



Social protection: an effective and inclusive response and recovery strategy to address impacts of COVID-19 in Africa

KEY MESSAGES

- Social protection should be part of the short-term response and long-term recovery plans to address the health, food security and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, addressing needs of people operating in a range of sectors, notably including agricultural subsectors.
- Social protection is a tool to help preserve and adapt local food systems to overcome the challenges brought by COVID-19, including through maintaining or increasing local production to shorten food value chains, facilitate market access and make systems more resilient.
- African governments should invest in establishing strong social protection systems (including a combination of social assistance, social insurance and labor market regulations) and expanding social protection coverage, including expanding contributory schemes. Fiscal constraints in national budgets should be examined and addressed towards supporting expansion of social protection systems.
- Ensure that programmes provide uninterrupted benefits despite containment measures, and provide continued or expanded fiscal support ensuring sufficient allocations in national budgets.
- When programmes exist, consider implementing top-ups (vertical expansion) of cash, in-kind transfers, or complementary programmes, and expansion of coverage (horizontal expansion) to affected populations not currently reached by existing schemes, building flexible systems and operational capacity for programmes to respond to the current pandemic crisis and future shocks.
- Actively seek innovative approaches to expansion and delivery (e.g., digital platforms for registration and delivery) to reach the existing and newly vulnerable groups, notably in the informal sector operating in diverse agriculture subsectors.
- Work with humanitarian actors in conflict or fragile contexts to deliver and build government capacities for shock responsive social protection.

Context

COVID-19 poses significant challenges to an already strained rural context in Africa, characterized by limited access to medical services, electricity, clean water, internet and information. Africa remains the region with the lowest internet usage (28.2 percent), and importantly, the internet user gender gap is significant and growing, increasing from 20.7 percent in 2013 to 33 percent in 2019. Food systems, from production, processing, distribution and consumption have been affected by the pandemic, as well as the containment measures and movement restrictions imposed by governments to stop the spread of the virus. Communities are experiencing shortages of inputs, labour, and limited access to land for production; increased post-harvest losses; transport restrictions blocking food aid and limiting access to markets; and reduced food availability and purchasing power for the consumer. The growing direct impact of COVID-19 is affecting health, in terms of morbidity and mortality, as well as quickly overburdening health care services with negative repercussions for non-COVID-19 related health problems.

Even before COVID-19 had spread to Africa, the socio-economic impact was felt. The decline in demand and production from the most economically developed countries where the pandemic initially hit the hardest – China, the European Union and the United States of America – has caused a global recession, with direct repercussions in Africa. The economic downturn has led to an overall decline in both on and off-farm income, as well as remittances, leading vulnerable households to experience income reductions from all directions. With the spread of the virus across the continent, containment measures including physical distancing, school closures, prohibiting gatherings, closing or limiting of non-essential businesses, markets and economic activities, and border closures have also led to negative economic consequences.

Both existing and newly vulnerable populations are in need of social protection support, especially marginalized and underserved populations. For example, migrants and refugees are facing additional challenges in earning income and sending remittances back home, sometimes forcing them to return home to rural areas, placing further burdens on the households back home. The reduction in remittances, estimated to reach a 23 percent drop in the region (Ratha, 2020), can also have deep impacts, not only at the household level, but for many local and national economies that heavily rely on this income stream. For rural populations especially, dire economic circumstances can push vulnerable households to resort to unsustainable consumption of natural resources to compensate for income loss, such as illegal fishing or overfishing, or rapid deforestation. These families may also resort to the use of child labour among other negative coping strategies, especially with the widespread closure of schools due to COVID-19.

Yet, despite the growing recognition of the importance of social protection by African states, the majority of rural households, and particularly those who depend on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods, face significant barriers to access adequate social protection, including health-related services (Allieu, A.M. and Ocampo, A., 2019). On average, across countries, only ten percent of the population in Africa is covered by social assistance (Beegle, Coudouel and Monsalve, 2018), with only 17.8 percent of the population covered by at least one benefit (ILO, 2018). As a large share of these people in both urban and rural areas are in the informal sector, they lack income protections typically afforded to formal sector workers and have limited resources to manage income shocks. Refugees and migrants, currently facing additional challenges due to lockdowns and movement restrictions, are typically excluded from national social assistance and health insurance responses which may be available to other vulnerable populations.

These factors further exacerbate a situation of already increasing rates of hunger and poverty. According to the 2020 Global Report on Food Crises, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, globally 135 million people were estimated to be acutely food-insecure (IPC/CH Phase 3 or above); 73 million of those are in Africa. Rural areas are facing numerous other challenges, including the desert locust outbreak, fall armyworm, early droughts, flooding and conflict. The disruption of traditional transhumance patterns and the creation of new ones may lead to new tensions and local displacement, and increased levels of poverty and food insecurity. The net result is that COVID-19 is projected to plunge an additional 49 – 80 million people into extreme poverty, a 23 percent increase, with sub-Saharan Africa bearing the largest share with an increase of about 23 million (Mahler et al, 2020; IFPRI 2020). COVID-19 is projected to increase the number of people afflicted by hunger from 135 to 265 million people (Beasley, 2020).

Why is social protection so critical – in crises and beyond?

The region has made important progress in terms of prioritizing social protection as a core component of poverty reduction and rural development strategies, including in the context of the Malabo Declaration and Agenda 2063. While all the countries in the region have at least one social assistance programme in place and coverage and adequacy have increased exponentially in the last decade, large gaps still exist, and sustainable financing of social protection remains elusive in many countries, compromising the effectiveness of these investments on resilience and poverty reduction (Beegle, Coudouel and Monsalve, 2018). Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Africa region had the lowest investment in social protection, with the exception of Arab States, at just 5.9 percent GDP as compared with the global average of 11.1 percent (ILO, 2018). This is a critical moment to scale up social protection systems to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and support longer-term recovery for vulnerable populations.

In the short-term, access to predictable social assistance (e.g., cash or in-kind transfers, public works, and school feeding), social insurance (e.g., social security, unemployment benefits, sick leave and health insurance) as well as labour market policies, can help mitigate the direct economic impacts of the pandemic on households and communities, namely, health-related costs (prevention, testing and treatment), reduced access to adequate food supply and diverse diets, as well as the reduction or loss of employment and income due to reduced demand, market closures, and restrictions in movement. Making social protection available relieves the pressures facing households in terms of compliance with confinement and movement restrictions and protects them and the community at large from infection. Additionally, cash, food support, and public works/cash-for-work projects can play a protective role and help stabilize the household, supporting families to manage containment conditions without resorting to negative coping strategies, such as reduced and less diversified food consumption, distress sales of assets, indebtedness, unsustainable use of natural resources, and child labour.

In the medium- and long-term, access to social protection enhances resilience and the ability of rural households to rebuild their livelihoods, invest in economic activities, and manage multiple risks including future shocks. Social protection is an essential strategy for ensuring an inclusive recovery pathway. Evidence from social protection programmes in Africa shows a broad range of beneficial impacts, including improved access to more and better foods, education and health services, an increase in the economic and productive capacity, and resilience of rural households e.g. increased savings and improved social networks. Social assistance has also been shown to generate significant multiplier effects in the local economy (FAO and UNICEF, 2016), indicating

that it can also be a tool to stabilize demand and stimulate local economies during the recovery phase from the pandemic. Large public works programmes can provide employment opportunities during recovery for the vulnerable, while building sustainable assets and assisting the poor in the short-term. Social insurance (health and employment related), in both contributory and/or subsidized forms for the most vulnerable, provides necessary protections and is a critical component of supporting sustained resilience of both poor and potentially at-risk households over time. Contributory schemes for national health insurance and/or social security coverage for those able to pay also help to compensate for fiscal shortfalls during the economic downturn. A multi-programme, multi-sectoral approach, combining the provision of social protection benefits (both assistance and insurance) with productive support and access to essential services, assets, and basic infrastructure, can provide an opportunity to *build back better* and offer economic inclusion pathways to poor and vulnerable populations.

Review of best practices and emerging social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa

Countries in sub-Saharan Africa are designing strategies to address the COVID-19 crisis, with the majority implementing one or more social protection responses. Lessons from the human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) epidemic, food crises, and Ebola outbreak highlight that health care needs are the main priority. Yet, as stated in the African Union (AU) recommendations for COVID-19 response (AU, 2020), impacts on income, food security and livelihoods must also be addressed by employing both immediate and medium-term strategies in order to prevent backsliding on poverty reduction and food security gains (FAO, 2020) and promote recovery.

Expanding existing social protection programmes – including cash transfers, in-kind food transfers, access to health insurance and employment related guarantees – has been the primary measure used in the global response (Gentilini, 2020). In Africa, many countries are leveraging existing social protection instruments as critical response tools, with the majority of responses being adaptations of existing social assistance measures. Some of the more developed systems continue to build up a more comprehensive strategy that includes a combination of social assistance, health insurance and social security measures, whereas countries with less robust systems may still be in the process of formulating responses, designing new programmes, and mobilizing resources.

National social protection systems in Africa vary greatly in their level of development and ability to efficiently respond to the pandemic crisis. Countries such as **Kenya**, **Ethiopia** and **South Africa** are starting from a strong base of long-standing programmes, often created in the context of food crises and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These countries have made important innovations in terms of design and implementation of social protection, strengthening community structures, developing comprehensive strategies and a systems-approach, prioritizing strong linkages with economic inclusion, while also designing programmes to effectively respond to predictable crises, such as the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in **Ethiopia** and the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) in **Kenya**. However, most of Africa is basing their response on underdeveloped social protection systems that tend to be fragmented and provide limited coverage. The pandemic has caused vast increases in ‘newly poor’ and vulnerable populations, placing additional demands on these strained systems.

Despite these realities, African countries have initiated a significant and rapid increase in the number and coverage of programmes, in particular to cover the newly vulnerable, with several programmes targeted specifically to newly unemployed or informal workers. Moreover, digital

innovations such as mobile registration and payment mechanisms that could improve safety, reach and operational efficiency are being initiated in some countries, but these are not yet widespread.

National responses include a number of social protection adaptations, innovations and expansions to address COVID-19:

- ***Adapting mechanisms of registration and payment of transfers to comply with health safety measures.*** Adaptive measures include digitalization, including opting for mobile registration and payments; payments through local banks or via community-based organizations or service providers; spaced cash or in-kind distribution that observes strict health safety protocols; advance payment of benefits in a lump sum covering a few months; or, as last resort, retroactive payments. **Angola** has begun using digital registration systems to register beneficiaries for a COVID-19 cash transfer programme. **Rwanda** and the **Gambia** are exploring the possibility of using mobile payments, as are many other countries that have the necessary infrastructure and information in the registry. Governments, such as **Ethiopia, Ghana, and Sao Tome and Principe**, opted to make advance payments of two to three months of cash benefits to provide urgently needed resources to ensure that households have access to food, and to avoid gathering participants routinely as it poses a health risk with regard to COVID-19.
- ***Ensuring that provision of social protection benefits is uninterrupted.*** Programmes must ensure that benefits continue despite restrictions imposed to contain COVID-19. For example, payments for conditional cash transfers (such as schooling or health care conditions and cash-for-work) should continue even when conditions cannot be met (for example, when workers must stay home or services are unavailable). In **Nigeria**, with the COVID-19 outbreak, two months of conditional cash transfers were paid immediately. The PSNP in **Ethiopia** has waived work requirements for those in urban areas.

Some countries are ensuring that children have access to school meals while schools are closed, including options for delivery or pick up of cooked meals or food baskets and take-home rations. Based on lessons from the Ebola outbreak, the Government of **Liberia** has continued its feeding programme, transforming it to take-home rations, following strict hygiene protocols. **Nigeria** and **Cabo Verde** have done the same, and a number of other countries are weighing the options for how to adapt delivery for their specific contexts. In **Senegal**, as example, United Nations (UN) agencies are working with the government to implement a “household food basket initiative,” buying local produce from women and youth for distribution to vulnerable families, including children who are no longer benefiting from school feeding programmes. **Sierra Leone** is taking a similar approach.

- ***Expansion of existing social protection programmes.*** When programmes exist, the most efficient option for immediate response is to scale up existing programmes and provide top-ups (**vertical expansion**) (cash, in-kind transfers, and/or complimentary services), or expansion of coverage (**horizontal expansion**) to communities impacted by the pandemic but not yet reached by existing schemes.

Kenya is moving forward with both vertical and horizontal expansion: resources have been allocated to provide additional support to elderly, orphans and other vulnerable members, and the National Safety Nets Programme (NSNP) will be expanded to informal sector, seasonal and casual workers. In **Angola** and **South Africa**, the government will increase the benefit levels of their Child Grant programmes to ensure children's needs are met, given the new welfare risks posed by COVID-19 (Gentilini, 2020). In **Ethiopia**, transfer levels have been increased for the PSNP in urban areas and further expanded to cover additional low-income households. Similarly, in **Lesotho**, the COVID-19 response is being layered on top of the ongoing CASH+ response to the 2019 drought, in the form of vertical expansion of the National Child Grant Programme.

- **Creation of new ad hoc programmes to fill gaps.** Some countries are creating new social protection programmes to address broader socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, targeting a diversity of vulnerable population categories.

New complementary programmes have been created and aligned with national systems, such as in **Namibia**, where an Emergency Income Grant will support employees who have lost their jobs (formal or informal sector) due to the pandemic and its fallout. Likewise, **South Africa** has created an emergency fund to provide paid sick leave and unemployment insurance to those affected by COVID-19 for three months, as a compliment to the routine Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF).

In **Cabo Verde** and **Burkina Faso**, one-off payments are planned for informal workers, including sellers in local markets. Input supports are being provided in **Côte d'Ivoire**, **Mozambique**, **South Sudan**, **Rwanda** and **Zambia** before the next planting season in anticipation of reduced access to necessary inputs for smallholder producers. South Africa is providing agricultural start-up packages to ensure household food security, echoed by several other countries (Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Kenya, Rwanda, and Somalia) which are providing seeds and materials supplies to ensure healthy diets.

Some countries have implemented new *unconditional* cash transfer programmes to respond to COVID-19, such as in **Madagascar** (urban) and **Somalia** (rural) and just recently **Malawi**, which targets vulnerable households as well as small businesses. **Burkina Faso**, **Cabo Verde**, **Côte d'Ivoire**, **Kenya**, **Lesotho**, **Mauritius**, **Namibia**, **Rwanda**, **Sierra Leone** and **Togo** have all created ad hoc programmes to target informal workers of various sectors.

To ensure continued access to food, **Senegal** is using an existing social registry to provide both cash transfers and immediate food support to the most vulnerable. Other countries such as **Cabo Verde**, are targeting food support to families earning less than minimum wage. In **Nigeria**, food support will be provided to internally displaced populations (IDPs). **Burkina Faso** will sell food at subsidized prices to vulnerable households through designated vendors.

Ensuring an inclusive social protection response and recovery for Africa

An inclusive path to recovery will not be automatic, but will require specific social protection responses to effectively reach those who would fall into poverty as a result of the pandemic. The following measures need to be considered:

- **Adapt criteria for targeting to encourage inclusiveness.** A key consideration for increasing coverage is how to identify affected households. In response to COVID-19, attention should be given to vulnerable groups most affected by the crises including youth and children, the elderly, and women, who often serve as caretakers of the sick. The situation of these already vulnerable groups may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, leading them to experience increases in household burdens and economic losses, leaving them at greater risk. The deep impact on women and the elderly has implications for the food system in the near term, as the African continent has a significant share of older farmers and about 70 percent of Africa's food is produced by rural women (Guluma, 2018).

Additionally, when defining immediate responses, and when universal coverage is not an option, eligibility criteria should be reviewed to provide assistance, not only to those who conform to current programme definitions of poorest and most vulnerable, but also those who are 'at risk' of losing access to food and healthy diets, and facing major disruptions in income and livelihoods, creating significant new vulnerabilities and risks. This may require significant adapting of eligibility criteria, as the profile of the newly poor may differ from the existing definitions.

- **Countries should proactively invest in comprehensive registries.** A number of countries have, or are in the process of building, national registries that could provide data to target households for a broad range of programmes. However, due to the diverse profiles of the newly vulnerable, existing social registries may not have adequate coverage or information for this purpose. While some countries have been drawing from national social registries for expansions, such as **Senegal** and **Nigeria**, others have limited or no registries. Additionally, many registries do not include the newly vulnerable populations affected by COVID-19, especially informal workers. These countries are challenged to identify vulnerable households and informal workers through innovative means. **Sierra Leone** is addressing these challenges by bringing together development partners to work with government in combining existing registries from trade associations, rural workers organizations, and other programme rosters to identify and target vulnerable informal workers.

Overall, support should be provided to create, leverage, or improve social registries so they can be used to target a wider range of individuals for various social protection and other complementary programmes (e.g., economic inclusion or productive support). More comprehensive unified national registries can facilitate multi-sectoral coordinated packages of integrated support, such cash transfers combined with livelihood assistance.

- **Employ innovative approaches to reach those in the informal sector, including seasonal workers across all agriculture sub-sectors:** The share of informal economic activity in sub-Saharan Africa remains among the largest in the world. Even in contexts where social protection is available, the agriculture sector does not benefit from many labour-related provisions available to formal workers; thus, they remain particularly vulnerable and unprotected. The AU initiative, *Social protection for informal and rural economy workers*

(SPIREWORLD), which seeks to extend coverage to informal workers by leveraging rural workers organizations and other non-traditional means, has particular relevance to raising awareness, communication, rapid identification and registration of affected households, and monitoring in this context.

It should be recognized that some populations, including pastoralists, may be at the same time the most affected and the hardest to reach. Pastoralist communities are particularly at risk given disruption of livestock movements, and negative impacts to domestic, regional and global markets. Innovative schemes, including insurance to cover losses should be promoted. In **Ethiopia and Kenya**, during periods of drought, governments have prioritized the importance of livestock insurance, including for pastoralist communities. This could be expanded or further subsidised in the current crisis.

- **Ensure food, income and livelihoods support reach affected households in challenging settings.** When social protection programmes do not exist, or when the systems are compromised due to conflict, it is critical to ensure that relief is delivered in the short term, with delivery support via community structures when feasible, and using the operational expertise of humanitarian actors to build and invest in designing nascent systems. Attention should be given to capacity building for government to deliver shock responsive social protection in the future. This includes improving systems for linking early warning systems to social protection to enable anticipatory actions or rapid response as soon as the first signs of a shock/crisis emerge. Specific attention should be given to countries with ongoing conflicts, or that are already in food crisis situations or with large segments of their populations in situations of acute hunger before the COVID-19 pandemic (FAO, 2019).

In **Burkina Faso**, development partners are building on the ongoing emergency response using cash transfers in areas prone to conflict or with displaced populations, scaling up unconditional cash transfers. Some households will also receive assistance to increase vegetable and livestock production, and hygiene kits. In **Somalia**, development partners are focusing on: (i) scaling-up, horizontally and vertically, unconditional cash transfers to rural households to cover three-months of food needs; and (ii) scaling-up cash and livelihood inputs transfers to promote local production and protect agricultural livelihoods. With regard to migrants and refugees, typically outside of national social protection responses, humanitarian actors are providing social assistance, such as in **Rwanda**, where WFP continues to support refugees and examine how to adapt programmes to respond to COVID-19 related challenges.

Key recommendations

A review of the experience of social protection in the region and best practices leads to the following key recommendations:

- Social protection should be part of the **short- and long-term responses** to the health, food and nutrition security and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.
- Countries should conduct **rapid impact and/or needs assessments for specific agricultural subsectors** to formulate appropriate social protection responses to the impacts of COVID-19, including the newly at risk, vulnerable and poor, with a focus on *building back better* by linking social protection beneficiaries to productive support to promote the transition to resilient and sustainable livelihoods and food systems.
- African countries should **invest in building long-term household resilience by expanding social protection programmes** to make them more risk-informed and shock-responsive; contingency funds could be created with humanitarian funding. Social protection financing should be included in negotiations with the World Bank and IMF, while fiscal space in national budgets should be preserved or even expanded in the context of economic recession.

Regarding social protection design and implementation:

- **Ensure programmes provide uninterrupted benefits.** Assess health risks for delivering cash or in-kind benefits, cash-for-work, and school feeding and adapt delivery mechanisms to meet safety guidelines; ensure timeliness of benefits, providing advance payments or distribution when possible; relax conditions that require work, or access to school and health services.
- **When programmes exist, consider top-ups (vertical expansion) of cash or in-kind transfers, or expansion of coverage (horizontal expansion) to affected communities, building capacity for shock responsive social protection.** Provide a top up to existing benefits, leveraging cash whenever possible where markets are functioning; use *inclusive targeting criteria* and *existing registries* to reach additional at-risk households, including migrants and refugees; expand national registries and build capacity of national systems to respond to future crises.
- **Identify complimentary livelihood support programmes to link to social protection measures** (e.g., CASH+) both during the immediate and recovery phases to protect livelihoods and make them more resilient. Examples include providing access to inputs and extension services to increase production, and public purchasing schemes to create demand (e.g., home grown school feeding or food purchase for distribution to vulnerable households).
- **Consider innovative approaches to reach the most vulnerable in the informal sector, including agriculture sub-sectors.** Expansion should focus on the most vulnerable, but also aim to cover those with significant livelihood risks – and identify particularly at-risk zones and populations; immediate measures should consider support for livelihood preservation and recovery (e.g., input support, CASH+) and enhance community-level schemes.

Employment and livelihood insurance schemes should seek to reach informal and small-scale agricultural workers.

- **Adapt targeting criteria and create comprehensive registries using innovative technologies to ensure inclusion and reach to those affected, notably in rural areas.** Retain flexibility giving attention to potential adaptations of existing targeting criteria that benchmark the poor and vulnerable - to cover newly poor populations with increased vulnerability resulting from the pandemic. Where national registries do not exist or are not inclusive enough, create a registry of informal workers by leveraging other types of registries and programme rosters. Look at ways to leverage mobile platforms for digitalization of registration and payment to increase reach in rural areas, while ensuring this approach does not lead to exclusion of rural people, particularly women, with limited access to mobile technology.
- **Work with humanitarian actors to deliver and build government capacities for shock responsive social protection.** Where systems are less developed or compromised by conflict (especially remote or insecure areas), delivery of social protection through humanitarian actors may be necessary and can be used as an opportunity to build a shock responsive social protection system for the future.
- **Invest in building social protection systems with a variety of contributory (health insurance, social security) and non-contributory (social assistance) programmes, including labour market guarantees,** to best support inclusive recovery during and once the pandemic has begun to pass.

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