

Social Protection and the Right to Food

- * Social protection is a direct and immediate support to individuals who are unable to meet basic needs, such as an adequate food intake. By targeting populations living in poverty it also contributes to social development and economic growth.
- * The right to social security and the right to food are complementary and interdependent human rights. Social protection programs have a crucial impact in ensuring access to food, decent health care and education – all basic human rights that lead to an adequate standard of living.
- * Social protection programs provide concrete and effective instruments to increase levels of human capital (improving levels of health, nutrition, education and social integration) and household income. This translates into higher resilience and better ability to cope and manage risks.
- * Social protection programs require active and meaningful participation of all stakeholders to secure ownership, legitimacy and long-term sustainability of the program.
- * Independent evaluation and complaint mechanisms leading to corrective actions strengthen the effectiveness of programs and protect people against corruption and other forms of abuse.

The importance of social protection as a social and economic stabilizer became particularly visible during the global food crisis of 2008 and the economic and financial crisis of 2009. As stated in SOFI 2012, social protection is crucial for accelerating hunger reduction. First, it can protect the most vulnerable who do not benefit from economic growth; second, social protection when properly structured, can contribute directly to more rapid economic growth. In order for this to happen, social protection programs must include human capital development and strengthen the ability of those living in extreme poverty, and especially small holder farmers, to manage risks and increase their productivity by adopting improved technologies.¹

The importance of social protection as a tool for fighting poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity rose to the forefront of the high-level debate at the 39th plenary session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in October 2012.²

This Issues Brief aims to provide some guidance to decision makers on applying a human rights-based approach to social protection programmes since they significantly contribute to the progressive realization of the right to food.

Social protection programmes can respond to different levels of protection of the right to food

What is the right to food and what is its relationship to social protection? The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food, or means for its procurement. The right to adequate food should not, therefore, be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense as a quantity of calories, proteins and other nutrients. Nor should it be understood as merely a social welfare objective. The right to food is achieved **progressively** through effective public policy.

Achieving this goal requires different responses tailored to the diverse needs of the population. A social protection programme is an appropriate tool to manage multi-layered interventions because

1 FAO. 2012. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012*, p. 36. Roma.

2 CFS, HLPE. 2012. *Social Protection for Food Security*, Report 4 HLPE. Roma.

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it involves interconnection between rights; as such, it can protect the right to food through other human rights such as labour rights, the right to health and the right to education.

What are the different levels of protection? Social protection is achieved through a wide range of instruments aimed at reducing vulnerability, social exclusion and risks while improving income levels and alleviating poverty. Their main objective is to provide entitlements, whether in cash or in kind, or through services which provide guarantees against: a) lack of work-related income (or insufficient income) caused by sickness, disability, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, old age or death of a family member, b) lack of access or unaffordable access to care c) insufficient family support, particularly for children and adult dependants; d) general poverty and social exclusion.³

Not all social protection programmes respond in the same manner to vulnerability. In this regard, certain programmes respond appropriately under **emergency** circumstances, providing access to a minimum of social services and rapid and immediate access to food (physical distribution). Other programmes are focused on providing **basic social care** for people in vulnerable situations to ensure a dignified standard of living. In this regard, it is important to note the difference between those with a limited ability to work, such as the elderly, orphans, or people with certain types of disabilities (whereby welfare will be ongoing and long term), and the people who have the ability to work. In the latter category, the improvement of livelihood opportunities through social assistance eventually leads to sustainable independent living.

There is extensive evidence on the impact of social protection programmes on health, education and nutrition. In Nicaragua, the Social Safety Net Program (RPS) led to a net increase of 12.8 percentage points (25 percentage points for children of poorer families)⁴ in the enrollment of school children. The impact of social protection programmes has also been seen in the type and quality of food consumption, notably in the improvement of the quantity, diversity and adequacy of food consumed. The results of a number of evaluations show that households receiving cash transfers spend more on food and nutrients of better quality than households that do not receive the transfer but have similar total income or consumption levels.



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In Mexico⁵ and Nicaragua,⁶ studies show that participants ate more fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy products). The same can be seen in Colombia, where participant families in the *Familias en Acción*⁷ programme consume more milk, meat and eggs.⁸

Finally, there are social protection programmes which aim to increase human capital investments and at providing opportunities for economic and social development. For example, the state can provide cash transfers programmes to smallholder farmers, providing them with financial support to assume higher levels of risk when investing in technologies, which will increase productivity. In contexts where there is limited to no access to credit, labour and product markets, transfer programmes that address health, education or nutrition, may have a significant impact in the productive activities of participant household members. The effects of such programmes such as *Progresá* in Mexico and the Social Cash Transfer program in Malawi have been shown to be significant, relaxing liquidity, credit and/or insurance constraints and facilitating

3 ILO-UN. Social Protection Floor Initiative. <http://www.socialsecurityextension.org/gimi/gess/ShowTheme.do?tid=2565&ctx=0>

4 Adato, M. & Bassett, L. 2009. *Social protection to support vulnerable children and families: the potential of cash transfers to protect education, health and nutrition*. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2903773>

5 IFPRI. Hoddinott, J. Skoufias, E. & Washburn, R. 2000. *The impact of Progresá on consumption: a final report*, p.18. Washington, D.C.

6 IFPRI. Maluccio, J.A. & Flores, R. 2005. *Impact Evaluation of a Conditional Cash Transfer Program, The Nicaraguan Red de Protección Social*, p. 32. Washington, DC.

7 IFS. Attanasio, O. & Mesnard, A. 2006. *The Impact of a Conditional Cash Transfer Programme on Consumption in Colombia*. Fiscal Studies, vol. 27, no. 4., p. 427.

8 FAO, IALCSH, OHCHR. 2011. *Conditional transfer programmes from a rights-based approach*. Final Report of the Experts Workshop, p. 21. <http://www.rlc.fao.org/iniciativa/expertos>

productive activities.⁹ However, social protection programmes must be designed and structured carefully to avoid possible negative outcomes such as increased child labour on household farm production (Malawi)¹⁰ or time conflicts with agricultural household labor needs (Mexico).¹¹ Such cash transfers can represent, on average, just under 30% of participant households' per capita income.¹²

From the standpoint of social protection, improving access to food is not just a matter of increasing income or providing food. There are a variety of options aimed at developing synergies with development policies in the medium and long term, protecting other human rights that are fundamental to the right to food (for example, health and education). This is the case with school feeding programmes, whose main objective is to increase levels of access to education. These programmes, in turn, can promote purchases from family farming, thus combining food distribution in schools with support for small producers in order to improve livelihoods of rural families living in poverty and food insecurity. Other measures to support small farmers include, production insurance schemes that are accessible to small farmers, such as the *Garantía Safra* insurance which protects against damages caused by recurrent droughts in the north east of Brazil.

How to apply a rights-based approach to social protection programmes?

1) Social protection programmes that impact access to food by the most vulnerable should be integrated as part of a wider policy of poverty reduction¹³ and be compatible with the National Food Security and Nutrition Policy.

These programmes should not be isolated responses coming from separate ministries, but rather should be framed within the overall institutional policies as integrated and coordinated responses. This allows for spaces of social dialogue and cooperation where various agendas of different actors and sectors can be merged, such as in the elaboration of a National Poverty Eradication Strategy or a National Development Plan. Participatory platforms such as the Brazilian National Council for Food Security and Nutrition (CONSEA), or the *Mesa de Concertación de Lucha Contra la Pobreza* in Peru, are suitable for providing broader representation and participation from civil society.

9 Gertler, P., Martinez, S. & Rubio-Codina, M. 2012. *Investing cash transfers to raise long-term living standards*. Also in Covarrubias, K., Davis, B. & Winters, P. 2012. *From Protection to Production: Productive Impacts of the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Scheme*.

10 Covarrubias, K. *Ibidem*.

11 Handa, S., Davis, B., Stampini, M. & Winters, P. 2010. *Heterogeneous Treatment Effects in Conditional Cash Transfer Programs: Assessing the impact of Progresa on Agricultural Households*.

12 Covarrubias, K. op. cit.

13 Sepúlveda M. & Nyst, C. 2012. *Human Rights based approach to social protection*.

2) The programmes and measures that are not part of a contributory scheme should target the most vulnerable population. Within this population, special attention must be given to children, the elderly and people with disabilities. The targeting and selection criteria should be non-discriminatory, transparent, fair and efficient, and should fully meet the programme objectives. Throughout the targeting process, close attention should be given to possible exclusion errors, as these have serious implications, denying the right to social protection to those who really are in a situation of extreme vulnerability.

3) Social protection programmes must have a legal framework whereby legal entitlements are recognized as enforceable rights. Within the legal framework there should also be clear definitions of the roles and responsibilities of implementing authorities, along with corresponding procedures and objective criteria for establishing the eligibility of participants. Furthermore, in recognizing the right to social security within the Constitution and national legislation, a safeguard is created against misuse of power in the public domain.

4) Information on the social protection programme must be fully transparent and accessible, so that people understand the modalities for the operation of the programme, the selection criteria, the implementing authorities, their rights etc. This aspect is particularly relevant for people living in remote rural areas, as well as for indigenous populations and other groups. The information related to the programme must be adapted to their own languages. Communication should be simple and clear to the public, pursuant to the principle of equal access to information.

5) It is essential to provide programme administrators training on human rights in order to implement a human rights-based approach to programmes and avoid mismanagement, abuse of power and corruption. Judges should also be sensitized in understanding social protection entitlements as enforceable rights, and be ready to establish redress measures for those whose rights have been undermined.

6) Applying a gender lens is vital to the design and implementation of the various types of social protection programmes. Empowerment strategies have been created to increase the roles and responsibilities of women as household members; notwithstanding, it is important to maintain a cautious approach so as not to assume gender patterns and wrongly assign women as sole heads of households. Moreover, the requirements of social protection programmes can create a greater burden and workload for women. It is necessary to establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms to protect the rights of women against abuse in hospitals and schools, where programme operators can leverage their authority to abuse women and children.

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7) As part of accountability mechanisms, administrative and judicial recourse should be in place to ensure control over the actions of those implementing the programmes. These complaint mechanisms should be effective, affordable and easy to use; in particular, they should be accessible to sectors of population that are illiterate or lack primary education.

8) The recognition of social protection as a policy priority and as a right of citizens implies that this be reflected in government budget allocations and annual social spending. Fiscal measures are required to ensure sustainability for such programmes and to conform to the redistribution of wealth, which is essential for achieving social cohesion and ensuring human rights.

Conclusions

When designed according to a human rights-based approach, social protection programmes can contribute to the immediate realization of the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger and to the progressive realization of the right to food. To improve access to food on a long-term basis, programmes and measures aimed at breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty and focused on guaranteeing access to health and basic income must be adopted. Public participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of these programmes legitimizes and empowers people to demand these rights as legal entitlements and not as favors. Social control mechanisms are crucial for ensuring transparency and accountability for more effective social protection programmes that respect the human dignity of participants.

Ensuring Accountability in Mexico's "Oportunidades" Programme

Mexico's Oportunidades programme aims to *"engage in inter-sectoral strategies and actions for education, health, and food; ensure coordination with other social programmes that support employment and income creation and the increase in savings for households in extreme poverty; promote capacity building to raise living standards, create opportunities, fulfill potentials and facilitate incorporation of these populations into development spheres."*

Serving 5.8 million people in the country, the Oportunidades programme has promoted effective accountability mechanisms for families to exercise their rights and responsibilities, be informed, and problem-solve issues that arise within the programme's operations. This includes lodging complaints against irregularities in its implementation. In 2010, 317,518 complaints were lodged. Despite legal proceedings often being expensive, slow and difficult to access, this type of social accountability mechanism meets four basic requirements: i) information mechanisms, ii) monitoring mechanisms, iii) channels for processing complaints and claims and iv) an on-going evaluation and assessment programme that has addressed issues arising within the complaint mechanisms and ensures follow-up on recommendations. The majority of complaint cases are addressed through an in-built mechanism that resolves cases, through channels that reduce the risks of human rights violations. Follow-up actions for monitoring and evaluating social control mechanisms include three instruments: i) a Bimonthly Report, ii) the Citizen Service System: this records the number of complaints, requests and acknowledgments by each institution involved in the programme (using, for example, fixed or mobile mailboxes, telephones, hearing sessions etc.) iii) Guidance and Training: provided for members, participants, and staff involved on social accountability mechanisms.⁷

14 Accountability Scheme for the Human Development Programme 'Oportunidades' – Food Support Programme
http://www.oportunidades.gob.mx/Portal/work/sites/Web/resources/ArchivoContent/1924/esquema_de_contraloria_social_2012.pdf



This product was developed in the context of the project *"Coherent Food Security Responses: Incorporating Right to Food into Global and Regional Food Security Initiatives"* funded by Spain.

www.fao.org/righttofood/governance_en.htm

For questions and comments, please contact:
 Luisa Cruz (Luisa.Cruz@fao.org)

