



## Obstacles to Social Protection to Fight Hunger: Real Challenges and False Problems

For several years, social protection has been presented as a radical approach to fighting food insecurity. However, few of the least developed countries have set up large-scale social protection for food security policies. In West Africa in particular, interventions for the most part have limited timeframes. Insurmountable implementation difficulties, overly high costs, lack of political will: what are the major obstacles to social protection for food security in West Africa?

Brazil's *Bolsa Família* reached 25% of the country's population (nearly 50 million people) and Senegal's *Bourse de Sécurité Familiale* reached less than 5% (50,000 households) in 2013.

### Does Social Protection Make People Lazy and Dependent?

Governments reticent to introduce a social protection for food security policy often insist on the supposed ties between social transfers and hand-out mentalities. The possibility of receiving aid is said to encourage a large proportion of the population to not work, with negative consequences on government budgets and economic growth. Studies on this subject, however, show that such effects are weak or inexistent. They even affirm that social transfers can revive the economy when they are well designed. When Namibia experimentally launched a universal 'base income support' programme, unemployment fell from 64% to 52% in six months because recipients invested part of their stipends in informal sector micro enterprises (bread making, sewing) and their neighbours had a little money to the buy goods and services they offered.

### Does Social Protection Threaten the Social Fabric?

Another widespread idea is that social transfers destroy traditional self-help networks. In contexts marked by rapid urbanisation and subject to risks capable of affecting the livelihoods of an entire region, existing solidarity systems are in any event not enough. Social transfers can what is more reduce the pressure on families of the recipients of these transfers. For all that, one must not neglect the potential effects of social protection programmes on existing social ties and balances, particularly when programmes target only part of the community. It is important to have a good understanding of local dynamics, which can fuel and support the elaboration of social protection systems well suited to the context.

### Can Social Protection Lastingly Pull People Out of Poverty and Hunger?

When they are well designed, social protection programmes should foster households' autonomy and their lasting exit from food insecurity and poverty. Some programmes insist on these potentially 'promoting' effects (enabling an exit out of poverty) of social protection. Rwanda, for example, combines

cash transfers and public works with a credit system granting loans to the poor to launch additional economic activities. Despite these efforts, some households who had been able to 'exit' the system must once again be covered one or two years later. In practice, this exit out of poverty is not obvious. Even well defined, can a social protection programme allow an agricultural household of 15 people with barely one hectare of farmland lastingly avoid food insecurity? Initially linked to poverty and social inequalities, hunger is a problem that requires one also take an interest in policies targeting jobs, land and demography as well as power relations and power balances within societies. Social protection is not a cure-all and must be coordinated with other programmes to fight hunger.

### Is Social Protection for Food Security Expensive?

Mexico's conditional transfer programme reaches 25% of the population and costs less than 1% of GDP per year. Ethiopia's social protection programme (transfers and public works) helps nearly 10% of the population and absorbs close to 1.5% of GDP.

Another frequent argument is that setting up a social protection policy to fight food insecurity would be too expensive for the poorest countries. It is also said that such a policy would replace other more 'productive' investments. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), financing a social protection system encompassing several programmes would cost between 2% and 6% of GDP in most of the least developed countries. In Niger, this figure is said to be between 60 and 190 billion CFA francs (between

€90 and €290 million). Yet, this country's annual uranium and oil exports alone have risen by nearly €400 million since 2006. Another telling comparison: spending to manage the 2010 food crisis is said to have amounted to 250 billion CFA francs (€380 million). Inaction—and intervention after a crisis that could not be avoided—is expensive, certainly more expensive than social protection programmes that make it possible to avoid crises.

### Can Least Developed Countries Finance Social Protection Programmes?

Instituting a social protection policy comes at a cost, but some countries manage to cover this cost. Lesotho, albeit poor, has for example decided to finance its social pension programme on its own. While states seem to have sufficient resources to finance—at least in part and over the medium term—social protection programmes to fight hunger, it is no less true that these resources are limited. It is true that some interventions are expensive and it is difficult to call them into question once established, particularly in the case of subsidies. In Malawi, the cost of the agricultural input subsidy programme has continued to rise, from approximately €65 million in 2006-2007 to €86 million in 2011-2012. Its financing by the state could no longer be sustainable and it could prevent other investments from being made in food security, which might be more favourable to poorer and more vulnerable populations. In contexts marked by limited resources, it is crucial to privilege the most effective interventions.

### Can Social Protection Be Financed with International Aid?

In West Africa, social protection programmes are in large part financed by international aid stakeholders, notably the World Bank and British, European and American aid agencies. Yet, the weight of this aid—both in programme financing and definition—seems little compatible with the

According to the World Bank, donors provide 80% of the funding for social safety nets in Burkina Faso, 60% in Mali and 70% in Niger. In Botswana, social safety nets are financed 100% by the

very nature of social protection, supposed to be a lasting system written into law and guaranteed by the state. The recent evolution in countries in Southern Africa shows that a transition towards true national systems is possible; Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Senegal seem to have recently begun this transition. The technical and financial partners can continue to play an important role, notably during the set-up phase for social protection programmes, which is particularly expensive, and states can then provide the bulk of funding for transfers. Olivier de Schutter (United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food) proposed setting up a Global Fund for Social Protection to lift obstacles to financing social protection programmes in poor countries. This fund would contain two components: the ‘fund’ allowing poor countries that wish to lay the foundations of social protection to receive financial support from the international community; and a ‘reinsurance’ component that would enable poor countries to insure themselves against the risk of no longer being able to finance increased demand for social protection.

### Is it Necessary to Target Programme Beneficiaries?

In principle, social protection is a right and should be guaranteed for all. But, faced with financing constraints, most experts think that interventions need to be targeted. Several arguments are put forth. Targeted programmes generally make it possible to deliver more resources to beneficiaries than universal transfers because they are fewer in number. Next, some interventions have negative effects on private circuits when they do not target the poorest. In its early days, Malawi’s input subsidy programme also benefitted farmers who had the means to buy unsubsidised fertiliser. Studies have estimated that subsidised fertiliser replaced 30% to 40% of commercial purchases in 2006-2007.

### Is it Possible to Target Social Protection Beneficiaries Effectively?

Nevertheless, it is not easy to target the populations that should benefit from a programme effectively. In West Africa, different techniques exist but all present risks, particularly in terms of inclusion (risk of giving to people who do not need the programme) and exclusion (risk of not giving to those who need the programme).

	Geographic Targeting	Targeting Based on Socioeconomic Criteria	Targeting by Category	Self-Targeting	Community Targeting
<b>Operations</b>	Aid is brought to the inhabitants of a zone marked by high levels of food insecurity.	The aid is provided based on household socioeconomic status.	Aid is provided to households based on easily observable criteria (usually age or gender) that correlate closely with food insecurity.	The cost of accessing services is high (physical effort, waiting time, etc.) and/or the value of services is low to dissuade people who are not poor.	Residents identify the poorest or most vulnerable members of the community. This technique is widely used in West Africa.
<b>Advantages</b>	Inexpensive (in time and financial resources).	Better targeting of interventions on the poorest.	Inexpensive.	Inexpensive.	Technique potentially more precise than others.
<b>Criticisms and Constraints</b>	Some people are food insecure outside target zones; others do not need help in the target zone.	Costly method (in time and financial resources).	Not all female-headed households, for example, are food insecure while some male-headed households are.	People who need help (the elderly, pregnant women, etc.) are excluded or dissuaded. The physical effort required lessens the effect of the programme, particularly when salaries are low.	Processes are rarely transparent and the selection of beneficiaries is often influenced by the village chief.

## What Targeting Methods in West Africa?

In West Africa, social protection for food security programmes often target socioeconomic criteria and poverty in order to reach the food insecure in priority. The distinction, within communities, between eligible people and others can, however, stigmatise the former and frustrate the latter. Introducing a threshold may be poorly perceived by populations because it is often arbitrary. Some governments, in particular in countries where national unity is not strong, are hesitant to exclude certain segments of the population from programmes. Income differences between very poor households and poor households in countries such as Niger are minimal, which sometimes causes the exclusion of poor households and the inclusion of less poor households in programmes. Faced with these inclusion and exclusion errors, the cost of targeting and the risks of tension and stigmatisation linked to socioeconomic targeting, choosing the 'right' targeting method for the context and financial constraints is both very important and very difficult. No targeting method is perfect, and the question remains open.



### Further Reading

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

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

*Targeting*, FOA online class (2012)

<http://www.foodsec.org/dl/elcpages/food-security-courses.asp?pgLanguage=en&leftItemSelected=food-security-courses>

'Quelles politiques pour les populations pauvres du Sahel' (*Grain de Sel* no. 59-62, 2013)

<http://www.inter-reseaux.org/revue-grain-de-sel/article/grain-de-sel-no59-62-queelles>

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