



## Social protection for enhanced food security in sub-Saharan Africa



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### ABSTRACT

This paper identifies several positive synergies between social protection programmes and enhanced entitlements to food. One function of social protection is to manage or reduce vulnerability. Several instruments are reviewed – weather-indexed insurance, public works programmes, emergency food aid and buffer stock management – which aim to stabilise income and access to food across good and bad years, or between the harvest and the hungry season. Other social protection instruments aim to raise household income and crop production, for instance agricultural input subsidies or input trade fairs, as well as public works projects that construct or maintain physical infrastructure such as rural feeder roads. This paper also argues that entitlements to food can be strengthened if social justice principles are introduced to the design and delivery of social protection programmes. Examples reviewed include rights-based approaches such as employment guarantee schemes, community-based targeting and demand-driven accountability mechanisms. The paper concludes by arguing for a comprehensive approach to social protection that will achieve sustainable food security, by combining interventions that stabilise income or food production with those that raise income or food production, and are designed and delivered in ways that enhance social justice.

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### Introduction

The evidence base on the positive impacts of social protection on various indicators of wellbeing is growing rapidly (DFID, 2011; EuropeAid, 2012; HLPE, 2012), and the continuing expansion and institutionalisation of social protection programmes throughout Africa appears to be irreversible. However, most social protection programmes do not focus explicitly on enhancing food security; instead, they focus on poverty reduction and management of economic risk. One reason for this might be the assumption that reducing poverty automatically reduces food insecurity – though this is questionable – while another reason might be the fact that many social protection programmes, especially in rural areas, are *de facto* food security interventions – as this article will demonstrate.

There is no consensus on the conceptual boundaries of social protection, but most operational definitions include two elements: social assistance (protection against poverty) and social insurance (protection against vulnerability). A third component advocated by some definitions addresses social injustice and exclusion: “social equity to protect people against social risks such as discrimination or abuse” (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004: 9). A definition

that includes all three components was proposed by the 2010 European Report on ‘Social Protection for Inclusive Development’:

“A specific set of actions to address the vulnerability of people’s life *through social insurance*, offering protection against risk and adversity throughout life; *through social assistance*, offering payments and in kind transfers to support and enable the poor; and *through inclusion efforts* that enhance the capability of the marginalised to access social insurance and assistance”.

[European Communities (2010: 1)]

The primary functions of social protection are to alleviate income or food poverty, and to manage vulnerability. Poverty alleviation or reduction is achieved by raising household income or agricultural production (in the case of farmers), while income or livelihood vulnerability can be reduced by stabilising incomes. Vulnerability also has a social dimension, related to marginalisation and exclusion, and this can be addressed through strategies that empower people.

Recent thinking on social protection emphasises ‘graduation’ and ‘self-reliance’. For low-income households that have labour capacity, social protection should provide only temporary support, and should promote sustainable livelihoods rather than dependence on ‘handouts’. Graduation from Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), for instance, is defined as a transition from ‘chronically food insecure’ to ‘food sufficient’.

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“A household has graduated when, in the absence of receiving PSNP transfers, it can meet its food needs for all 12 months and is able to withstand modest shocks” (Government of Ethiopia, 2007: 1).

Food insecurity is closely related to poverty and vulnerability, especially amongst farming households in rural areas, where income and crop production (especially food crops) overlap strongly. It follows that there is a close relationship between social protection and food security, and this paper identifies several synergies and linkages between them, both conceptually and in policy formulation and programme implementation. Specifically, social protection can promote food security by:

- *stabilising incomes*: mitigating seasonal stress, managing risk and insuring against shocks;
- *raising incomes*: promoting agriculture and enhancing rural livelihoods;
- *enhancing social justice*: empowering poor farmers, pastoralists and landless labourers.

A recent report on ‘Social Protection for Food Security’, commissioned by the Committee on World Food Security (HLPE, 2012), disaggregates the sources of food insecurity into Amartya Sen’s four categories of ‘entitlement’ to food, and clusters social protection responses that have food security objectives according to which entitlement deficit they address. According to Sen (1981), food insecurity occurs when the sum of all food that individuals, households or groups acquire from production, labour, trade and transfers is inadequate to meet their minimum consumption needs.

Several social protection interventions can be mapped against each entitlement category (Table 1). For example, agricultural input subsidies boost food production, while crop or livestock insurance compensates farmers for production losses. Public works programmes (food- or cash-for-work) offer temporary employment to people who are either unemployed or – especially in rural areas – seasonally underemployed. ‘Trade-based entitlements’ are triggered by market failures or rapid food price inflation which makes food inaccessible to poor people. Food price stabilisation, food subsidies and grain reserve management all aim to keep food affordable and/or ensure that food supplies are adequate in local

markets. Finally, access to food can be enhanced directly through food or cash transfers – school feeding, conditional or unconditional cash transfers that are used to buy food.

This classification reveals that social protection is much more than ‘handouts’ of food aid or cash grants to poor people. Social protection can contribute actively to food production, employment creation and market stabilisation. This also raises definitional questions about the boundaries between social protection and agricultural or trade policies, but it might be appropriate to think in terms of overlaps rather than clearly defined boundaries between sectors – some interventions clearly have elements of both ‘livelihood protection’ and ‘livelihood promotion’, or ‘stabilising incomes’ as well as ‘raising incomes’.

Before the ‘Washington consensus’ thinking that inspired agricultural liberalisation reforms throughout sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s, governments intervened directly in the agricultural sector to promote household and national food security. Typical interventions (some of which are discussed below) included national grain reserves to stabilise food supplies, fertiliser subsidies to ensure access to inputs for poor smallholders, and food price subsidies to protect access to food for poor consumers. This ‘old social protection agenda’ was expensive, untargeted and interfered with market development, but after these measures were abolished or scaled down, food insecurity increased in many countries, at least for a transitional period. Since about 2000, the ‘new social protection agenda’ (Devereux, 2009) has provided partial protection against weak markets, seasonal food price fluctuations and food supply shocks, but instead of intervening at the sector level, African governments and their development partners now deliver targeted support to vulnerable individuals and households.

The objective of this paper is to explore the current state of social protection in sub-Saharan Africa and the role it plays in enhancing the food security of communities, households and individuals. This paper is structured along the three arenas of intervention identified above, while recognising the powerful synergies and overlaps between them. Each section discusses the conceptual relationship between social protection and food security in terms of the objective under review, and illustrates this by referring to relevant policy instruments. Case studies of specific programmes, drawn mainly from recent experiences in Africa, are also introduced and critically reviewed. The focus is on rural areas, not only because poverty and food insecurity are concentrated in rural communities in Africa but because most social protection interventions are either at national scale or are implemented only in rural areas. Urban food insecurity remains relatively neglected by policymakers. The paper concludes by suggesting policy options for African countries that would strengthen the synergies between social protection mechanisms and enhanced food security outcomes.

**Table 1**  
Food entitlement failures and social protection responses.

Entitlement category	Social protection instruments	Food security objectives
Production	2.1. Input subsidies	• Promote food production
	2.2. Crop and livestock insurance	• Protect against harvest failure or livestock mortality
Labour	2.3. Public works programmes	• Provide temporary employment • Create useful infrastructure • Promote agricultural production
Trade	2.4. Food price stabilisation	• Maintain market access to food
	2.5. Food subsidies	• Keep food affordable for the poor
	2.6. Grain reserves	• Ensure adequate market food supplies
Transfers	2.7. School feeding	• Reduce hunger • Promote access to education • Promote local food production • Enhance, food consumption
	2.8. Supplementary feeding	
	2.9. Conditional cash transfers	• Reduce hunger or poverty • Promote children’s access to education and healthcare
	2.10. Unconditional cash transfers	• Reduce hunger or poverty

Source: HLPE (2012: 31).

### Stabilising incomes

Fluctuations in food supplies or prices magnify food insecurity in poor and vulnerable households. Many mechanisms have been devised for protecting food security in such contexts. These include innovative approaches to agricultural insurance, offering temporary employment opportunities on public works programmes, giving food aid or cash transfers to targeted individuals or households, and managing food supplies through strategic grain reserves. This section examines the strengths and limitations of each of these mechanisms.

### Insurance

Conventional private insurance rarely reaches poor crop farmers and livestock producers in Africa, because of insurance

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