



Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia

BACKGROUND OF THE ONLINE CONSULTATION:

"Addressing the main challenges of food security and rural poverty reduction by incorporating social protection into national strategies and actions"

[➤ http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/eca/en/social_protection](http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/eca/en/social_protection)

The need for social protection in improving food security and nutrition and reducing rural poverty is widely recognized. However, access to social protection remains an issue. The *World Social Protection Report* released in 2014 states that only 27 percent of the global population enjoys access to comprehensive social security systems, whereas the other 73 percent is covered only partially or not at all.¹

From this perspective, the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia differs from other parts of the world because of its recent history with the social protection system of the Soviet era, which was recognized worldwide for comprehensiveness, universality and accessibility. Cash transfers and in-kind benefits covering basic needs of urban and rural groups such as food, energy, housing, and public transport were non-contributory, with free education (including tertiary-level) and health care complementing the system. Both women and men residing in rural areas and engaged in agriculture were entitled to social security, including pensions and maternity benefits for rural women.

There were limitations to that system as well, as the access to social services was tied to the individual's employment and social benefits were oriented towards certain population categories (such as war or labour veterans) or towards employees of certain industries, regardless of their income level. State pensions were extended to rural dwellers somewhat later than those granted to industrial workers and civil servants,² and their amount was lower.

Over the past two decades significant work has been carried out in the region in reforming the national welfare systems to match the demands of market economies. Some countries have achieved greater progress in transforming their systems, while others have introduced partial measures largely retaining the past system of privileges. While the overall picture is

¹ ILO. 2014. *World Social Protection Report 2014/15: Building economic recovery, inclusive development and social justice*. Geneva, Switzerland.

² Beginning in 1964.

fragmented, it is characterized by the coexistence of contributory and non-contributory schemes and the introduction of targeted social assistance programmes that provide cash to disadvantaged population groups.

Reforms in the national welfare systems have been accompanied by important shifts in poverty and food insecurity rates, punctuated by economic transition. While poverty rates have fallen significantly in the region over the past decade, poverty and undernourishment in rural areas remain an issue. In Eastern Europe, for example, the incidence of rural poverty is from one to three times that of poverty in urban areas.³

In the rural context, agriculture continues to account for a significant share of employment and gross domestic product. Women are particularly affected, as many men go to urban areas in search of employment, leaving women with the entire burden of farm and family work.

These ongoing demographic changes along with labour migration and gender gaps in life expectancy, as well as gendered differences in accessing higher quality jobs, have also affected social protection policies and programmes. Implementation of social protection policies in rural areas runs into additional challenges due to the higher incidence of poverty, the higher degree of informal labour in the countryside, and prevailing sociocultural norms and practices that confine women to their households or insecure jobs. At the same time, evidence suggests that a significant portion of the beneficiaries of social assistance schemes that target low-income groups reside in rural areas. As such, ensuring coherence among social protection and agricultural and rural development policies and programmes is key to addressing rural poverty and food insecurity for rural populations. Evidence and experience show that implementation of social protection schemes, such as cash transfers, can have positive impacts on agricultural productivity, household food consumption, and local economic development.⁴ Harnessing these linkages can ensure that social protection schemes, when coordinated and targeted with agricultural development programmes, can not only help to lift people out of poverty and food insecurity, but can also contribute to the structural transformation of the agriculture sector with higher agricultural productivity and household incomes.

³ IFAD. 2011. *Rural Poverty Report*. Rome.

⁴ FAO. 2013. *Information Note: Recognizing the linkages between social protection and agriculture*. From Protection to Production Project.