



Understanding 'Social Protection for Food Security'

There is no one single definition of 'social protection' as it takes different forms and degrees in different countries. The expression covers all mechanisms that allow people to withstand the 'risks of life' (illness, old age, unemployment) and poverty. These services are in theory set by law and seen as rights. In recent years, social protection has increasingly been seen as an approach that allows one to fight more effectively against food insecurity.

Social Protection: An Acknowledged Right in Theory

Social protection refers to the idea that government authorities have a responsibility to ensure that people receive at least minimal social benefits. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Labour Organization, everyone is entitled to expect a minimum of goods and services needed to live a decent life. Thus, countries that have signed this declaration can be held accountable for any person who goes hungry or starves to death on their watch: this is the right to food.

The right to food is written into the very constitution of countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Mexico, Côte d'Ivoire and Niger.

Social Protection: A Sensitive Subject

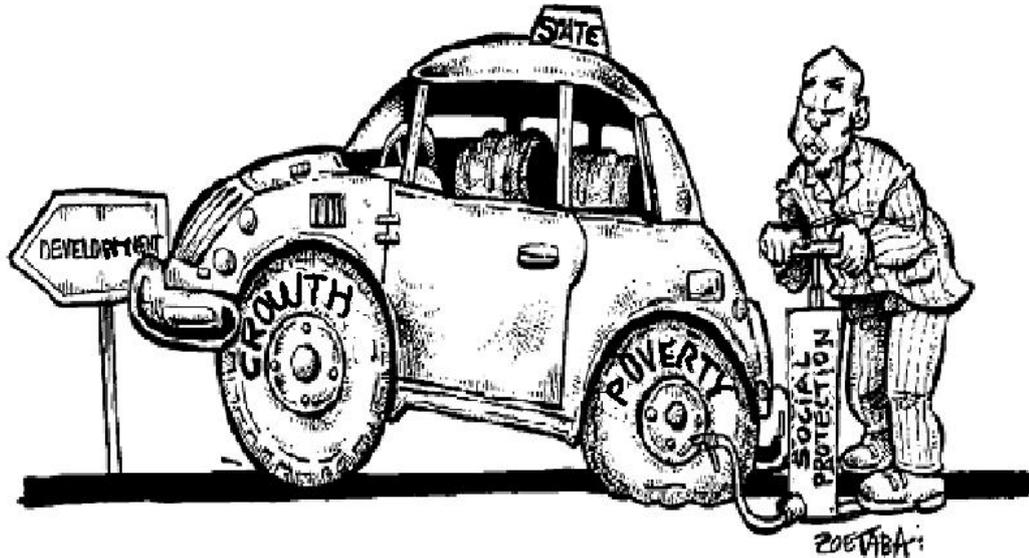
Theoretically accepted by all, social protection is struggling to be applied in many countries. Why? First, it implies that states organise some form of wealth redistribution, an eminently political question. Next, it forces budget choices: should one choose social spending or instead opt for spending that targets productive sectors (industry, agriculture, etc.)? It can also have an effect on informal solidarity mechanisms (private and traditional) and raise implementation issues. In short, it raises the underlying question of just how much the state should intervene in the economy and citizens' lives.

Social Protection: A Societal Choice

Social protection systems vary greatly from one country to the next, notably because they are a reflection of culture, history, available resources and political choices. For example, social protection is more fully developed in some European countries with social democrat traditions than in the United States marked by its liberal heritage. The former give a larger role to the state (the notion of 'welfare state') than the latter. In emerging countries, social protection has begun to develop above all in the past ten years or so (especially in India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa). In lower-income countries, notably in Africa, social protection is little developed but we are seeing more and more stakeholders (notably donors) promote it, especially as a solution to hunger.

Does Social Protection Hinder or Drive Growth?

Some (liberal) economic traditions see social protection as non-productive spending and recommend that it be kept to a strict minimum, believing that solidarity is a private affair and that public spending must concentrate on investments in public goods. Some also accuse social protection of encouraging a hand-out mentality and dependency among the poor. Others say the exact opposite and claim that social spending stimulates growth. Indeed, it puts people, who have been made more secure, in a position to invest (see *the brief on obstacles to social protection*).



Social Protection, a Cure for Inequality?

Thanks to the *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) program, poverty affected 15.4% of Brazilians in 2009, compared to 27.8% in 1999.

We now know that economic growth is not synonymous with poverty reduction. Quite the contrary. Growth often widens the gap between the rich and the poor. To fight this phenomenon—which is potentially explosive for societies—many emerging countries want to strengthen their social protection.

What Do We Mean by Social Protection 'for Food Security'?

This expression reminds us and affirms that social protection is an effective and realistic solution to fight hunger. The originality of this approach comes from the fact that we have traditionally not insisted very much on social protection to fight hunger. When coordinated with other food security (FS) policies, social protection is in some ways a 'radical' cure for hunger because it helps its victims directly and lastingly.

What is Unique About Tackling FS Through Social Protection?

Until now, to fight hunger in developing countries, the emphasis has been more on emergency relief programmes during food crises or on agricultural and economic development actions. The social protection method attempts to reconcile both approaches, emphasising hunger prevention.

How Is Social Protection Different from Emergency Relief to Fight Hunger?

The main difference between a social protection approach and an emergency relief programme during a food crisis lies in the lasting and predictable nature of public assistance. A relief programme comes after a crisis starts and only lasts as long as the crisis. In the social protection approach, benefits are set and written into law. They are a right for citizens.

Why Is Social Protection Now Being Promoted in West Africa?

In the Sahel, food crises have become cyclic. Since the start of the 2000s, the region has faced more and more frequent food crises (in 2005, 2009 and 2012) and millions of people are in a constant state of food insecurity. These repeated crises, cyclically hitting the same households, have called into question the traditional methods used to fight food insecurity, which neither preserve nor restore households' livelihoods. According to many studies, it is also much less expensive to prevent hunger than to try to cure it after the fact.

How Do Agricultural Policy and Social Protection for FS Differ?



We used to believe that hunger was mainly a problem of not enough agricultural production. Stimulating agricultural production was therefore supposed to fight food insecurity by allowing farmers to produce more food to feed themselves as well as feed the rest of the country and earn money. This idea has now been called partially into question. For example, we are seeing more and more poor farmers who no longer have the means to produce all the food they need (in the Sahel, they are very numerous). They are forced to work for other farmers and there's no point in giving them fertiliser: what they need is food or incomes to buy food.

Do Social and Agro-Economic Approaches to Fight Hunger Contradict Each Other?

The idea is not to pit development policies and social measures against each other or to choose one over the other. To fight hunger, it is often necessary to pursue several goals at once: stimulate production, watch price fluctuations, and assist the poorest with social redistribution policies. The difficulty is often a matter of finding the proper dosage of each of these complementary policies.

What Social Protection Do We Find in Developing Countries?

In West Africa, assistance for poor populations is scattered and limited in time and space. Often, it is not part of any true social protection policy but rather part of relief or crisis response systems. These mechanisms take diverse forms: free food distributions, sale of inexpensive foodstuffs, public works programmes, subsidised staples, and even direct conditional or unconditional cash transfers (*see the summary brief on social protection instruments*). These actions are sometimes carried by national stakeholders, but they are often designed, financed and implemented by international actors—bilateral aid agencies, international organisations or NGOs. In other developing regions, notably South America and Southern Africa, several countries have managed to set up lasting

The Productive Safety Net Program implemented in Ethiopia since 2005 aims both to help the poorest and build infrastructures that improve agricultural production (irrigation systems, terraces, etc.) or facilitate the food trade (building roads and markets).

social protection programmes reaching a vast segment of the population relying mostly on national funding (see the summary brief on lessons to be learned from successes).

But Isn't Traditional Solidarity a Form of Social Protection?

In poor countries, due to a lack of widespread social protection, there are often traditional solidarity mechanisms—within families, social groups and communities—that play a vital role but are also the subject of debate. Some question their effectiveness, fairness and capacity to cope with the changes underway (urbanisation, migration, the breakdown of family or community ties, population growth, climate change, etc.) and claim that governments need to live up to their responsibilities. Others insist on the complementary nature of the systems (some local organisations are sometimes in a better position than the state to organise and manage solidarity).

Do Poor Countries Have the Means to Set Up Social Protection Systems?

It is obvious that social protection is costly for states. This is a crucial issue for low-income countries with limited budgets. In addition, international aid budgets are shrinking. Nevertheless, it is important to compare this short-term cost with the cost of doing nothing. Chronic undernutrition, child malnutrition and food crises are clearly even more expensive for countries and populations. Finally, many studies have shown that social protection systems are entirely possible in low-income countries (see the summary brief on obstacles to social protection).

According to diplomat Jan Egeland, if the international community had intervened in Niger in early 2005, it would have cost \$1 (€0.70) per day to prevent child malnutrition. But by July 2005, it cost \$80 (€57) to save the life of one child suffering from malnutrition.

How Can Social Protection Be Financed in Poor Countries?

States have several options to cover these costs: (i) improve the efficiency of current social spending; (ii) make different budget choices (but where could spending reasonably be cut?); (iii) expand taxes and increase tax collection (there is lots of room for progress in poor countries); and/or (iv) set up innovative financing mechanisms (e.g., a tax on financial transactions). Donors also have a large role to play during the (expensive) launch phase of social protection systems.

Further Reading

Social Protection for Food Security, a report by the HLPE (2012)

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/me422e/me422e.pdf>

Social Protection for Inclusive Development, European Report on Development (2010)

<http://erd.eui.eu/erd-2010/final-report/>

Point Info Future Agricultures: Agriculture et protection sociale en Afrique (March 2009)

http://www.future-agricultures.org/component/docman/doc_details/1470-agriculture-et-protection-sociale-en-afrique#.UIVnUBCtuuk

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