change, conflict, and extreme poverty are increasingly concentrated, forming a new epicentre of crisis and driving food insecurity. Among those affected, more than 128,000 people are experiencing catastrophic levels (IPC 5) of food insecurity in the 20 countries on the International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s Emergency Watchlist (IRC 2023).

The most damaging impacts of climate change occur when it compounds existing risks and inequalities in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). In these communities, climate change can exacerbate displacement, destroy livelihoods, and disrupt access to food. Many FCAS are also experiencing climate change effects that are more intense than the global average (OHCHR 2011). This is particularly alarming, as research demonstrates that every 1°C temperature increase is associated with a 1.64 per cent rise in the probability of severe food insecurity (Romanello et al. 2021).

A roadblock and need for a paradigm shift for the role of humanitarian actors in social protection

Non-governmental actors aiming to move beyond traditional assistance and pursue social protection to tackle food insecurity and malnutrition often face significant roadblocks, especially in FCAS. Historically, humanitarian actors have focused on crisis response while increasingly working to

expand social assistance coverage and inclusiveness. As global crises—driven by conflict, climate change, and economic downturn—demand adaptive policies to address both short-term shocks and long-term socioeconomic drivers of food security and nutrition, a paradigm shift is essential. Recognising the important role non-governmental actors are already playing, and can further play, in transitioning from short-term relief to comprehensive strategies aligned with government priorities is crucial. This shift would maximise the potential of social protection in addressing emergency needs and fostering economic recovery.

Informing the paradigm shift: The International Rescue Committee (IRC) experience

Generating evidence and sharing lessons learned on some of the ongoing efforts that may directly or indirectly contribute to social protection can help overcome recognition roadblocks that limit humanitarian actors' potential to enhance food security and nutrition outcomes. Here are some examples of relevant contributions from the IRC from a recent scoping study (IRC 2023):

Enhanced social protection delivery chain

The IRC primarily operates in FCAS, where government social protection systems are often nascent, or severely weakened (Behrendt et al. 2015) due to conflict. In these contexts, there may be no formal provision of social protection, weakened systems, or only time-bound support related to an acute crisis lacking a coherent overall strategy.

While not embedded in a formal working system, the IRC experience demonstrates that non-State actors can still play various roles to support social protection efforts across countries with different levels of system maturity (ibid.). In cases

where governments have functioning systems, humanitarian partners can provide advisory services and strengthen system functions across the **social protection delivery chain** to ensure business continuity despite conflict surges. In these countries, the IRC shares lessons from decades of humanitarian cash assistance interventions, helps governments reach displaced or other underserved communities and applies a fragility-sensitive lens to social assistance efforts.

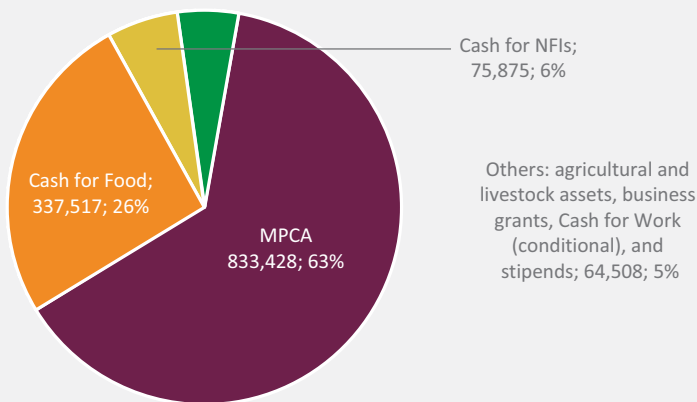
Shock responsive and anticipatory safety nets

In FCAS with more mature social protection systems, there is potential to transition from direct implementation to strengthening systems for government counterparts. This can be achieved by fostering high-quality bilateral partnerships with line ministries and key non-State actors involved in the social protection. The IRC is already supporting such system strengthening in contexts such as Nigeria through its anticipatory cash activities, enhancing the technical capacity of relevant line ministries to align the disbursement of cash assistance to forecasted shocks based on agreed triggers. This approach has reduced reliance on negative coping strategies and improved investments in productive assets (Balana et al. 2023). Sharing evidence on the impact and cost-effectiveness of anticipatory cash has the potential to significantly inform adaptive social protection systems and influence the necessary paradigm shift recognising the role of non-State actors.

Fostering more inclusive data and information systems

New social protection frameworks—such as the World Bank's 2020 Adaptive Social Protection (ASP)—broaden social protection to include *ex ante* resilience-

FIGURE 1: IRC individual clients reached by type of cash and voucher assistance in 2023



Note: Partnerships with humanitarian and non-governmental actors in FCAS can fill gaps through non-government led cash assistance to secure more stable food consumption for those at nutritional risk. In 2023, the IRC delivered USD 79 million in cash and voucher assistance (CVA) in 36 countries.

Source: IRC Annual Statistics (2023).

building and longer-term climate change adaptation efforts, providing additional entry points for international organisations supporting crisis affected populations.

Within this broader framework, humanitarian agencies can align their resilience-building programmes with social protection efforts, leveraging their robust understanding of local contexts to improve the quality and reach of social protection systems. Their detailed knowledge of the diverse needs and systemic challenges faced by marginalised communities enables them to implement multisectoral integrated interventions that contribute to social protection systems.

This is particularly true for politically and economically marginalised communities, which non-governmental actors—especially non-governmental organisations (NGOs)—can help make visible and accessible to social protection systems by contributing technical expertise in the development of social registries. This is especially relevant for countries hosting large refugee populations, who are often excluded from national safety nets. Through programmes such as Re:BUiLD, aimed at fostering self-reliance among urban refugees in Kampala and Nairobi, the IRC has developed a niche in understanding and addressing urban refugee poverty.

Re:BUiLD has leveraged this knowledge for sustained advocacy efforts on behalf of urban refugees.

Supporting delivery systems with improved payment solutions

Governments can also draw on humanitarian agencies' technical and operational expertise in programme delivery. They can leverage knowledge in deploying payment solutions through their global financial service provider networks. In response to the conflict in Ukraine, the IRC has leveraged its partnership with the Red Rose⁴ data verification system—used for cash transfer programming—to create linkages with national social registries and Management Information Systems (MIS), effectively extending assistance to displaced and conflict-affected people in Ukraine and Poland. The Red Rose payment platform effectively distributed Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA), enabling clients to address their most urgent needs, including food purchases. Evidence shows that MPCA improves varying food security indicators, including quality, quantity, and diversity (IRC 2023).

The supply side—social protection interventions to strengthen markets

Market access is often the weakest link in the food system. Therefore, supporting market actors and improving the food

environment is crucial. In addition to strengthening existing social safety nets, improving the delivery chain, and applying a fragility lens to promote more inclusive social protection systems, humanitarian organizations with a market-system focus play a pivotal role. They support market actors to ensure the continued availability of stable, nutritious, and affordable food in the markets and complement social assistance efforts to smooth food consumption.

The IRC has implemented this approach in various challenging contexts to support clients requiring cash assistance for food and other basic needs, as well as vendors. In the volatile security context of Diffa, Niger, in 2019, the IRC supported remote communities with cash and e-vouchers to enable household food access and stabilise food consumption. Market monitoring showed that most products remained available, and price fluctuations did not affect the ongoing voucher redemptions at different intervention sites. This stability was achieved through the IRC's support of local vendors by covering their fuel and labour costs with a 5 per cent commission, which helped maintain product availability.

Financing social protection partnerships—the role of the World Bank

Domestic resources for developing or scaling social protection systems to enhance food security are often constrained by economic downturn or high debt burdens in FCAS. For example, Somalia paid more than 95 per cent of its government revenue on debt repayment in 2022—the highest percentage in the world—preventing from investing in systems that could have averted the catastrophic food security crisis that year, which pushed the country to the brink of famine (UNCTAD 2022). This underscores the critical importance of external financing from development partners.

The World Bank has demonstrated its ability to significantly increase support to governments for social protection and food security during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, through the International Development Association (IDA)—one of the few sources of financing available in the form of grants and highly



Photo: UN Photo/Tobin Jones. Refugee women carry their belongings as they flee from floods and conflicts. Somalia, 2013.

“... humanitarian agencies can align their resilience-building programmes with social protection efforts, leveraging their robust understanding of local contexts to improve the quality and reach of social protection systems.

concessional loans for FCAS (IRC 2024). Where the World Bank is providing this support to governments to build or expand social protection systems in FCAS, it should increasingly integrate its traditional ‘government-first model’ to expand partnerships with non-government actors. This approach would enable greater scale, reach, and delivery of these systems, ensuring a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to social protection (IRC 2023).

NGOs often have better access to remote and vulnerable populations, particularly in FCAS, and possess local expertise that allows them to design and implement culturally appropriate interventions. Additionally, NGOs have established trust and relationships with local communities, which can enhance the acceptance and success of social protection programmes.

Non-governmental actors have the potential to play a crucial role in supporting social protection to achieve food security and nutrition outcomes at scale. This is particularly true in FCAS, where governments’ social protection systems are often either nascent or weak. NGOs typically have access to remote and vulnerable populations, possess local expertise, and are accepted by local communities, making them well-suited to provide relevant technical and operational support. Despite these strengths, these actors still lack the recognition they deserve and have limited entry points to meaningfully support governments in their social protection strategies and implementation.

In a context of increased recurrent crises compounded by the effects of climate change, economic shocks, and conflict, it is vital to ensure that non-governmental actors can aid in the transition from crisis response to long-term solutions. Their lack of recognition as key players in the broader system landscape is one of the roadblocks to achieving food and nutrition security through social protection. To facilitate this paradigm shift, humanitarian actors need to generate evidence demonstrating how their capabilities can meaningfully contribute to social protection. Meanwhile, other stakeholders, such as the World Bank and other agencies, must recognise the role of non-State actors and ensure they have the resources needed to scale social protection, especially in the most challenging contexts. ●

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Either through deliberate planning or through serendipity, social protection and food security will become increasingly intertwined.

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Stephen Devereux and John Hoddinott

Food security and good nutrition are foundational to building adaptive capacities, and strengthening these through periods of conflict is an investment in future recovery and rehabilitation when the focus shifts towards securing livelihoods.

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Jeremy Lind, Lars Otto Naess and Meghan Bailey

School meal programmes are effective investments that, when implemented with high-quality, can deliver benefits across multiple domains and level the playing field for disadvantaged children

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Aulo Gelli

Addressing income inequality should be central to the fight against hunger.

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Diego Sánchez-Ancochea

Integrating food security and nutrition objectives into social protection is a priority, along with increasing investment in basic services to improve nutrition.

”

Jane Waite, Amina Tarraf, Omar Abdelgawad, Micheal O’Hiarlaithe, Fred Alumasa, Aldrian Mungani and Jasmin Radwan

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