



## Social Protection, Food Security, and Asset Formation



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### SUMMARY

The last two decades have seen a rapid rise in social protection programs and studies that assess their impacts on a large number of domains. We construct a new database of studies of these programs that report impacts on food security outcomes and asset formation. Our meta-analysis finds that social protection programs improve both the quantity and quality of food consumed by beneficiaries. The magnitudes of these effect sizes are meaningful. The average social protection program increases the value of food consumed/expenditure by 13% and caloric acquisition by 8%. Food expenditure rises faster than caloric acquisition because households use transfers to improve the quality of their diet, most notably increasing their consumption of calories from animal source foods. Since the consumption of animal source foods in these populations is low, and because there are significant nutritional benefits to increasing the consumption of these, this is a positive outcome. Our meta-analysis also finds that social protection programs lead to increased asset holdings as measured by livestock, non-farm productive assets, farm productive assets, and savings. There is no impact on land holdings though the number of studies that assess these is small.

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### 1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals agreed to by the 193 member states of the United Nations has committed the global community to ending poverty and hunger by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). There are many ways in which this can be accomplished—increasing productivity of smallholders, increasing levels of education, reducing barriers to entry to high-return activities, to name a few. In the last 20 years, social protection has emerged as an additional policy tool to address poverty and hunger in developing countries and there has been a rapid increase in the number of social protection programs and the total number of beneficiaries these cover. Fiszbein, Kanbur, and Yemtsov (2014) estimate that as of 2013, nearly one billion people around the world receive one form of social protection, cash transfers.

As Fiszbein *et al.* (2014) note, there are a plethora of definitions of social protection. Social protection encompasses: (1) social insurance, contributory schemes that protect against shocks to health or employment; (2) labor market interventions such as job training; and (3) social assistance programs (or social safety nets), targeted non-contributory interventions such as cash and in-kind transfers, labor intensive public works, and humanitarian assistance. In most developing countries, the coverage of social insurance and labor market interventions is limited to a small frac-

tion of individuals who work in the formal sector and are relatively well off. By contrast, social assistance is often targeted to poor households. Following Fiszbein *et al.* (2014), we focus on the social assistance component of social protection and the contribution it makes to improving household food security, reducing hunger, and facilitating asset formation.

We focus on food security and assets for several reasons. First, there are other reviews of the impact of social protection on household food security, including one commissioned by the Committee on World Food Security (HLPE, 2012) and a review of the impact of cash transfers commissioned by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID, 2011). These reviews are impressive in their breadth of coverage. However, they are based on a selective, not comprehensive set of case studies which can be misleading. For example, DFID (2011) reports on the basis of three studies, that there is a “growing body of positive evidence” that social transfers improve child nutritional status (DFID, 2011, 6). But a systematic review by Manley, Gitter, and Slavchevska (2013) using meta-analysis techniques shows that while the average impact of social protection programs on height-for-age is positive, the effect size is small and not statistically significant. Moreover, the HLPE (2012) and DFID (2011) reviews contain few studies from sub-Saharan Africa. Our review includes new work on Africa that has been published more recently.

Second, an important objective of social protection programs in the developing world is to “address the causes of poverty, and not simply its symptoms” (World Bank, 2001 in Barrientos, 2010). Barrientos (2010) emphasizes that social protection in developing countries has a broader developmental role and is not limited to fulfilling income shortfalls. He notes that persistent hunger and poverty is caused by the constraints faced by poor people in taking advantage of economic opportunity which is explained by their vulnerability to shocks of various kinds. Thus he argues that there are three main functions of the broader developmental role of social protection: “(i) to protect the basic levels of consumption among those in poverty or in danger of falling into poverty (a topic covered by Fiszbein et al., 2014); (ii) facilitate investment in human and other productive assets which alone can provide a way out of persistent and intergenerational poverty; and (iii) to strengthen the agency of those in poverty so that they can overcome their predicament” (Barrientos, 2010).

Relatedly, the literature on assets and poverty traps also emphasizes the importance of assets in preventing households from being locked in a low-level equilibrium (Carter & Barrett, 2006). This literature argues that households that start out at very low levels of asset ownership are unable to escape long-term poverty. Households that are above this threshold but close enough that unexpected shocks can put them under the threshold are also at risk of such long-term poverty. If social protection programs can bring these households that are under or close to this threshold above the threshold, then it can effectively prevent them from falling into a poverty trap.

Given all this, we build a new database of social protection interventions and food security and asset outcomes. Using this database, we conduct a meta-analysis on the impact of social protection, specifically its social assistance element, on household food security and asset formation. We find that the average social protection program in our sample raises the value of food consumption by 13% and caloric acquisition by 8%. These average effects are precisely measured—the 95% confidence intervals are 10–16% and 5–10% respectively—and are statistically significant. The value of food consumption from animal source foods rises by 19% and is significant, indicating that beneficiaries use these transfers to improve both diet quantity and quality. Our meta-analysis also finds that social protection programs lead to increased asset holdings as measured by livestock, non-farm productive assets, farm productive assets, and savings but not land.

## 2. Search methodology

### (a) Criteria for inclusion

Studies included in our analysis use primary data to investigate the impact of social protection programs on food security or asset outcomes. We focus on the following types of social protection programs: cash transfers (conditional or unconditional), public works, and food transfers (or food vouchers). We include studies from all developing regions: Latin America and Caribbean (LAC), Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia (SA), and East Asia and Pacific (EAP). We limit our literature review to studies/programs that have been implemented from 1994 onward, the time period corresponding to a significant expansion of social protection interventions in developing countries. In terms of quality of the studies, our selection criteria for inclusion are the following: 1) evaluations should be based on samples of 300 households or more given that impact evaluations based on a very small sample are not very informative and may not detect impacts merely because of the size of sample; 2) studies should have a rigorous evaluation design based on a randomized

control trial, quasi-experimental techniques (such as regression discontinuity or propensity score matching), difference-in-difference, or instrumental variables. Studies that we do not include in our review are those that only look at supply side interventions, such as grants to health centers; correlation studies that do not conduct statistical tests; process evaluations; or evaluations focusing solely on measures outside the scope of our analysis such as health or educational outcomes.

### (b) Search process

Our search process entailed a review of the social protection evaluation literature summarized in Figure 1. Our initial search was conducted in 2014 with the database completed in October 2014. As part of revising the paper, we updated our search, closing it on July 31, 2016. The three initial review studies we used to locate impact evaluations included Grosh, Del Ninno, Tesliuc, and Ouerghi (2008), specifically the tables detailing public works and conditional cash transfer programs; sections on evidence of impacts and causality of social protection programs from Kabeer (2009); and appendices describing studies that Manley et al. (2013) used in their review of cash transfer program effectiveness. These review studies led us to 43 research papers which we analyzed for relevant outcomes. Of these 43 papers, 9 were included in the database.

We next turned to the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation's (3ie) impact evaluation repository. The 3ie repository is a searchable database of over 2,400 published impact evaluations, pre-screened from a potential 60,000 evaluations which were reviewed to meet certain standards of rigor. The repository focuses specifically on developing countries and includes a section on social protection impact evaluations, of which 314 were listed at the time of our search in early 2014. We reviewed the abstracts for each of the 314 listings, and the evaluations with outcomes relevant to food security and productive assets were analyzed in full. Among the 314 studies, 14 were included in the database.

We then conducted online keyword searches to seek out remaining studies of interest. We performed Google searches using combinations of search terms such as “social protection impact evaluation”, “food security”, “assets”, “impacts”, “cash transfer”, “impact evaluation”, or other terms targeted to specific programs, i.e., “Bolsa Familia impact evaluation”. We also used advanced searches or Google Scholar to narrow results. For example, we conducted an advanced search for “social protection impact evaluation” (all of these words) plus “assets” or “food security” (any of these words), limiting results to PDF documents to help eliminate some of the powerpoint presentations, websites, and other hits which were not on target. This search alone yielded approximately 3.7 million hits, requiring a more targeted approach. When “cash transfer” was included as a search term, we found that hits included more rigorous evaluations and were more on target. An advanced search for “cash transfer”, “impact evaluation”, and food security yielded around 34,000 hits. Keyword searches led to other websites, such as the economics-focused bibliographic database IDEAS, and to useful sources such as Garcia and Moore (2012), which contains summary tables of impact evaluations and results of African cash transfer programs. Many resources found through our online keyword search were studies which we had already collected via other means or were process evaluations, briefs, or evaluations of smaller programs with insufficient samples sizes. In total, we included 21 through this search method.

Throughout the search process, we encountered evaluations through means other than those described above. Researchers sent their studies or those of their colleagues for review. Citations from some evaluations led us to others which were pertinent to our research. In a few cases, workshops or announcements informed

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