



World Food Programme



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Scoping Study on Social Protection and Safety Nets for Enhanced Food Security and Nutrition in **Central Asia region**

REGIONAL SYNTHESIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2018



Members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have found their way to economic growth and improved livelihoods after a long period of transition to market economies.

Instability and conflict within and around the region, vulnerability to developments in the global economy and an increasing frequency of natural disasters are obstacles on the path to inclusive growth. The three countries, Armenia, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, which are the focus of a new regional synthesis report on nutrition-sensitive social protection and safety nets commissioned by the World Food Programme (WFP)¹, are at different development stages. Armenia performs better in terms of GDP and real wages, thanks to comprehensive economic reforms implemented in the decade after independence. Kyrgyzstan, and even more so Tajikistan, are the poorest countries in the region, but are also progressing in terms of economic growth.

By 2015, all countries in the Europe and Central Asia region had achieved Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 1c, with the exception of Tajikistan.

Yet, food insecurity and malnutrition remain pertinent issues in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whereas the prevalence of undernourishment is particularly alarming in Tajikistan. The populations of all three countries are affected by the double burden of malnutrition: undernutrition (including micronutrient deficiencies) and overnutrition. The underlying reasons are poverty, lack of nutritional awareness and food import dependency. Poverty affects approximately one third of the population in all three countries and contributes to malnutrition primarily through undermining households' economic access to food. Certain population groups, such as rural populations and women and girls have a higher risk of being poor and food insecure.

Social protection is recognized by the respective governments as an effective tool to improve human welfare and well-being. This is reflected in the comprehensive social protection systems in place. Armenia, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan all have social insurance systems and at least one kind of social assistance programme targeted at poor and vulnerable groups. School feeding programmes have become integral parts of national social protection strategies and yield positive returns in poverty reduction, nutrition and human capital accumulation. Remittances from migrant family members provide an important informal safety net.

The performance of social protection programmes is mixed. Social insurance, in particular old-age pensions, contributes substantially to poverty reduction in all three countries. Social assistance, on the other hand, is characterized by low coverage and adequacy, particularly in Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. Although all governments direct considerable shares of their budgets towards social protection, social assistance programmes

are relatively underfunded. Despite social protection systems being fairly comprehensive, gaps in shock-responsive safety nets, promotive measures or programmes that take into account the specific needs of vulnerable populations, remain. Nutrition objectives are strongly embedded in programmes such as school feeding run with WFP's assistance, but not yet in government-run safety nets.

Although challenges undoubtedly exist, there are also a number of notable projects and good practices that can serve as examples to follow across the region and beyond.

The Optimizing School Meals Programme in the Kyrgyz Republic, the comprehensive reform of targeted social assistance in Tajikistan and the integration of social protection services in Armenia are examples of sound policy design, implementation and excellent cooperation among both domestic and international stakeholders.

Policy Recommendations

- **Comprehensive safety nets are required to break the cycle of hunger and poverty and achieve the SDGs and Agenda 2030.** Regarding existing programmes, especially social assistance in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, the most pressing challenge is to increase coverage and transfer adequacy. International partners can assist with building the case for scaling up or discontinuing certain programmes, for instance by conducting ex-ante policy analyses. Moreover, United Nations agencies and international donors have global expertise and a pool of evidence that can underpin strategic and technical decisions.
- **Further improvement to the design of existing policies is possible and advisable,** for instance with the incorporation of appropriate graduation objectives as a mid-term goal. Programmes with graduation objectives, such as productive safety net programmes, need to be carefully designed based on international best practice. Governments should be assisted to develop normative frameworks based on agreed-upon standards for promotive social protection programmes.
- **Governments will be required to make considerable financial efforts to address gaps in social protection.** The financing of social protection is a key obstacle in scaling up programmes and addressing gaps. Fiscal space may be sustainably created by reallocating spending from other government sectors, increasing tax revenues or expanding social insurance coverage and contributions. International partners can also assist in this process. If the minimum standards for social protection are set and agreed upon, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank or the World Bank can assist governments in costing schemes and finding fiscal space.
- **Adoption of electronic registries and M&E systems contributing to programme efficiency and effectiveness can be used to improve the design and implementation of social protection programmes.** For instance, the

absence of longitudinal (panel) data is a significant gap in all three countries and the region in general, and use of electronic registries can help provide the administrative data needed to evaluate social protection programmes. The new electronic registries and M&E systems also provide an opportunity to adopt a nutrition-sensitive approach to social protection.

- **A common understanding of minimum standards must underpin the establishment of social protection systems that are respectful of human rights and address the specific vulnerabilities of populations in the region.**

Policy dialogue should be fostered around the development of a set of minimum standards for social protection, food security and nutrition. Minimum standards for social protection should refer to ILO's Social Protection Floor Recommendation (R202) covering basic livelihood needs throughout the lifecycle. Policy dialogue should also address the need for shock-responsive social protection in the region. Establishing or – where applicable – strengthening emergency preparedness capacities should also be a priority.

The rationale behind social protection for all is multifaceted, but first and foremost, decent living standards and the right to a healthy, adequate diet are basic human rights. Social protection is a key pathway to securing these rights. If SDG 2 on Zero Hunger is to be achieved by 2030, governments, the international development community and civil society have to work together to further develop social protection systems in the CIS countries.

Highlights from country specific reviews

Armenia:

Armenia has a well-developed social protection system, even if certain components are modest in size. Remittances from migrant workers play an important role as an informal safety net, and pension schemes have particularly strong poverty reduction effects. School feeding offers a combination of protective and promotive functions and contributes to food and nutrition security of children and their families. Inclusion and exclusion errors, gaps in shock-responsive and promotive elements, and challenges related to governance and policy implementation, among others, can be addressed through on-going policy dialogue around the following elements:

- Using a set of **minimum standards** to guide policy dialogue, such as those proposed in International Labour Organisation's Social Protection Floor recommendations.
- Supporting **nutrition-sensitive social protection** by investing in the capacity of social case managers to detect child malnutrition; introducing referral mechanisms between social and health services as well as strengthening communication about nutrition.
- Strengthening **governance** and **cooperation** among line ministries, to create synergies particularly in rural areas and contribute to the development of active labour market policies, public work programmes and productive safety net programmes.

Tajikistan:

Tajikistan has a relatively comprehensive social protection system, which includes elements of social insurance, social assistance and social services. Existing social protection programmes have limited impact on food security due to the low coverage and adequacy of the social assistance system, currently under reform. Addressing existing institutional and implementation challenges will require consideration of the following elements:

- **Improving policy design and implementation**, including on coverage and adequacy of transfers, promotive social protection measures, shock-responsive safety nets and nutrition-sensitive social protection, creating a monitoring and evaluation framework to guide evidence-based policy making, and ensuring sound public financial management of social protection programmes.
- **International development partners**, particularly the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, and the United Nations Children's Fund, can play a major role in addressing these issues and supporting the government.

Kyrgyz Republic:

Social protection is relatively comprehensive in the Kyrgyz Republic, but social assistance and active labour market programmes are small. Since 2010, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and its partners have demonstrated dedication to improve the well-being of the population and have made important achievements in social protection policy. The last two decades have brought about several reforms, and there have been ongoing efforts to expand and consolidate social protection. Yet, social protection in its current form does not fully address the needs and vulnerabilities of the Kyrgyz population. A comprehensive reform aimed at strengthening social protection and its impact on food security should include the following elements:

- **Strengthening the design** of social protection programmes by reviewing standards that guide access, eligibility and benefit values and targeting approaches. Ensure that the protective, preventive, promotive and transformative potential of social protection are de facto realized. Allow the poor, not only the officially unemployed, to access active labour market policies.
- **Strengthening the implementation** of social protection programmes through capacity-building, introducing a nationwide electronic registry and carrying out robust monitoring and evaluation practices, could contribute to a more efficient and effective system.
- **Reviewing the efficiency** of resource allocation within social protection. An increased financial commitment to social protection also is necessary to overcome gaps and bottlenecks.



WFP/ Elizabeth Zalkind



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WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide, delivering food in emergencies and working with communities and governments to build resilience. Each year, WFP assists some 80 million people in around 80 countries.

The full version of this report is forthcoming and available on request. Contact: wfp.mena@wfp.org