

FAO mini-series

Podcast #2 –

“Social Protection: Breaking the cycle of Rural Poverty”

[Sandra] Hello and welcome to episode 2 of this special 4-part podcast mini-series on “Sustainability”.

My name is Sandra Ferrari, and I am your host.

[Theme Music UP]

In last week’s episode we discussed sustainable agriculture and the role of food in the UN’s new sustainable development goals. In this week’s episode we’re going to be talking about social protection and how that relates to agriculture and food security.

You will hear from a widow and a farmer in Ghana, West Africa. And you will also hear from a government supported farmer in Brasilia, Brazil who grows the food that his children and other children at the local school eat.

Earlier this week, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization released its yearly flagship publication, the State of Food and Agriculture– otherwise known as the SOFA report.

Each year, the SOFA report tries to provide a balanced science-based assessment of a key issue in agriculture. And that can help policymakers, farmers and experts make informed decision.

[Theme music OUT]

This year the topic examined is social protection.

So - What is social protection?

Social protection refers to government programs that try to reduce poverty and prevent people from falling into poverty when crisis strikes. These programs are particularly important for populations that are already vulnerable – like the extremely poor, and the elderly.

But they also allow people to become more productive and build their assets – which has benefits to the larger community, too. Throughout the developing world, some 2.1 billion people, or one-third of the population, receive some form of social protection.

In a recent interview with our team at FAO Radio, Rob Vos, Director of FAO’s social protection division explained the different types of social protection programs.

[Rob Vos Clip] Programs could range from those like that developed countries have – pension schemes, guaranteed health insurance, and so on... but in the context we work in... you think of subsidies on basic food products, cash transfers, specific nutrition support programs – such as school feed programs – or employment guarantee schemes.

[Sandra] According to the latest SOFA report, almost one billion people are considered extremely poor and another billion are poor.

So people become trapped in vicious cycles of hunger, poor nutrition, ill health and low productivity that keep them poor.

And 78 per cent of the extreme poor live in rural areas where most of our food is grown.

So empowering rural areas is key to breaking that vicious cycle: And research suggests that a potent formula to do this is with a combination of investments in social protection --to help agricultural producers be more productive -- AND investment in agricultural development.

In a moment we're going to go hear from villagers from a rural community called Bamahu, which is in the upper West region of Ghana.

Many of them are receiving support from their government through something called the LEAP program – which is a cash transfer program.

Now – from a policy perspective there are many elements that need to be considered when we're talking about direct social assistance like cash transfers.

Will a particular program truly help the people receiving support? How will support to these individuals affect the local economy? What type of support is most beneficial to all?

Latif Mahama, a regional correspondent for Ghanaian news agency, CITI FM, went to the rural community of Bamahu - in the Upper West Region of Ghana - WA municipality. Last week, many in the community received their cash transfers from the LEAP program.

[GH tape up]

(Male farmer)

My name is Adamu Salia. As you can see I am a farmer. My entire family depend on the little we get from the farm. I have an acre of maize, half an acre of millet and some vegetables. We have not been able to increase the yields because of the high cost fertilizer and other inputs.

This year I intended to have increased my farm up to four acres but as you can see I don't have the money to do so.

This money government has just given us will help me buy at least a bag of fertilizer. Before now I was worried about how I will feed the family. So this is a big relief to me and my family.

In fact, we used to hear about this support for other communities, but we had never got it until today.

I received GHC 64 . The officers told us that the money will not reach all of us. It is my prayer that those who are not able to get today will get theirs next time when they come.

(Wa municipality official)

I am the honourable Issahaku Nuhu Putiaha WA municipal chief executive in the upper west region of Ghana. Without this support it would be very difficult for them to make out a living. This is why we are always very happy for the government and the donors and those who are assisting for us to get it hear in the municipality. It is a direct strategy towards reducing or eliminating poverty and also mitigating their plight, the hardship that people go through. Out of 10 people you get about 9 people being poor. This LEAP money we are getting is going a long way to helping the people. Look at the women clapping; they are very delighted to have this.

(Female farmer)

My name is Muniratu Alhassan. I am a widow with eight children. I am a small scale farmer in Bamahu.

Today we are very glad and grateful that government has come to our aid. I received GHC 106. We did not believe that such a program will come to this village. Indeed it has come to help the widows of this community and other physically challenged persons.

My husband died and left me and my 8 children. It has been very difficult to take care of my children. Two of them could not continue their education because I was not able to pay for their fees. This has remained my saddest challenge since I lost my husband.

This money I just received will be used strictly to take care of my children's school needs, nothing more nothing less. I don't want any of my children out of school anymore. You have indeed come to save me from a great embarrassment in this community.

[Sandra] Those interviews again were collected by Latif Mahama, regional correspondent for Ghanaian news agency, CITI FM.

Now – for Adamu the link between his livelihood as a farmer and the food on his table is quite explicit, but what we're hearing in Muniratu's story is about the indirect link between food security and social protection.

Her story highlights how the social elements of a community are interconnected with the local economy and the ability of many rural poor to integrate into their community.

To explain more about the qualitative scope for something like a cash transfer project, I'll go back to an interview I did with FAO technical officer, Pamela Pozarny, during the social protection seminar two years ago.

[xPozarny Clip]

To me one of the more interesting findings which are coming up quite strongly about LEAP, is the effects on social networks, and how these cash transfers are enabling these very, very, very – the poorest of the poor – reengage and re-enter into mostly informal social networks in the community. These social networks are critical for resilience and risk sharing, for sharing of information, for asking for help, to develop small little income generating activities, they are also rotating savings and credit groups. So those are examples of how by re-entering social networks, these households, they say: “Now we can mingle with other people. We're more accepted. They call us when there are social family events, because they can contribute more. Even if it's a very modest amount, they are seen and perceived as a little more self-reliant.

So this is a whole cycle – a positive cycle – where we see if the possibilities for longer term transformation and agency.

[Sandra] FAO's State of Food and Agriculture report 2015 finds that in poor countries, social protection schemes - such as cash transfers - offer an economical way to provide vulnerable people with opportunities to move out of extreme poverty and hunger and to improve their children's health, education and life.

On average, middle and low income countries spend between 1.5 and 1.6 percent of their GDP on social assistance, which suggests that it's affordable to developing countries as well.

Evidence suggests that expanding such programs in rural areas and linking them to inclusive agricultural growth policies has the potential to rapidly reduce the number of poor people.

When it comes to social protection schemes around the world, what's currently going on – what trends are we seeing and what are some key challenges across the various regions. To answer those questions, FAO Radio's Kim-Jenna Jurriaans rounded up some regional perspectives.

[Kim-Jenna] So, we spoke to five FAO experts working at our regional offices for Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, the Near East and North Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

[Al Hassan] Social protection and agriculture have the same objective of ending poverty, enhancing food security and nutrition.

[Kim-Jenna] That's Al Hassan Cisse, a Social Protection Programme Coordinator at our Africa Regional Office in Accra. He says that many countries across Africa have started to implement some form of social protection in recent years, but with differences in scale and types of programs. So what's still missing?

[Al Hassan] There is a need to link SP to food security and nutrition. Financing is another problem. Many keep relying on external resources for social protection. Policy dialogues are important to build social protection into rural development strategies.

[Kim-Jenna] Now, this notion that social protection schemes need to be built in a way that empowers rural areas was a point that most of these regional experts mentioned in this conversation; including Abdessalam Ould Ahmed, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for the Near East and North Africa.

[Ould Ahmed] Inclusive growth will only happen if the majority in the region are brought into the production cycle.

[Kim-Jenna] That's him speaking on the phone from Cairo.

But to make that inclusive growth possible, the region needs to first change its approach to social protection, he says -- away from fuel and food subsidies, to social protection programs that tackle all kinds of development challenges.

[Ould Ahmed] Social assistance programs have particular importance in this region, with food and fuel subsidies almost reaching 5.6 percent of GDP compared to 1.1 on average in other regions.

[Kim-Jenna] Because countries in the region depend strongly on food imports, people are vulnerable to changes in food and fuel prices. So governments have tried to protect low income citizens with these blanket subsidies. But many leaders in the region are rethinking their approach.

[Ould Ahmed] There is a feeling that maybe these systems are not sustainable and they are also not as effective as a means of social protection, in light of other experiences of other countries, particularly in the Latin America and Caribbean countries, where cash transfer systems have had a great impact on poverty alleviation, on food security... In Morocco, a conditional cash transfer system was put in place to support education in rural areas and this program has had tremendous impact on enrolment ration, so it's often mentioned as one of the most successful programs in the region.

[Kim-Jenna] He says it's crucial to link social protection to social development goals, like education, eradicating hunger, malnutrition, poverty, and making agriculture sustainable.

So there you have it again – the need connect protection programs to development. But good programing also needs to be integrated and comprehensive, says Sumiter Broca, Senior Policy Officer at FAO's Asia Pacific regional office in Bangkok. According to him, many countries across Asia use some form of social protection -- so either social insurance, social assistance, or labour market programs... but...

[Sumiter] What we're not seeing is comprehensive programs covering all three types. It's very ad-hoc. Politicians respond to needs as expressed by the voters or the public at large and it's not embedded in some kind of comprehensive view point. There's no social protection practice that applies across the region. It's a patchwork, it's improvised a bunch of band aids.

[Kim-Jenna] So what needs to be done to make things more effective?

[Sumiter] We need to bring countries together to learn from each other's experiences then each country needs to decide for itself. You know, 'what's the biggest issue that can be addressed through social protection? What types of social protection how much would it cost?'.

[Kim-Jenna] At our office for Europe and Central Asia, our colleagues have been specifically looking at the state of social protection in the 12 former Soviet countries, who are implementing social protection reforms. The old soviet system they inherited provided many important services, like child care and health care, according to Dono Abdurazakova, Gender and Social Protection Consultant based at our regional office in Budapest. But there is still relatively little awareness of how social protection systems can be used to lift people up from poverty and create life-long security.

[Dono] Some countries are better than others. But generally it's an areas that's been unfunded. Even though achievements have been made, situation is characterized by limited impact, especially in rural areas - issues of access to programs and their ability to reach the neediest. There is also an issue with the size of social payments. They are very small and insufficient to lead households out of poverty

[Kim-Jenna] But as the region undergoes reform, it's also innovating and experimenting with new ways to apply social protection schemes.

[Dono] Georgia, was one of the first countries in the region to introduce scores for means test, to define the status for eligibility for social benefits, which is decided on the basis of scores calculated by the computerized system. computerized system. Before that social assistance was provided only to particular categories of populations – such as single penioners, the disabled, families with many children. But with introduction of this methodology, applications are done on behalf of a family by a social agent who visits the household and the score of the household is calculated.

[Kim-Jenna] And that brings us to Latin America and the Caribbean – the last region on our little tour around the world. While social protection programs have been around for decades in many regions, Latin America has become somewhat of a model in recent years because many countries in the region - in very little time - managed to lift millions out of chronic hunger, with a mix of economic growth and targeted social protection programs.

As we've heard before, conditional cash transfer programs have been the most successful – and 21 out of 33 countries in the region are now using them.

[Rapallo] Around 21 percent of the people in the region are participating in these programs. That shows impact in the reduction of hunger and rural poverty.

[Kim-Jenna] That's Ricardo Rapallo, Food Security Officer and Project Coordinator supporting FAO's Hunger Free Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative

[Rapallo] The second example – a very concrete example - are the school feeding programs, which are linked with public purchase and family farming promote integration between schools and communities. These programs have shown a positive impact, because we have seen an increase in household income for rural households and farmers organizations, it provides fresh and healthy food for the children and provides integration between the schools and the communities.

[KJ] So we've heard that throughout the regions cash transfers programs, either conditional or unconditional, are popular tools, and that there's a growing understanding that countries should build their social protection schemes in a way that also helps them achieve larger development goals, like improving health, education and better nutrition. To learn a bit more about how school feeding programs have helped to reduce rural poverty and increase nutrition, we're now turning to Brazil.

[Sandra] Members of the FAO communications team travelled to Brazil this year to interview beneficiaries of one of the country's most effective and internationally celebrated social protection programmes - the school feeding initiative.

The school feeding is one of an array of programmes in the larger Fome Zero initiative, which also includes Brazil's flagship cash-transfer program, Bolsa Familia. Bolsa Familia an integrated initiative that was formed in 2003 by the federal government.

So under that, within school feeding, schools are matched with local farmers who grow food to provide to schools so that underprivileged children are ensured good nutrition in their day.

First we hear from the farmer on a rainy day in Brasilia.

[xBrazil school feed-mixdown4.mp3]

(Farmer)

My name is Rivaldo José Goncalves. I'm a milk producer, and family farmer here in Brasilia in the federal district. I've been producing milk for 10 years. I started off producing 10 Liters of milk per day, and today I produce more than 300 Liters of milk per day to the cooperative.

The cooperative is our market... it's our intermediary to the consumer... our direct intermediary. Through the cooperative we get a better price for our product.

Our cooperative sells to 3 government programs here in Brasilia, for schools, for child daycare centres, to homes for the elderly.

When I started here, I entered a government program to assist family farmers here in the federal district and they taught us how to produce milk, in my case, or to produce grains in the grains in the other cases, and and they taught us new production techniques every day.

These programs allow producers to grow strong roots in the countryside and with these programs there is also a greater financial incentive to sell to the schools, so it's better for family farmers, and that helps us a lot.

I have three children. I'm producing here on my property [maybe just say "farm"] the products that my own children and their classmates are going to consume at schools.

(Nutritionist)

My name is Joanna Quitaner Bisoto. I'm the director of the school feeding program in Formoso, Goias.

In our Municipality, Formosa, we're doing diverse menus, to diverse modalities, according to age and time period that the child is staying in the school. If a child is here for the full day they receive three meals, and when they are here for half a day they receive one meal – all balanced with vegetables and fruits, milk products... it's all present in the school meals nutrition.

We plan the meals in our secretariat for each school.

We offer standard nutrition rice, beans, sugar, milk, and organic products from organic gardens and school gardens. Products that come from organic farmers.

We plan according to the meal. It can be a weekly plan, a monthly plan and even a plan for the full semester so we're able to purchase the products in large quantities. But we plan the menu weekly

We weight the children and measure their height, we do tests to see if the menu is adequate or not. We adapt the way we prepare food certain types of foods we're using. We weigh and measure the height the students regularly to see if there is obesity or undernutrition and we follow up the work of the health centre here in the municipality.

[Sandra] Social Protection has been featured in the New Sustainable Development Goals adopted by almost 200 governments last month. Social Protection has been linked to the goals to end poverty, gender equality, and the reduction of inequality.

We heard from beneficiaries in both Ghana and Brazil whose voices need to stay central in these conversations.

And while local contexts might call for different strategies, there is evidence that these measures play a key role in making people and communities more resilient and productive and by connecting them to agriculture and rural areas are potent forces to break cycles of poverty and make food production sustainable into the future.

[Theme music UP]

[Sandra] Next week in this special FAO mini-series... our entry point into this conversation about sustainability will be the Zero Hunger Generation.

This has been an FAO Radio podcast. I'm Sandra Ferrari.

[Theme music OUT]

If you would like to hear the full interviews with the guests in today's podcast, visit [FAO.org/media](https://www.fao.org/media) for more information.
