



Linking Nutrition and Social Protection in Western Africa

WFP Regional brief

October 2022



World Food Programme

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There is a growing interest and commitment from governments across Western Africa to develop their social protection¹ systems as fundamental instruments to address some of the key drivers of poverty and vulnerability within the region. Social protection is key tool to tackle poverty as well as food insecurity, and to support nutrition and resilience, as recognized in many high-level global and regional commitments and declarations .

Realizing this potential will require the right investments. Virtually all countries of the region have a social safety net in place, most commonly in the form of a social cash transfer (Beegle et al, 2017). However, social protection coverage in the region lags at 12 percent of the population², much behind the global average of 47 percent and far from the objectives set forth in the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDG) agenda³. Public expenditure levels are low, and, with notable exceptions, most safety nets are funded through international aid. Increased investments in scaling up social protection is urgently needed. In addition, the magnitude of the protracted food security situation in Western Africa, as well as the worsening and evolving malnutrition problem will also require to adequately integrate these challenges into policies, programs, and delivery systems to secure impact.

This advocacy brief is intended for WFP staff to present the existing evidence on the role of social protection to address food insecurity and malnutrition, and dive into key strategic opportunities to accelerate these impacts in the region.



NUTRITION AND FOOD SECURITY SITUATION IN WESTERN AFRICA

Severely affected by conflict, climate change and natural disasters, and socio-economic shocks (due among others to Covid-19 and the Ukrainian crisis), many countries in the Western Africa region are not on track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to hunger and nutrition by 2030. Sahel countries count among the world's most exposed to crises and disasters. Increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, frequent droughts and floods, and land degradation threaten the livelihoods of highly vulnerable communities. Food insecurity and malnutrition are high and widespread, with seasonal peaks pushing rural areas into severe crisis. In addition, and in a mutually reinforcing relationship, poverty remains high with about 31 percent of the population living with less than USD 1.9 per day, and 60 percent living with less than USD 3.2 per day (World Bank, 2022).

According to the Cadre Harmonisé of March 2022, some 30.4 million people were in need of immediate assistance in 2021 -particularly women and children- and approximately 40.7 million people could be affected by food and nutrition insecurity during the period June to August 2022. The current global food and energy crisis is expected to push an additional 10 million people into food insecurity this year (WFP, FAO and CILSS, 2022).

Western Africa is today the only region in the world where the prevalence of Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM)⁴ and the absolute number of stunted children have been growing since 2018, while micro-nutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity also follow upward trends. Stunting rates⁵ are very high in Niger (43.5 percent) and Chad (32 percent), high in Mali (21.9 percent) and Burkina Faso (21.6 percent), and medium in Senegal (19 percent) and in Mauritania (17.8 percent), based on latest national surveys⁶.

Anaemia is reaching extremely high levels especially among pregnant and non-pregnant women where the prevalence is higher than 50 percent and 40 percent respectively, in all countries⁷. During the 2022 lean season, approximately 6.3 million children aged 6-59 months are expected to be affected by acute malnutrition in the six countries of the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal)⁸. Compared to previous years, the number of expected GAM cases has never been so high, showing an increase of 27 percent from 2021 and of 40 percent from 2020, reaching a record high level for the fifth year in a row.

1 A common interagency definition describes social protection as the 'policies and programmes aimed at preventing, and protecting people against, poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life [...with] a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups' (SPIAC-B, 2017).

2 Authors' calculations based on ILO, 2021 (statistical annex)

3 SDG 1.3 sets to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

4 GAM indicates acute malnutrition based on weight-for-height (less than the -2 standard deviation of WHO Child Growth Standards median) and/or oedema. It is also referred to as wasting. Source: <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/32604/acute-malnutrition-threshold>

5 Stunting is an indicator of undernutrition and is measured as height-for-age and characterized by at least two standard deviations below the WHO Child Growth Standards median. Impaired growth has life-long consequences. Source: <https://www.who.int/news/item/19-11-2015-stunting-in-a-nutshell>

6 SMART Surveys, 2021; Senegal, SAN 2019

7 Global Nutrition Report 2021

8 WFP-UNICEF Nutrition Hotspot Analysis

Box 1: Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG)

The FNG analysis aims to improve understanding of nutrition in local contexts by identifying bottlenecks, opportunities, and enabling factors that are linked to food insecurity and malnutrition across the food system. To do so, it examines diets and also availability, cost, and affordability of nutritious foods. The analysis identifies characteristics of households least able to access nutritious diets across food environments and seasons, the drivers of diet costs, and the nutritious foods that are most challenging to access and for whom. While it is typically done for the general population within a region or country, it also aims to understand nutritionally vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant and lactating women (PLW), adolescent girls and elderly

people. In relevant contexts, FNG can focus on groups facing upheaval, such as refugees, migrants, or displaced populations, or on groups affected by medical conditions, such as individuals with HIV or tuberculosis.

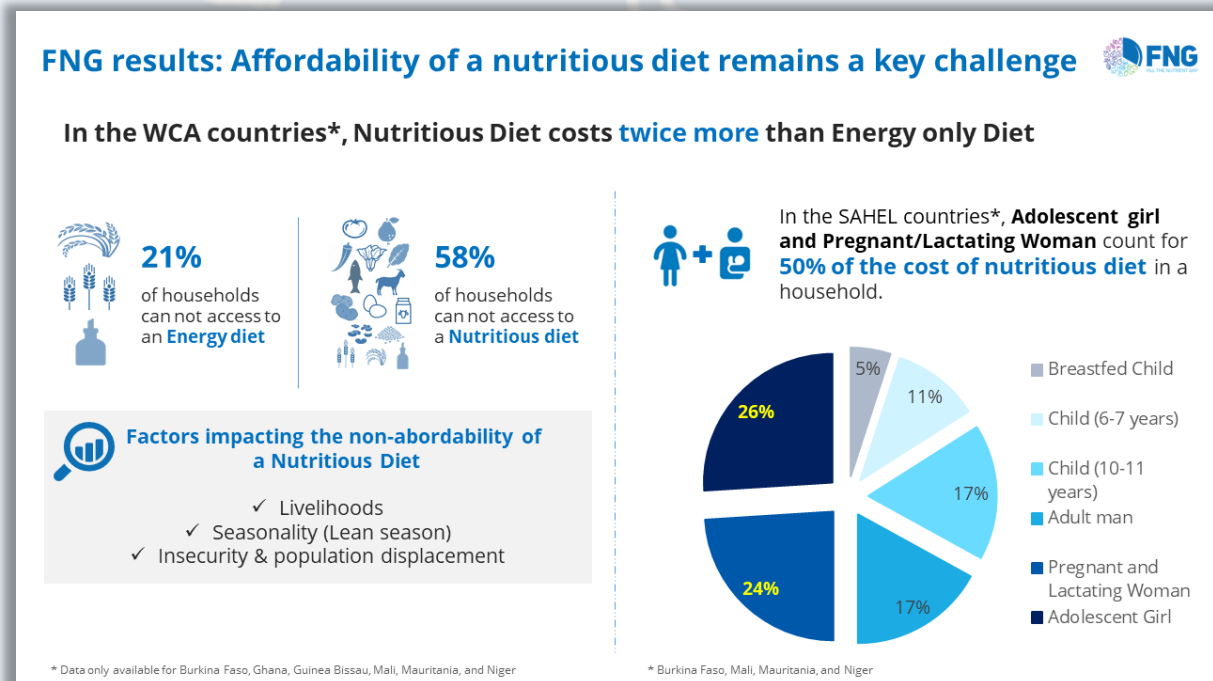
The analysis is carried out in partnership with local stakeholders including governments, development corporations, UN organizations, nutrition clusters, the private sector, and NGOs, and is tailored to each specific context. This approach allows the FNG to better consider local determinants of the food system, like food availability affected by seasonality, and changing dynamics caused by insecurity, displacement, or environmental events.

Source: WFP, 2020.

In the region, the cost of healthy diets, which is critical for food security and nutrition, is exceeding the poverty line and average food expenditures. Fill the Nutrient Gap analyses (see box 1) conducted in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Guinea Bissau, have documented how affordability can be a major barrier to healthy diets, especially in the Sahel. A quarter of households cannot afford an energy diet while more than

half of these households cannot access a nutritious diet at the same time. Adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women are the group with the highest nutrition needs in the household and are not always prioritized. Furthermore, seasonality influences the acquisition of a nutritious diet, so during the lean season its cost becomes very high.

Figure 1. Findings from FNG studies in West Africa



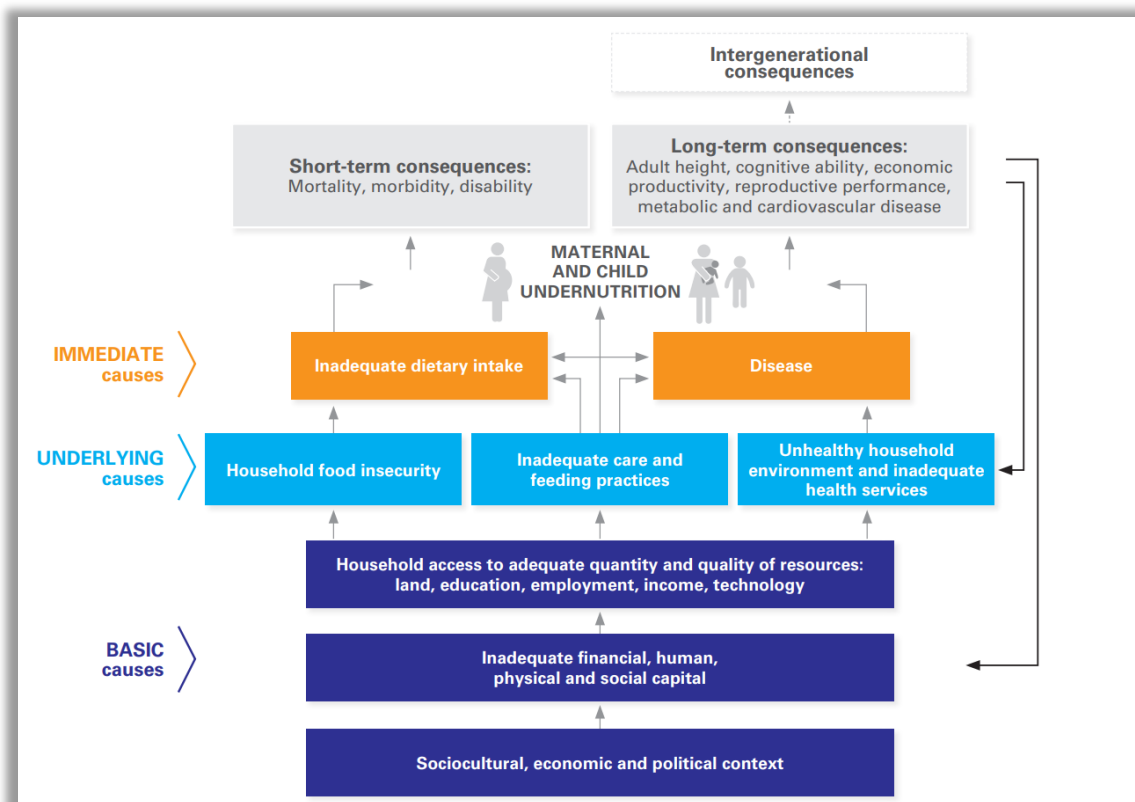


SOCIAL PROTECTION AND NUTRITION: WHAT DO WE KNOW SO FAR?

The framework to support child nutrition through cash transfers, developed by UNICEF (de Groot et al., 2015) and adapted by the Research on Food Assistance for Nutritional Impact/REFANI (Fenn, 2015), finds three main pathways through which social protection, and in particular social cash transfers, may impact the underlying determinants of child nutrition by making additional financial resources available in a household (Figure 2).

The three pathways are i) food security, ii) health access and environment, and iii) care and feeding practices. Understanding the drivers of malnutrition is key and as presented in the context section, accessing an adequate nutritious diet remains a real challenge in the region.

Figure 2: The UNICEF conceptual framework of undernutrition is shown. Source: UNICEF, 2013.



On the one side, there is strong evidence demonstrating that social protection can support food security and dietary diversity (FAO, 2015). Social transfers have a tracked impact on several dimensions of food security, which is one direct determinant of nutrition per the framework presented above. Social protection has a direct impact on improving access to food either through the provision of in-kind food transfers or through income support which will in turn increase food consumption (HLPE, 2012). Another direct and most important function of social protection is to stabilize access to food. It has been demonstrated that social protection allows poor households to better manage

risks, smooth consumption and reduce negative coping strategies, in particular in the case of adaptive social protection (Franckenberg et al, 2013). Indirect impacts are recorded on availability of food. Social cash transfers can support food production by releasing the credit constraints that allow people to invest in their production and procure inputs and fertilizers for instance (Tirivayi et al, 2013). Home-grown school feeding programs in turn may increase local food production (HLPE, 2012). Social protection can increase dietary diversity and the evidence suggests that transfers are used to improve both diet quantity and quality (Hidrobo et al, 2014).

On the other side, when looking at the impact of social protection on nutrition indicators, evidence is more mixed. A number of evaluations of social cash transfers, in particular conditional cash transfers, have found little to no impact on stunting and wasting⁹ (Ruel and Alderman 2013). It is worth noting that many of the programs reviewed were not originally designed to improve nutrition, which could probably explain the scarcity of overall nutritional benefits. Recognizing the potential as well as the need for a more deliberate approach, increased linkages between social protection and nutrition have been promoted. As presented by Alderman (2016), nutrition-sensitive social protection, through income support, provision of price support and subsidies, as well as addressing behaviours and preferences, could address food consumption, care practices, and use of health services, to ultimately improve nutritional outcomes. The development of the nutrition-sensitive concept and its promotion from the mid-2010s onwards has led to a new wave of programs and studies, with more positive outcomes. A recent meta-analysis, conducted by James Manley, Harold Alderman and Ugo Gentilini (2022), reviewing 129 studies, confirmed that the

overall effects of cash transfers on stunting and height for age z-score (HAZ score) are statistically significant albeit small in size, and for the first time found an impact on the reduction of wasting. It is particularly relevant to point that transfer size is positively linked to HAZ and dietary diversity, and that social and behavior change communication has demonstrated its effectiveness on a number of variables. These are encouraging findings that also contribute to making the case for stronger nutrition-sensitive social protection approaches.

This latest evidence gives a positive impulse to nutrition-sensitive social protection but also contributes to making the case for more holistic approaches, that combine nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific approaches, as well as link social protection to other sectors (Devereux and Nzabamwita, 2018). Some of these key aspects are related to the interactions between income and diets and its relevance for poverty and nutritional analysis; the concepts of food and nutrition security; the central role of dietary diversity; and the importance of caring practices and environment for nutrition.



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9 Wasting is defined as low weight-for-height. (see definition of GAM)



HOW TO ACCELERATE THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION ON NUTRITION?

Rolling out nutrition-sensitive social protection approaches has to necessarily go hand in hand with the realization of the Universal Social Protection by 2030¹⁰(USP2030) agenda, and materialize across its five dimensions: coverage, adequacy, comprehensiveness, quality and responsiveness (USP2030 Working Group on Social Protection and Food Systems Transformation, 2021).

Universal social protection requires all individuals to be covered by the social protection programs and benefits that they require depending on their specific needs and profile. From a nutrition-sensitive perspective, this means prioritizing nutritionally vulnerable populations and ensuring they are covered by social protection programs. The adequacy of benefits is also a determining factor, looking at the affordability of healthy, safe and nutritious diets – benefits need to contribute significantly to closing the gap. Tackling malnutrition requires synergetic and comprehensive approaches so ensuring benefits are bundled and social protection recipients have a facilitated access to complementary essential services, such as health, nutrition and water and sanitation. The quality of program design and implementation is decisive to ensure including, safeguarding and empowering people, and that program objectives can be met. In the context of Western Africa, where shocks are recurrent, we need to ensure that systems are responsive – and can continue operating in a disruptive context but also expand to meet additional needs

It is important to adopt a systems-approach¹¹ and work at all levels when pursuing nutrition-sensitive social protection. This will guide the present brief:

SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

- **At the system architecture level, the enabling environment needs to be conducive of these linkages.** Clear nutrition goals need to be included in social protection strategic documents and conversely social protection needs to be identified as a key strategy

for attaining food security and nutrition, and thus reflected in higher level strategic or policy frameworks. There should be strong advocacy and leveraging of commitment to include nutrition-related actions and indicators into social protection policies, strategies, and programs. Policy and programmatic coherence needs to be supported by strong coordination mechanisms between social protection, health, education, and agriculture sectors among others, as well as with humanitarian actors. Many countries in Western Africa are currently reviewing their social protection policies and strategies, which provides an ideal momentum to support the integration of nutrition-sensitive goals and approaches.

Information platforms, such as social registries, need to be inclusive and facilitate the prioritization, identification and reach of nutritionally vulnerable groups such as pregnant and lactating women and girls (PLWG), children 6-23 months, elderly, adolescent girls, etc. WFP can put its expertise in this field at the service of governments to strengthen these platforms, which in West Africa are being rolled out almost across all countries.

KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

- **Data and analysis as well as evidence are vital to inform nutrition-sensitive social protection policies and programs design.** WFP's expertise in producing highly relevant nutritional data and analysis is particularly needed. Analytical tools such as the Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) can for instance provide detailed data and analysis on the needs, composition and cost of a nutritious diets, which can inform differentiated approaches, and inform transfer values, modalities, complementarities for instance. In Western Africa, nine countries have already produced an FNG analysis with support from WFP, which can be used to inform nutrition-sensitive social protection initiatives.

10 SDG 1.3 Calls for the implementation of nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors. To support the realization of this goal a Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (USP2030) was set up, and has defined a set of actions centered around the core principles of universal social protection: https://www.oecd.org/dev/inclusive-societies-development/USP2030_Call_to_action.pdf

11 There are different ways of representing social protection systems, for this brief we follow the approach of the WFP global social protection strategy, which conceptualises systems around twelve building blocks across three main areas: system architecture; knowledge and learning; and programme features which encompasses both programme design and delivery (WFP, 2021).

PROGRAMME FEATURES

- **In program design and delivery, it is key to ensure that social protection benefits adequately and comprehensively cover nutritionally vulnerable groups**, with appropriate benefit modalities and amounts, and are combined with complementary health and nutrition services, such as food fortification, micronutrient supplementation or promotion of dietary diversity, as well as strong social and behavioural change components. Programs need to be delivered in a predictable, regular, and timely fashion, for their impacts to be maximized.

Coverage needs to be dramatically increased starting from the most vulnerable groups. Because coverage levels are so low across the region, most of those in need of support are left unserved. An additional challenge is the adequacy of benefits vis a vis needs. Several FNG studies have highlighted the major discrepancy between social transfer

amounts and the cost of healthy and nutritious diets. Social transfers address chronic poverty and are therefore designed to stimulate consumption by covering a small portion of needs, it is relevant to consider the proportion of needs covered when a basic basket is compared to the cost of a nutritious diet. Programmatically, moving towards nutrition-sensitive approaches, this may translate into higher cash transfer amounts for certain categories, or the provision of a mix of cash-based transfers and in-kind support to support access and affordability of nutritious foods. The mix of cash and/or in-kind modalities needs to be based on adequate analysis of existing and potential markets. WFP conducts regular markets and price assessments which can better inform these programmatic decisions.

Complementing transfers (either cash or in-kind) with social behavior change communication is a key strategy to maximize the impact of these transfers by influencing feeding practices. WFP is increasingly developing complementary social and behavior change communication interventions, including targeting social protection beneficiaries, such as in the context of the CRIALCES project in Mali (see box 2).

Box 2: Réponse à la CRise ALimentaire au Centre Sahel (CRIALCES Project) in Mali

The CRIALCES project for food systems strengthening in Central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) supports supply and demand of nutritious foods from farm to fork. WFP strengthens the capacity of smallholder farmers' organizations and food transformation units, assists regulatory authorities in improving food safety and quality systems, boosts the availability of nutritious foods on local markets and, provides electronic value vouchers to pregnant and lactating women and children aged 6 to 23 months (voucher value based on a supplementary feeding ration). Enhanced social behavioural change communication (SBCC) helps women

and men to make healthier food choices for their households and use proper feeding practices for their infants.

In Mali, the CRIALCES experience is progressively being integrated with the national flagship social protection program. In partnership with national counterparts, market functionality analysis and food price monitoring nourish the information system allowing beneficiaries to receive an adequate nutrition top-up complementing household cash transfers. This integrated assistance package will be provided during the second semester of 2022 to CRIALCES beneficiaries included in the national social registry.

Ensuring access to services, in particular water and sanitation is also essential to avoid that poor hygiene practices and environment jeopardize any gains derived from other interventions.

While there is a certain emphasis in the literature on social cash transfers, school feeding programs are also key for nutrition-sensitive programming. Ensuring school meals offer a well-balanced menu, based on safe, nutritious ingredients available in the market or locally grown. WFP has a longstanding experience directly implementing or

supporting governments' own school feeding programs. Important dimensions to this work are the connection of school-based programs with local food production from smallholder farmers, the optimization of food production, procurement and meal preparation processes, and the focused efforts to involve women, young farmers and food processors along the process. Indeed, addressing the affordability of healthy, safe and nutritious foods by stimulating the demand is an important strategy but that needs to complement with actions across the food system (box 3).

Box 3: Leveraging food systems to improve affordability, availability and accessibility of a healthy and nutritious diet

Resilient, inclusive and functioning food systems are critical to address the malnutrition crisis in West Africa and to ensure adequate supply of nutritious, safe, seasonally relevant, and affordable food even in crisis situations. Particularly, foods fortified with micronutrients can reduce the cost of a nutritious diet for a West African household by up to 70 percent while also preventing and treating deficiencies of vitamin A, iron, folic acid, and other micronutrients. While not adequate as a sole means of improving nutrition, WFP research shows this is among the most cost-effective ways of improving nutritious food affordability.

WFP works with a broad ecosystem of public and private sector partners (e.g., government institutions, industrial and semi-industrial food processing businesses, smallholder farmers, transporters, academia, civil society), to improve resilience, efficiency and sustainability of value chains in and around hotspot areas. Access to social protection can also contribute to release some of the credit constraints that allow households to invest in their own production. Synergetic approaches that also integrate this potential of social protection programs are also to be explored. More broadly, nutrition-sensitive social protection approaches need to be thought out within a food systems framework, which addresses food production, food environment and food consumption and diet preferences.

In addition, while social cash transfers and school feeding programs offer a good entry point to implement nutrition-sensitive approaches, it is important to consider the entire range of social protection instruments and programs, including of social insurance. For instance, the expansion of health coverage can play a key part in supporting access to services. It is important to also take into account the different nutritional needs per age, gender, and health status which in turn require different mixes of interventions. Analyses such as the FNG have, for instance, allowed to highlight the particularly high needs of adolescent girls, in particular pregnant adolescent girls, that are usually not specifically targeted by social protection interventions¹².

The design of programs and benefits is important, but implementation quality equally matters. Evidence shows that regularity, timeliness and predictability play are determining factors in the positive impacts of social programs. Understanding beneficiary needs and constrains when accessing benefits and services can better inform the way programs are implemented.

Box 4: WFP's engagement in Ghana to support nutrition-sensitive social protection

In Ghana, WFP supports the Government by strengthening safety nets towards a national social protection system to adequately address the food security and nutrition needs of vulnerable households. Key initiatives include:

- i. Rice fortification for school meals piloted in 6 districts to help address micronutrient deficiencies, and an advocacy plan for a national policy to back the mandatory use of fortified rice in school meals.
- ii. Upcoming Fill the Nutrient Gap and Minimum Expenditure Basket analyses to determine the cost of the most affordable nutritious foods and minimum requirements for households to meet their basic essential needs. The results will inform any revisions of cash-based transfer values provided under the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) and Ghana School Feeding Program (GSFP) and guide school caterers in selecting least costly nutritious foods for school meals.
- iii. An integrated nutrition and livelihoods intervention in Karaga District, one of the most food insecure districts in Ghana that targets LEAP households with nutritious food vouchers, livelihood support and Social and Behavioural Change Communication.

12 In Ecuador, WFP conducted an FNG study that highlighted the disproportionate cost of a healthy and nutritious diets for adolescent girls, which led to the implementation of a targeted cash transfer program with Government and partners.



CALL FOR ACTION: HOW CAN WE GO FURTHER IN WESTERN AFRICA ON THIS AGENDA?

In many countries across the region, there is an opportune moment to influence national social protection policies, programming and coordination for enhanced nutrition-sensitiveness.

Existing programs need to be comprehensively reinforced (e.g., cash-based transfers complemented by accompanying measures to enhance nutrition) and build on integrated/multisectoral program coordination, evidence generation and data management. Critically,

social protection coverage needs to expand considerably.

In Western Africa, WFP can provide technical assistance to governments but also build complementarities between WFP's own programming and national social protection systems to leverage the scope, scale, and quality of nutrition-sensitive national social protection systems and hence, generate impact particularly on low-income households and nutritionally vulnerable people.

In particular, we identify key entry points and opportunities in the region:

➤ AT SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE:

- The revision of national social protection policies and strategies ongoing or upcoming in many countries of the region, including in Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso provide an excellent opportunity to define the strategic principles and main priorities to ensure cross-sectoral coordination and coherent policy and programming to support the agenda.
- The FNGs conducted or about to be finalized in the region can provide an excellent basis to start of deepen a national dialogue on nutrition-sensitive social protection.

➤ AT PROGRAM LEVEL:

- Lessons from WFP's experience in implementing school feeding programs and strengthening their impact on nutrition, as well as new ongoing initiatives linking social protection and nutrition (such as in Mali – box 2 – and Ghana – box 4) can inform the design of national programs to increase their ability to influence the determinants of malnutrition.
- Ensure delivery systems can facilitate the identification and reach of nutritionally vulnerable people and the coordination and management of multisectoral interventions. For instance, social registries are growing in the region if adequately designed and rolled out can facilitate the inclusion and targeting of nutritionally vulnerable groups.
- WFP strongly supports governments in setting up shock responsive social protection systems, which is a key element to support food security and nutrition. Furthering these efforts, to ensure social protection systems are able to withstand shocks and expand when needed is key.



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