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# ‘Climate-smart’ social protection: Can it be achieved without a targeted household approach?



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### ABSTRACT

Climate change impacts are heterogeneous even within the same socio-spatial scales whether they are countries, states or even communities. In a community, different households vary in their degree of vulnerability. Such vulnerability differentials can be attributed to endowment, entitlement structure, institutional access and efficiency, and availability of social safety nets. In this study we focus on vulnerability reduction, resilience building and strengthening of adaptive capacity through social protection programs. We review how these programs have been implemented in various communities in developing countries and based on those accounts, we propose a general framework for a more strategic deployment of social protection programs. We suggest that successful deployment of social protection instruments depend on how low, medium and highly adaptive households are targeted. Such a novel approach to when, where, and how social protection instruments can be implemented may serve to enhance the adaptive capacity of households and raise the effectiveness and reach of the instruments themselves.

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## 1. Introduction

Efforts to formulate policies aimed at reducing poverty and vulnerability to climate change have become increasingly focused on using “social protection” mechanisms to assist populations affected by the loss or reduction of incomes and assets during periods of severe environmental stress.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of the social protection model is an assumption that the inability of individuals and households to meet basic needs (of nutrition, healthcare, etc.) during droughts, famines and other volatile periods is the result of a loss or devaluation in skills, assets and incomes in relation to the cost of food, shelter and other basic entitlements. The perceived solution is therefore to provide affected populations with cash or asset transfers, which can theoretically improve their ability to “command” scarce resources in volatile market settings. In addition to preventing highly destructive poverty spirals (see below), social protection can also build upon the assets and capabilities of affected populations, thereby strengthening resilience to future shocks and stresses (Deshingkar et al., 2005; Dreze and Sen, 1989; Matin et al., 2008; Sen, 1981,1999; Slater et al., 2008; Johnson and Krishnamurthy, 2010).

Among donors, social protection programs offer an important means of supplementing and rebuilding the assets and incomes of households adversely affected by periods of social upheaval, market instability and environmental change (Doocy et al., 2006; Farrington and Slater, 2006; Prowse, 2008; Davies et al., 2008; Slater et al., 2008; Tanner et al., 2009; Teichman, 2008; Todd et al., 2010; Maluccio, 2010). Cash transfers (and food transfers) are generally designed to address short-term consumption needs in the context of rapid onset disasters, such as earthquakes, flooding and entitlement failures during droughts. Asset and conditional cash transfers (CCTs) on the other hand aim to influence longer-term behavior by conditioning the transfer of assets or cash in relation to a particular policy outcome, such as nutrition, education and healthcare. CCT programs provide cash payments to poor households that meet certain behavioral requirements and are often related to children’s health care and education. The first generation of CCTs, specifically in Latin American middle income countries, have been successful and demonstrate that well designed and implemented CCT programs can have a wide range of good outcomes such as increased food consumption and improved school enrollment. However, CCT programs generate full synergies between social assistance and human capital development only where the supply of health and education services is extensive and of reasonable quality (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009).

The attraction of using social protection in a context of climate change rests in its ability to influence household decisions over a relatively long (i.e. 50–100 year) period of time (Davies et al., 2008). Recognizing the fact that vulnerability exists in a wider political economy of resource access and distribution (cf. Adger, 2006), cash transfers, asset transfers and other forms of social protection can provide an important means of building assets, diversifying incomes and spreading risk. However, notwithstanding the agreement reached at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Cancun, in 2010 to support additional adaptation financing, resources are limited, raising the challenge of targeting the populations and priorities on which scarce adaptation resources will be allocated and employed. Other challenges include, but are not limited to, prioritizing current risk versus those that are realized over time, navigating and supporting decision-making under uncertainty, etc.

Growing evidence suggests that SP programs do contribute to climate change adaptation. A close examination of over 124 agricultural programmes, in Asia, suggests that the more programmes integrate SP, DRR and CCA, the more likely they are to improve the livelihoods of poor people (Davies and Bene, 2013). Specifically, in India, access to crop insurance have been found to encourage farmers to delay their planting until conditions were more favorable, suggesting that insurance can provide an important means of managing and mitigating risk during unfavorable climatic conditions. Farmers with crop insurance were found to be more likely to invest in commercial crops, such as cotton, as opposed to more traditional varieties of paddy (Panda, 2013). In Ethiopia, households receiving Productive Safety Net Project (PSNP) transfers have been found to be able to manage the shocks better than those that do not receive the transfer in the face of drought, flood, illness, and livestock and crops losses (Béné et al., 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Prowse (2008); Davies et al. (2008); Heltberg et al. (2009); Johnson and Krishnamurthy (2010).

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