



Social protection and decent rural employment

The issue

Poor people in rural areas face many risks and vulnerabilities throughout their lives. Among these, precarious employment and hazardous working conditions tend to generate high degrees of income insecurity and affect their occupational health and safety. Social protection interventions can both help poor people cope with such vulnerabilities and contribute to the creation of [more and better employment opportunities](#) for rural workers and their families.

What does the evidence say?

Evidence generally shows social protection has positive impacts on employment outcomes through several channels:

- **Human capital development.** Social protection can enhance school enrolment and attendance by alleviating the burden of schooling costs, and some programmes make benefits directly conditional on school attendance. Cash transfers, child grants or school feeding programmes can improve nutrition outcomes, and in turn contribute to early childhood cognitive development. For working-age adults, social protection programmes can support job searches by decreasing the costs of travel and application fees, and by compensating for foregone wages. Social protection can also play a role in [life-long skills development](#), such as public works that promote on-the-job training or by incentivizing technical and vocational training and informal learning.
- **Employment creation.** Social protection can boost employment. Public works programmes do so directly by providing temporary jobs for rural workers to protect them against income losses caused by shocks or providing a source of income during the farm off-season. Social protection programmes can also support [asset accumulation](#) in the form of livestock, land or otherwise, thereby enhancing productive capacity and potential income diversification, which in turn can trigger new opportunities for farm and non-farm employment. FAO's [From Protection to Production](#) project has observed significant income and employment multiplier effects resulting from social protection through local economy stimulus.
- **Changes in household labour allocation.** Social protection is often perceived to create dependency and disincentives to work. Evidence from developing country rural contexts points very much to the contrary. According to numerous studies, social protection strengthens workers' ability to find [gainful employment](#). Social protection tends to increase labour demand in on-farm agricultural activities. It can also stimulate investments in non-farm household enterprises. There is less conclusive evidence that social protection by itself suffices to [eliminate child labour](#) or that it [increases less precarious, formal sector employment](#).
- **Working conditions.** Social protection can lead to increased rural wages, as shown by India's [public works programmes](#). Social protection can also increase bargaining power for better working conditions, enabling workers to negotiate against exploitative or extremely low paid jobs. However, if poorly designed, programmes such as labour-intensive public works can increase women's work burden and may involve heavy manual labour, making such programmes less appropriate and accessible for women.
- **Employment security.** Social insurance can reduce the likelihood of people resorting to damaging coping strategies and falling into destitution. Lack of access to maternity protection or health and unemployment benefits adds

significant burdens to families, in terms of healthcare costs, loss of working days or missed income. Pensions benefit the elderly but, in turn, can also benefit all family members, by financing education or job searches.

In practice: What FAO does

As part of its programme for reducing [rural poverty](#), FAO promotes access to social protection in rural areas and seeks to strengthen synergies with the creation of decent rural employment. FAO does so along two main lines of support to Member Countries:

- **Producing solid evidence to inform policy-making.** FAO carries out analytical work to fill in crucial knowledge gaps in areas such as the role of social protection in improving working conditions, supporting access or transitions towards more stable and productive employment, providing insurance against risks and shocks in settings with pervasive informality and seasonality, as well as protection and enforcement of labour rights. For example, FAO conducts quantitative and qualitative analyses on labour outcomes of cash transfers in sub-Saharan Africa as part of the [From Protection to Production project](#).
- **Providing policy and technical support.** FAO helps countries refine the objectives and design features of their social protection policies and programmes to support desired labour market outcomes, such as promoting labour market participation among the rural working-age population (especially youth and women) or preventing child labour (see box).

All activities are implemented in close coordination with FAO's work programme on [decent rural employment](#), and in collaboration with partners, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), World Bank and UNICEF.

Knowledge & evidence

- Analytical methods & tools
- Quantitative & qualitative evidence
- Communication & dissemination

Policy & technical support

- Capacity development
- Technical support in programme design & implementation
- Partnerships

Examples of how to integrate decent rural employment objectives in social protection programmes

- **To reduce child labour in agriculture**, child support grants can require school enrolment and include explicit messaging to attend school and avoid exposure to hazardous work. Example: [Child Grant Programme in Lesotho](#).
- **To provide decent work**, public employment programmes can be designed to ensure adequate wages, skills development, full respect of occupational safety and health standards, and access to social security and health care. Example: [National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India](#).
- **To extend social security to rural workers**, social insurance programmes can account for the specific needs of agricultural and rural activities. Example: [Rural Social Insurance in Brazil](#).

Reference: This Note is based on a working paper commissioned by FAO to the Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI): Samson, M., Nyokangi, E., Yang, M., Estruch, E., and Rapone, C. 2015. Social protection and Agricultural Development: Transformational approaches to strengthening the decent work agenda, FAO, forthcoming.