

Social protection: ensuring effective response and inclusive recovery in the context of COVID-19 in Africa

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Key messages:

- Social protection should be part of the short and long-term response to the health, food security and socio economic consequences of the pandemic.
- African Union Member countries should invest in expanding social protection programmes.
- Ensure programmes provide uninterrupted benefits.
- When programmes exist, consider top-ups (vertical expansion) of transfers or expansion of coverage (horizontal expansion) to affected communities, building capacity for shock responsive social protection.
- Consider innovative approaches to reach the vulnerable in the informal sector, including agriculture sub-sectors.
- Work with humanitarian actors to deliver and build government capacities for shock responsive social protection.

COVID-19 poses significant challenges to an already strained rural context in Africa. 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 related health problems, but even before COVID-19 had spread in Africa, the socio economic impact was felt. The sharp decline in demand and production from the most economically developed countries where contagion had initially hit hardest—China, EU and the USA—has caused a global recession, with direct repercussions in Africa. With the spread of the virus in the continent, containment measures, including social distancing, closing of schools, the prohibition of gatherings and the closure of non-essential businesses and economic activities may have devastating consequences.

These impacts further exacerbate a situation of increasing rates of hunger and poverty, as well as challenges affecting rural areas, including the desert locust outbreak, fall armyworm impacts, early droughts¹, conflict and insecurity. The disruption of traditional transhumance patterns and the creation of new ones may lead to tensions and local displacement, and increased levels of poverty and food insecurity.

Despite these challenges, the region has also 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. This is a critical moment to scale up these efforts.

Why is social protection so critical?

In the short term, access to predictable social assistance, in the form of cash or in-kind transfers, as well as specific labour-related guarantees, is key to mitigating the direct economic impacts of the pandemic on households and communities: health-related costs (prevention, testing and treatment), reduced access to food intake and diverse diets, as well as loss of employment and income due to

closures of markets and restrictions in movement. Social protection can also relieve the pressures facing households in terms of compliance with confinement and movement restrictions and protect them and the wider community from infection.

In the medium and long term, access to social protection enhances the ability of rural households to progressively rebuild their livelihoods, invest in economic activities and manage multiple risks. Social protection will be an essential strategy to ensuring an inclusive recovery pathway. Evidence from social protection programmes in Africa¹ shows the broad range of beneficial impacts, including access to more and better foods, access to education and health services and increasing economic and productive capacity of rural households. Social assistance also generates significant multiplier effects in the local economy.

Starting from a strong base of long-standing programmes, many created in the context of food crises and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Africa has seen a significant and rapid increase in the number of programmes in recent years. The region has made important innovations in terms of design and implementation of social protection, strengthening community structures, developing comprehensive strategies and a systems-approach, prioritizing building strong linkages with economic inclusion, while also designing programmes to respond effectively to predictable crises, such as the Productive Safety Net (PSNP) in Ethiopia and the Hunger Safety Net in Kenya (HSNP).

Despite recognition of the importance of social protection by AU member 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 services². On average across countries, 10 percent of the population in Africa is covered by social assistance³. Refugees and migrants, typically excluded from national social protection systems and health programmes, face additional challenges due to lockdowns and restrictions of movement.

Social protection in Africa: recommendations to enhance response and inclusive recovery

Countries in Africa are developing strategies to address the COVID-19 crisis, including social protection. Lessons from the HIV/AIDS epidemic, food crises, and Ebola outbreak highlight that health needs are the main priority, but, as highlighted in the AU's recommendations for COVID response⁴, impacts on income, food security and livelihoods must also be addressed by employing both immediate and medium term strategies⁵ in order to prevent backsliding on poverty reduction and food security gains.

Expanding existing social protection programmes –including cash transfers, access to health services and employment related guarantees – have been at the forefront of the global response.⁶ In Africa, many countries are still in the process of formulating responses and mobilizing resources, and many are considering social protection instruments as a critical response tool.

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

- Social protection should be part of the **short and long-term response** to the health, food security and socio economic consequences of the pandemic.

¹ See for instance: Davis, B., et al, eds. From Evidence to Action: The Story of Cash Transfers and Impact Evaluation in Sub Saharan Africa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
<http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5157e.pdf>

² <http://www.fao.org/social-protection/resources/resources-detail/en/c/1256369/>

³ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/657581531930611436/pdf/128594-PUB-PUBLIC.pdf>

⁴ AU DREA: The Impact of COVID-19 on Africa's Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resources

⁵ <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8497en/CA8497EN.pdf>

⁶ The latest World Bank review estimates that as 3/04/2020, 106 countries had adopted or announced a total of 418 social protection.

- AU Member countries should **invest in expanding social protection programmes**, leveraging humanitarian funding to make them more risk informed and shock responsive and create contingency funds and including social protection as a sector in negotiations with World Bank and IMF, while assuring the protection of such budgets in the context of economic recession.

In terms of social protection design and implementation:

- **Ensure programmes provide uninterrupted benefits.** Assess health risks for delivery of 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 conditionalities that require work or access to school and health services.
- **When programmes exist, consider top-ups (vertical expansion) of transfers or expansion of coverage (horizontal expansion) to affected communities, building capacity for shock responsive social protection.** Provide a top up to existing benefits; use existing registries to reach additional at risk households, including migrants and refugees; and build capacity of national systems to respond to future crises.
- **Consider innovative approaches to reach the 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; immediate measures should consider support for livelihood preservation and recovery (CASH+); enhancing community-level schemes; employment and livelihood insurance schemes should seek to reach informal and small-scale agricultural workers.
- **Work with humanitarian actors to deliver and build government capacities for shock responsive social protection.** Where systems are less developed or compromised by conflict, delivery of social protection through humanitarian actors may be necessary and can be used as an opportunity to build a SRSP system for the future.

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

In order to avoid disruption of social protection implementation, countries should consider:

1. Adapting mechanisms of delivery and payment of transfers to comply with health safety measures, either opting for mobile payments, payments through local banks, via community based organizations or service providers, or spaced distribution that observes strict safety protocols, and as a last resort allow for retroactive payments as it was done in **Sierra Leone and Liberia** during Ebola¹. Currently in **Morocco**, in order to limit movement, pensions are being paid without previously required conditionality and in **Egypt**, the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) is promoting the use of mobile wallets and contactless cards for transfer delivery.
2. Ensuring that payments for cash-for-work interventions continue even when workers must stay home, such as the case of the PSNP in **Ethiopia**, where work requirements have been waived for those in urban areas, and who will receive advance payments from April to June.
3. Ensure children have access to 'school meals' when schools are closed, including options for delivery or take home rations. For example, 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.

When programmes exist, consider top-ups (**vertical expansion**) of transfers or expansion of coverage (**horizontal expansion**) to affected communities. In all cases, when defining immediate response, eligibility criteria should be reviewed to provide assistance not only to those who fall within the current programme definitions of poorest and most vulnerable, but also to those at risk of losing access to healthy diets, or have major disruptions to their income and livelihoods, creating significant new vulnerabilities and risks. Specific attention should be paid to vulnerable groups most affected by

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/calp-ebola-outcome-analysis-web.pdf>

the crisis, including youth and children, but also the elderly and women, who often serve as caretakers of the sick, leaving them at greater risk. This 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. Pastoralist communities are particularly at risk given disruption of livestock movements.

A key question for expansion in the face of shocks is the identification of households. A number of countries have or are in the process of building social registries that could provide data to enable effective reach of rural households for a broad range of programmes. Development partners are coming together to attempt to combine existing social protection and producer registries to inform programming for COVID-19 responses.

Countries have adapted existing social protection programmes in the face of COVID-19. **Tunisia, Morocco and Kenya** have included social protection as part of a broader socio economic response to COVID. The **South African** Social Security Agency (SASSA) will provide early payments of social grants to older persons and persons with disabilities. In **Kenya**, resources have been allocated to provide additional support to elderly, orphans and other vulnerable members, while in **Cabo Verde, Angola and Egypt**, existing social assistance programmes are being expanded to new participants affected by the crisis². In **Ethiopia and Kenya**, governments have prioritized the importance of livestock insurance, including for pastoralist communities, which could be expanded or further subsidised in the current crisis. Also in **Ethiopia**, transfer levels have been increased for the PNSP in urban areas. 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, as well as horizontal expansion.

Innovative approaches are needed 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 and thus they remain particularly vulnerable and unprotected. The **African Union initiative on SPIREWORK**, which seeks to extend coverage to informal workers by leveraging rural workers organizations and other non-traditional means, may have particular relevance to rapid identification and registration of affected households in this context.

At country level, new complementary programmes are being created, aligned with national systems, such as in **Namibia**, an Emergency Income Grant will support employees who have lost their jobs (formal or informal sector) due to the pandemic and its fallout. In **Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Cabo Verde**, one-off payments are planned for informal workers, including sellers in local markets. In **Morocco**, the Economic Watch Committee members decided to activate a mobile payment device to transfer cash to informal sector workers adversely affected by COVID-19.

When social protection does not exist, or when the systems are compromised due to conflict, it is essential to ensure food, income and livelihoods support to affected households in the short term, delivery support via community structures, when feasible, as well as using the operational expertise of the humanitarian actors to build and invest in designing nascent systems. Specific attention should be given to the countries which were already in food crisis

¹ <http://www.fao.org/in-action/fapda/tool/index.html#main.html>

² <http://www.ugogentilini.net/>

situations or with large segments of their populations in situation of acute hunger before the COVID-19 pandemic¹.

In **Burkina Faso**, development partners will build on the ongoing emergency response to insecurity and displacement by scaling up unconditional cash transfers. Some households will also receive assistance to increase vegetable and livestock production, and hygiene kits. In **Egypt**, the government is partnering with local organizations to provide support, providing one-off payments to women village community leaders. In **Somalia**, development partners are focusing on i) scaling-up, horizontally and vertically, unconditional cash transfers to rural households to cover three-month food needs and ii) scaling-up cash and livelihood inputs transfers to promote local production and protect agricultural livelihoods.

Guiding questions for consideration by the Ministers:

- When social protection programmes exist, the recommendation to consider top-ups (vertical expansion) of transfers or expansion of coverage (horizontal expansion) to affected communities; is this feasible? What will it imply? How are countries planning to do this?
- When social protection does not exist, or when the systems are compromised due to conflict, what options do you foresee given the severity of the situation?
- Do you foresee any changes on the geography or the location of the most vulnerable?

¹ See 2019 Global Report against Food Crises (<http://www.fao.org/resilience/resources/ressources-detail/fr/c/1187704/>). Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan and northern Nigeria were among the worst food crises in 2018.