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WFP's support to strengthening the national social protection system in Ecuador

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Acronyms

BDH	<i>Bono de Desarrollo Humano</i>
CBT	Cash-based transfer
CDI	<i>Centro de Desarrollo Infantil</i> (Child Development Centre)
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSP	Country strategic plan
DBM	Double burden of malnutrition
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
MIES	<i>Ministerio de Inclusión Económica y Social</i>
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNFPA	The United Nations Population Fund
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
WFP	World Food Programme



1. Introduction

This case study reviews the World Food Programme's (WFP) support to social protection in Ecuador over the past decade. It assesses how WFP has supported the strengthening of Ecuador's national social protection system, with a particular focus on non-contributory social assistance which aims to assist the poorest in Ecuador. This is a light-touch exercise, undertaken through a rapid literature review and interviews with four current WFP staff. It is part of a suite of country case studies undertaken by researchers at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) for WFP, creating a portfolio of learning on WFP's work on enabling social protection around the world.

2. Context

Country Context

Ecuador is an upper middle-income country with a population of just over 18 million as of 2022 (World Bank n.d.a). Starting in 2004, Ecuador experienced over a decade of economic prosperity and sustained growth, as well as political stability. From 2007 to 2017, government social spending doubled (Johnston and Vasic-Lalovic 2023) and the country saw decreases in inequality and a decline in poverty (Johnston and Vasic-Lalovic 2023). Data collected by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos* (INEC) as part of the National Survey of Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment similarly shows a decrease in poverty at the national level over a similar period. According to their statistics the national poverty rate decreased from 36 per cent in December 2009 to 21.5 per cent in December 2017 (INEC 2023a). Rural poverty rates have been consistently higher than urban poverty rates. Data from INEC shows that the rural poverty rate started at 57.5 per cent in December 2009 and fell to a low of 35.3 per cent in December 2017, increasing to 49.2 per cent in December 2020 (INEC 2023a), as a consequence

of the Covid-19 shock. The Gini index similarly shows a reduction in inequality in the country, dropping from 56.38 in 2000 to 44.67 in 2017 (World Bank n.d.b). However, while national inequality consistently declined over this period, rural inequality has fluctuated more significantly (INEC 2023a).

Despite the successes achieved prior to 2017, recent years have been marked by a series of shocks, including climate and weather-related events, declining economic fortunes, increasing poverty, high death rates from the Covid-19 pandemic, and a sharp increase in violence, insecurity and political instability. Ecuador faces significant exposure to climate-related hazards, as well as the threats of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and landslides (WFP 2023b). A catastrophic earthquake in 2016 caused huge damage in the country, particularly in areas of socioeconomic vulnerability, and drew focus to weaknesses and challenges in the country's disaster risk management systems (World Bank 2021). This was the first in a significant series of shocks which has unsettled Ecuador this decade and has reduced the impact of the gains made in the previous decade (KII2). Today, Ecuador

continues to experience relatively high levels of poverty, not least following the Covid-19 pandemic which caused a deterioration in the economic and social situation (KII1, Government of Ecuador 2020b). Between 2017 and 2023, extreme poverty rose from 7.9 per cent to 9.8 per cent (WFP 2023d), and there is continued high inequality, with much poverty being centred in rural locations - income poverty is at 18 per cent in urban areas, 46.4 per cent in rural areas, and extreme poverty at 5.2 per cent in urban areas and 22.6 in rural locations (INEC 2023b). Poverty is also higher among indigenous populations and cross-border migrant communities. Ecuador is a transit country for thousands of people on the move from multiple nationalities, many of whom engage in complex onward movements. The country also hosts nearly half a million Venezuelan refugees and migrants. While the government has made efforts towards regularisation, Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador face challenges related to food security, documentation, socioeconomic integration, and various protection risks (R4V 2023).

Ecuador has witnessed an increase in violence and instability in recent years, with the homicide rate in 2023 reaching 44.5 murders per 100,000 people. This is the highest homicide rate in South America and represents a significant increase on the previous year (InSight Crime 2023). In 2024, Ecuador has faced a surge in gang violence including shootings, bombings and prison riots. The spike in violence has been linked to Ecuador's role as a key drug trafficking hub between Colombia and Peru, challenges faced by state security forces and the economic impact of Covid-19 (González Calanche 2024). In response, the government has declared a state of exception and an internal armed conflict, authorizing the use of lethal force and military assets against the organised crime groups (ibid).

Alongside this background of instability, food insecurity is also increasing in Ecuador (GSFI 2022). With 2.4 million Ecuadorians being severely food-insecure, and the country registering the second-highest rate of stunting in Latin America at 27 per cent in 2022 (WFP ACR 2022). Undernutrition and child malnutrition are more prevalent in rural areas, with the indigenous population among the most affected (Rivadeneira et al. 2022). Chronic childhood malnutrition affects 19.3 per cent of children under the age of two in Ecuador (INEC, 2023c), but the rate is much higher in rural areas, with the rural highlands being the most affected region at 27.7 per cent (ecuadorencifras.gob.ec 2023). Indigenous children under two are the most impacted ethnic group, with 33 per cent suffering from chronic childhood malnutrition, compared to 19.2 per cent of mestizo children, 15.7 per cent of Afro-Ecuadorian children, and 15.0 per cent of Montubio children (ibid 2023). Ecuador has the fourth highest rate of chronic childhood malnutrition in the region, behind Honduras (19.9 per cent), Haiti (20.4 per cent), and Guatemala (42.8 per cent) (ibid 2023). According to a 2023 study in the Amazon region of Ecuador (Murphy et al. 2023), the multidimensional poverty experienced by rural and indigenous families, including lack of knowledge, access, and financial resources, along with strong inappropriate cultural practices are strong factors behind childhood malnutrition within these communities. An interviewee for this paper (KII3) also suggested that local farmers often receive low prices for their products, and so become dependent on cheap, highly calorific and non-nutritive foods (KII3). A 2017 report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and WFP on the double burden of malnutrition (DBM) suggested that the cost of stunting is equivalent to 2.6 per cent of Ecuadorian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (ECLAC, WFP 2017).

Social protection context

Ecuador has an established social protection system mainly delivered by the Ecuadorian Institute of Social Security (IESS) and the Ministry of Social Inclusion (MIES). These combine programmes for formal employees - a contributory system (IESS), and social assistance grants, or *bonos and pensions*, for vulnerable households, often under the poverty line. MIES reports that, as of May 2024, the latter cover more than 1.4 million people (Government of Ecuador 2024a), and has evolved over the past few decades to focus on unconditional cash transfer programmes targeting poor households. Vulnerable populations may also benefit from social protection programmes such as infant development centres (CDIs) and the school feeding programme provided through schools under the public system, which is universally available yet only provides small snacks for pupils.

The broadest social assistance programme, the *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* (BDH) or Human Development Grant, was created in 2003 by merging previous initiatives. The BDH provides monthly cash transfers to those under the poverty line of USD 55 per month, and through the *Bono de Desarrollo Humano Variable* (BDH-V) provides up to USD 150 per month for extremely poor households with children under 18, conditional on meeting certain requirements such as school attendance and medical check-ups¹ (Jara, Palacio Ludena 2022). 875,000 beneficiaries receive the BDH (Government of Ecuador 2024a). In addition to the BDH, Ecuador has implemented other targeted social assistance programmes. The *Bono Joaquín Gallegos Lara*, introduced in 2010, provides a monthly transfer of USD 240 to caregivers of individuals with severe disabilities, catastrophic

illnesses, or those who are HIV positive. During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the government launched the *Bono de Protección Familiar* as a temporary measure to support informal workers who were not covered by existing social assistance programmes. This programme provided a total of USD 120 over two months to eligible beneficiaries (Jara, Palacio Ludena 2022). Additionally, 115,000 people receive the *Childhood with a Future Bonus*, aimed at pregnant women and those with children under two years old. The Old Age Pension is provided to 300,000 individuals, while 116,000 people receive a pension for disabled persons.

The government in Ecuador has put in place solid foundations for a social protection system, and WFP is working with the government to support this existing system (KII1). However, the Ecuadorian system continues to face a number of challenges, including:

- **Limited coverage and exclusion of the poorest** – High levels of informal employment and underemployment limit access to contributory social security. The selection of beneficiaries for social assistance programmes in Ecuador is based on proxy means testing and information collected in the social registry, however there is a proportion of the extreme poor, particularly in isolated locations of the country, who are not on the social registry and are therefore unable to receive payments (KII2). Some families living in situations of poverty are registered in the social registry but are not included in non-contributory social protection programmes. Indeed, while 1.8 million family units on the social registry are below the poverty line, non-contributory bonus and pension programmes only reach 1.4 million. This lack of coverage is primarily due to a lack of fiscal resources (KII2).

¹ It is worth noting that the conditionalities of the BDH-V are considered relatively 'soft' compared to other social protection schemes, mainly because the government lacks the capacity to rigorously enforce compliance or impose sanctions. By contrast, the *Bono Infancia con Futuro* has stricter conditionalities, where non-compliance results in a reduction of benefits.

- **Low value of benefits** – Stable and sufficient resources are lacking to sustain basic investments, social spending, and financing (KII2). Non-contributory social protection grants are targeted at the poorest, but they are inadequate to cover the basic food needs of families (KII2). While the number of people living in poverty has increased, the government budget for *Bono's* has not increased. According to INEC (2024), the food and beverage component of the Basic Family Basket in Ecuador costs USD 264 per month. The BDH, which amounts to USD 55, is therefore equivalent to only 20 per cent of the basic food cost for a family.
- **Persistent structural inequities in access** – Disadvantaged groups in Ecuador have lower social protection coverage, this includes rural populations and indigenous groups (KII2,

KII3). Migrant and refugee groups lack access to the social registry (KII1, KII2), and are not legally entitled to non-contributory bonus and pension programmes.

- **Large informal sectors lack social protection** – Informal workers are generally excluded from contributory social security, and often from non-contributory social security depending on their income and position on the social registry (Jara, Palacio Ludena 2022, KII3).

While evolving government priorities and uncertainty in transitions between governments have impacted the continuity of social protection efforts and budgets (KII3), the current government, with funding from the World Bank, is working on updating the social registry to improve the targeting of social assistance programmes.



Table 1: Notable contributory and non-contributory social protection schemes in Ecuador

Programme	Name of scheme	Description
Contributory Schemes Largely delivered by the principle social security system in the country, the IESS.	<i>Seguro General de Salud Individual y Familiar (SGSIF)</i>	Health insurance scheme funded by contributions from employee and employer, as well as state funding. Provides illness and maternity benefits for those affiliated as well as their families. The IESS runs health centres and hospitals which provide healthcare to entitled members.
	<i>Seguro General de Riesgos del Trabajo</i>	Occupational risk insurance which protects workers through health and safety programmes, and compensation for costs arising from work-related accidents and disease.
	<i>Largely delivered by the principle social security system in the country, the IESS.</i>	Mandatory pension insurance scheme, funded by employee and employer contributions with government funding. Insures against old-age, related disabilities and death for members and family members.
	<i>Seguro Social Campesino (SSC)</i>	Social protection scheme covering self-employed farmers and fishermen and providing health, maternity and old age benefits to those insured, and their families. Registrations for SSC are individual or collective and are lower than other mandatory insurance.
	<i>Seguro de Invalidez, Vejez y Muerte (IVM)</i>	The Disability, Old Age, and Death Insurance provides pensions for old age and disability of the insured person, and to the survivors of the deceased insured person.
Non-contributory Schemes Delivered by MIES	<i>Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH)</i>	One of the key pillars of MIES, the BDH is targeted at those who are outside of contributory schemes and living in poverty, according to information from the social registry.
	<i>Bono Infancia con Futuro</i>	Aims to prevent chronic child malnutrition for children for the first 1000 days of life. Intended to guarantee a minimum consumption of nutritious foods and incentivise the use of health services.
	<i>Bono Joaquín Gallegos Lara</i>	Provides monetary support for the guardians of those living with disabilities, as well as those under 18 living with HIV.
	<i>Pensión Toda Una Vida</i>	Distributed to cover economic needs and expenses incurred by individuals with disabilities, and who are in extreme poverty or poverty according to the social registry.
	<i>Pensión Mis Mejores Años</i>	Targeted at those aged over 65 and living in poverty according to the social registry.

3. WFP's objectives and role

WFP has been working in Ecuador since 1964, and as in other countries, has moved increasingly towards playing a capacity strengthening and technical assistance role. WFP Ecuador works closely with the government to complement and strengthen the national social protection system, and enable it to reach vulnerable populations, while also building resilience and capacity in communities and institutions to reduce poverty in the longer-term. According to the Annual Country Report (WFP 2023), WFP has been engaged in several key activities:

- providing food assistance (cash transfers, vouchers and in-kind) to vulnerable populations in Ecuador. This complements the MIES-led social protection schemes for food insecure Ecuadorians and the lack of provision for migrants and refugees who cannot enrol in the *bono* system;
- providing food assistance to people affected by natural hazards or other types of emergencies, in coordination with the national government;
- supporting smallholder farmers to increase incomes and productivity through training, market access, and strengthened farmer organisations;
- community and government institution capacity strengthening to adapt to climate change through emergency preparedness, early warning and resilience measures;
- providing technical assistance to institutions and social protection systems, including research, knowledge sharing and programme design and support;
- logistics and supply chain services to government and humanitarian partners to improve emergency response.

Through these key areas, WFP works to

complement and strengthen social protection systems, to reach vulnerable populations, while also strengthening the capacity of institutions to reduce poverty and food insecurity in the longer term (KII1, KII4).

WFP's Country Strategic Plan (CSP) for Ecuador 2023-2027 aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2022-2026 for Ecuador (WFP 2022). WFP aligns its work with broader UN efforts in Ecuador, actively participating, for example, in developing the UNSDCF and ensuring the CSP contributes to its four strategic priorities: **social protection and quality social services, environment and climate change, socioeconomic equality and sustainable productive transformation, and public management and social cohesion.**

Moreover, the CSP aims to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 on Zero Hunger and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals, with the CSP outcomes mapped to specific SDG targets. At the national level, the CSP is aligned with the priorities of the Government's national development plan, *Creating Opportunities 2021–2025*². Specifically, the CSP will contribute to the plan's goals related to reducing chronic malnutrition, teenage pregnancy, extreme poverty, food insecurity, and vulnerability to climate change. This strategic design aims to allow WFP to coherently contribute to Ecuador's hunger and poverty reduction goals.

² See the [government's national development plan here](#). Note that the new government has introduced a new National Development Plan: [see here](#).



4. Activities and Results

This review deals with three priority activity areas; a pilot study for pregnant adolescents, the national development of nutrition-sensitive social protection in the form of homegrown school feeding, and the horizontal expansion of social protection systems during the Covid-19 pandemic. These are three activities which were specified as key successes by WFP staff during interviews and fall broadly into the key activity areas mentioned in section three, particularly providing technical support to the delivery of social protection systems as well as engaging in institutional capacity strengthening.

Support to Nutrition-sensitive Social Protection

PILOT PROJECT FOR PREGNANT ADOLESCENTS

Ecuador has high rates of teenage pregnancy, with 55,000 adolescents giving birth in 2017 (WFP 2019). In 2018, in response to the high rate of unplanned pregnancy among adolescents from poorer backgrounds, as well as the economic challenges of ensuring a nutritious diet for young people from poorer backgrounds (KII2), WFP designed a CBT pilot project with the collaboration of Plan International, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), MIES, the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education. The project was implemented between 2019 and 2020, in the northern provinces of Carchi, Imbabura, Sucumbíos and Esmeraldas, focussing on pregnant adolescents in these areas and during the first 1000 days. The first 1000 days approach centres on the span from conception to a child's second birthday, as this are crucial to shaping their future. Without appropriate nutrition during this critical period, a child may experience

stunting, causing permanent harm to physical and cognitive development. The campaigns and activities resulting from the first 1000 days focus on nutrition, targeting pregnant women and new mothers as well as their young children. WFP coordinated with MIES to identify the most economically vulnerable pregnant adolescents up to 19 years old, and WFP provided unconditional cash transfers of USD 50 to the pregnant adolescents over the 6-month pilot period. Additionally, WFP partnered with UNFPA and Plan International to provide nutrition education and workshops promoting food security, nutrition, and sexual/reproductive health (Bernadini et al. 2021). As well as the unconditional cash transfers to pregnant adolescents for 6 months, the pilot provided birth kits with baby supplies and nutrition/health information, and monthly home visits by educators.

The project showed several successes, such as empowering adolescents to make decisions and increasing their dietary diversity and consumption of nutritious foods. Across the study the CBTs were primarily used by the mothers to purchase food, and there was a positive impact in the dietary diversity of the project participants (WFP 2020). Seventy per cent of the participants attended at least five antenatal check-ups, and many adolescents, students, and leaders were trained on nutrition and health topics (Bernadini et al. 2021). As part of this project, WFP undertook advocacy with the government focused on the results of the project. Subsequently, the government launched their own project, the *Bono Infancia con Futuro*, which aims to target more than 68,000 children and pregnant mothers in Ecuador (Government of Ecuador, 2023). The *Infancia con Futuro* grant is available to any family which falls under the poverty line and builds on the work done through the earlier pilot on the importance of the first 1000 days (KII2).

The pilot demonstrates alignment with several key components of social protection outlined in the WFP Strategy for Support to Social Protection (WFP 2021) and aimed to generate evidence and extend coverage to contribute to the national intersectoral policy on preventing and caring for pregnancy in adolescents (Bernadini et al. 2021). WFP collaborated with various government ministries such as the Ministry of Social and Economical Inclusion (MIES), Ministry of Public Health, and Ministry of Education, alongside partners like the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Plan International. This cooperative framework underscores the significance of inter-agency collaboration and sectoral coordination in effective social protection endeavours. Furthermore, the project leveraged the

existing government social registry to identify economically vulnerable pregnant adolescents, although it faced limitations in fully integrating these platforms for cash transfers due to the young age of the beneficiaries. (Bernadini et al. 2021). In this context, WFP complemented and extended the social protection system, utilising the social registry to pilot a targeted social protection scheme. Despite challenges, this initiative underscores the potential for future integration of platforms to enhance social protection strategies. The project yielded evidence to advocate for policy improvements, exemplifying the project's role in advancing comprehensive policies for preventing and caring for pregnancy in adolescents.



WFP'S SUPPORT FOR NUTRITION-SENSITIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION: HOMEGROWN SCHOOL FEEDING AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

WFP have also engaged with nutrition-sensitive social protection through support for the Ecuadorian government's school feeding commitments. In 2022, 2.9 million children benefitted from homegrown school feeding in Ecuador (WFP & IDB 2022), and the aim of the WFP programme is to reach 20,000 children by the end of 2024 (KII1). There are several key ways in which WFP has supported the national effort for homegrown school feeding:

- **Pilot programmes and model development** – WFP implemented a food assistance strategy in 2014, this focussed on connecting local small-scale producers with the homegrown school feeding programmes and serving as proof of concept for local procurement into school feeding. (WFP 2023c)
- **Project implementation and evidence generation** – From 2016 to 2019, WFP implemented the Complementing School Feeding with Fresh Products from Small Local Producers project in rural schools in the North of Ecuador, the results of which fed into policy dialogue around national school meals law (WFP 2023c). This project was scaled up in 2023 (KII1) with 50 per cent of funding coming from local government and 50 per cent from the private sector (KII1).
- **Informing policy** – In 2020, the national assembly of Ecuador, with the technical assistance of the WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), adopted a law on school feeding (Government of Ecuador 2020), which created that *Sistema Nacional Integral de la Alimentación Escolar*, the national school feeding system, granting children and adolescents in the education system the rights to adequate food and nutrition. As mentioned previously, evidence, and lessons learned from WFP projects were inputs for policy dialogue.



WFP's approach has been to demonstrate the success of the homegrown school feeding model to the government, through the setting up of the model, and gathering evidence to support its effectiveness, but also seeks to work in synergy with the Ecuadorian government, and particularly the Ministry of Education and Decentralised Autonomous Governments in promoting healthy food and nutrition for children (KII). The 2020 law aligns with WFP's homegrown school feeding programmes, which form part of a drive for holistic and nutrition-sensitive social protection. The homegrown school feeding model has demonstrated multiple benefits; children receive nutritious meals that contribute to their healthy development and learning, while also being exposed to traditional and locally adapted foods. This helps promote better eating habits from an early age. Additionally, by sourcing from local farmers, the model supports the local economy and agriculture, providing a sustainable market for smallholder producers (WFP & IDB 2022). WFP's experience with this model in Ecuador showcases the potential of homegrown school feeding to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously - improving nutrition, supporting livelihoods, and promoting local development (KII3). By showcasing the multiple benefits of the model, including improved nutrition, support for local livelihoods, and promotion of local development [KII3], WFP seeks to build government buy-in and capacity. Ultimately, WFP aims to hand over the implementation of the homegrown school feeding programme to the government while retaining a technical backstopping role.

A key aspect of WFP's approach is adapting the nutrition messaging and materials to the local context and involving the community in their development. One interviewee for this paper said that this is crucial for ensuring that the information is relevant, culturally appropriate, and actionable for the target population. For example, WFP nutritionists work with parents to identify locally available and affordable foods that can be used to prepare nutritious meals, rather

than just promoting generic dietary guidelines. They also take into account the social and cultural factors that influence food choices and eating behaviours, such as the preference for certain 'status' foods over traditional nutritious foods. By taking this participatory and context-specific approach, WFP aims to achieve sustainable improvements in nutrition knowledge and practices at the household and community level, enhancing the impact of social protection programmes.

WFP has also made significant contributions to the evidence base informing social protection policies and programmes in Ecuador through studies such as the report on the double burden of malnutrition (ECLAC & WFP 2017) and the Fill the Nutrient Gap assessment (WFP 2023). These studies aim to quantify the social and economic impacts of malnutrition in the country and to identify the key barriers and opportunities for improving nutrition through social protection and other interventions. WFP has been providing technical assistance and capacity strengthening to government social protection programmes focused on the critical first 1000 days of a child's life. In Ecuador, these programmes include the *Centros de Desarrollo Infantil* (CDIs) which provide comprehensive care and early stimulation for young children from vulnerable families. WFP's support aims to enhance the nutritional component of these programmes, recognising the vital importance of adequate nutrition during early childhood for lifelong health and development.

However, there are currently significant challenges, particularly in terms of the budget allocated for food provision. The national budget is insufficient to cover the costs of providing the necessary food rations in the CDIs, leading to a situation where the nutritional needs of vulnerable young children are not being adequately met (KII4). **WFP is working to advocate for increased budget allocations and to strengthen the capacity of these programmes to deliver nutritious meals and**

snacks. This includes developing tools such as a ration calculator to optimise the nutritional value of the food provided within the available resources. **WFP has also been actively advocating for the inclusion of nutrition-sensitive approaches within Ecuador's social protection programmes** (KII3), going beyond just providing food or cash transfers, to social and behaviour change communication strategies (SBCC) that promote healthy diets, care practices, and lifestyle habits. WFP works closely with parents, caregivers, and communities to raise awareness about the importance of nutrition and to provide practical guidance on issues such as dietary diversity, meal planning, and optimal feeding practices for different age groups (KII3).

MIES also runs the Growing with Our Children (CNH) programme, which offers family counselling and support services reaching approximately 190,000 beneficiaries across Ecuador (KII). As part of this programme MIES educators conduct home visits, engaging with families in activities that include health and nutrition components. As with the support for the CDIs, WFP complements and reinforces the government's efforts to improve health and nutrition outcomes for vulnerable families, contributing to the development of training materials which MIES educators use in the programme implementation (KII).

Across its homegrown school feeding and early childhood development interventions, WFP operates on multiple levels. Evidence has been generated through various studies and pilot programmes, such as the Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis and initiatives focused on human mobility and teenage pregnancy. This evidence-based advocacy has contributed to the government's increased focus on Chronic Childhood Malnutrition and the strengthening of programmes with a 1,000-day perspective, including the National Strategy for reducing chronic childhood malnutrition and the *Bono Infancia con Futuro*. Simultaneously, WFP

provides technical assistance to enhance the nutritional sensitivity of existing social protection programmes, particularly those related to comprehensive child development under the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion. This includes work with child development centres and the Growing with Our Children programme, where WFP nutritionists collaborate closely with government counterparts to build capacity in nutrition-sensitive social protection.

Additionally, WFP integrates education and communication components into its programmes to raise awareness about food and nutritional security among beneficiaries. The insights gained from these awareness initiatives further inform and strengthen WFP's advocacy efforts with key stakeholders.

This multi-faceted approach allows WFP to support government priorities effectively, contribute to policy development, and enhance the nutritional impact of social protection programmes in Ecuador.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING, AND EMERGENCY OPERATIONS

WFP supported the Ecuadorian government in the horizontal expansion of national cash transfer programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a consequence of the pandemic, many people who had not previously been identified as such in the 2018 social registry in Ecuador fell into poverty, and therefore, did not receive the BDH. WFP reacted to this challenge delivering assistance to those who were near the poverty line in the pre-pandemic social registry but not below it, and so were "invisible" to MIES. This enabled those that had recently fallen into poverty or vulnerability to be included in the cash transfer programme and ensured that the most vulnerable populations were not left behind during the pandemic. The additional funding allowed for a rapid response

from the government to the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, providing crucial support to those most in need. The experience also helped to strengthen the relationship between WFP and MIES, which one interviewee suggested had laid the foundation for future cooperation in shock-responsive social protection (KII4).

In addition to supporting the horizontal expansion of government cash transfers, WFP also implemented a parallel cash transfer programme to reach vulnerable groups not included in the government's social registry. Individuals must be registered in the social registry and classified as living in poverty or extreme poverty to be eligible to receive MIES benefits. The current model of the social registry presents significant challenges in updating information and including new beneficiaries, as updates are typically conducted on a regional or area basis, making real-time updates or inclusions challenging within the existing framework. To address this issue, WFP worked with cooperating partners and used its own targeting tools to identify vulnerable households, particularly those with pregnant women, children under 5, and people with disabilities. WFP cross-checked these households with MIES, verifying that they were not beneficiaries of other *bonos*, and provided direct cash assistance to those who were not registered. This parallel system ensured that vulnerable populations not captured by the government's targeting mechanism still received much-needed support during the pandemic. The parallel cash transfer programme showcased WFP's ability to complement government social protection programmes and fill critical gaps, leveraging its targeting expertise and community-led presence (KII4). Indeed, according to internal WFP operational data, through the Covid-19 response activities, WFP was able to reach 25 per cent of households assisted by MIES, and 75 per cent of households using the established parallel system.

In addition, WFP provided technical assistance to the Social Registry Unit to improve Ecuador's social registry, which suffers from significant gaps and outdated information. WFP advocated for adopting a decentralized model similar to the one used in Colombia, where data is collected by municipalities (KII4), on the basis that this approach is more cost-efficient and allows for more regular updates of the social registry. By sharing best practices and experiences from other countries, WFP has played an important role in promoting a more effective and inclusive social registry in Ecuador. Although progress has been slow, the hope is that WFP's technical assistance has laid the groundwork for potential future reforms that could significantly enhance the targeting and coverage of social protection programmes.

WFP has also advocated with the Ecuadorian government to include migrants and refugees in social protection programmes, particularly those from Venezuela. Migrants and refugees face significant barriers to accessing social assistance, even if their children are Ecuadorian citizens. For example, a Venezuelan mother with an Ecuadorian child is not eligible for the government's cash transfer programme targeting poor families with young children because the mother's nationality is used as the determining factor (KII4). WFP, in collaboration with other UN agencies like UNHCR and IOM, has been advocating for the inclusion of migrants and refugees with regular status in social protection programmes. WFP has had to continue providing parallel assistance to migrants and refugees, effectively running a separate safety net for this population. While this ensures that vulnerable migrants and refugees receive support, it highlights the challenges in achieving a fully inclusive social protection system in Ecuador. WFP's advocacy efforts have raised awareness of this issue (KII4), but significant political barriers remain to integrating migrants and refugees into the national social protection framework.

5. Lessons Learned

THE IMPORTANCE OF NURTURING AND MAINTAINING STRONG WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE GOVERNMENT.

Establishing and maintaining strong collaborative relationships with government counterparts is essential for contributing to national social protection policies and systems. This approach fosters trust and enables WFP to offer its expertise in support of government-led policy discussions. Changes in government administration can present challenges, requiring ongoing efforts to build relationships and share evidence with new officials. While new administrations may have different priorities, documents such as memoranda of understanding can help ensure continuity of cooperation (KII1).

Cultivating strong working relationships with technical staff in ministries is valuable for maintaining consistency during leadership transitions. Encouraging a sense of ownership at the government level can enhance engagement and commitment. Inviting government participation in analytical work from the beginning, such as establishing committees for guidance, increases the likelihood that results will align with government priorities. In this process, WFP can provide valuable support in a complementary role (KII1). For example, WFP offered technical assistance to the government in designing the *Infancia con futuro* programme, participating in a government-initiated working group that sought advice from international partners.

GENERATING SOLID EVIDENCE FROM PROGRAMMING PROVIDES A POWERFUL TOOL FOR POLICY ADVOCACY.

WFP has established itself as a trusted partner to the Ecuadorian government and its ministries by providing robust analytical support, such as the cost of the double burden of malnutrition study and the Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis. The government has found value in these studies, incorporating data from them into their own narratives (KII1), which demonstrates the relevance and utility of WFP's work. The monitoring and evaluation of WFP's programmes generates evidence that helps illustrate the significance of nutrition-sensitive social protection, aligning with government priorities. For instance, WFP's collaborative efforts may have contributed to the government's decision to establish the *Infancia con futuro* programme mentioned earlier.

CRISIS RESPONSE AS AN ENTRY POINT FOR SYSTEM STRENGTHENING.

The Covid-19 response showcases how WFP effectively utilised its experience and operational capacity to support the government's emergency response while simultaneously contributing to the strengthening and expansion of the national social protection system. WFP's previous collaboration with the government following the 2016 earthquake, where it worked through existing social protection platforms,

demonstrated its commitment to supporting government-led systems rather than creating parallel structures (KII1, KII2). Additionally, WFP's experience with large-scale cash transfer programmes for Venezuelan migrants provided valuable insights that it could offer to the government for assisting Ecuadorians affected by Covid-19 (KII1). The subsequent horizontal expansions in the social protection system in 2020, 2021, and 2022 illustrate how WFP's support during crisis response can contribute to the government's efforts to enhance the coverage and inclusiveness of the national social protection system.

SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM STRENGTHENING IS A LONG-TERM ENDEAVOUR.

Enhancing social protection systems is a long-term process that requires continuous learning, improvement and alignment with government processes. These longer-term approaches lead to more sustainable results. The complex issue

of chronic malnutrition in Ecuador, influenced by various political and economic factors, requires ongoing collaboration, and WFP remains committed to supporting government efforts in this area in the coming years (KII1). In some contexts, WFP recognizes that the government may require extended support due to capacity constraints and is prepared to provide long-term assistance as needed (KII1).

Iterative programme design, while time-consuming, yields improved outcomes. For instance, WFP has supported multiple rounds of cash transfers following Covid-19, with each round incorporating lessons from the previous ones. This process becomes more streamlined as the government becomes more familiar with the procedures (KII1). Aligning with government processes and approvals requires the understanding that social protection is one of many priorities for the government, and so nurturing and maintaining open communication and collaborative relationships is crucial for WFP's partnerships to be effective.



CONCLUSION

Despite a challenging economic and social context, WFP Ecuador has demonstrated several successes in strengthening the national social protection system over the past decade, providing timely technical support to the government; this paper highlights a number of these. Through pilot projects, such as the initiative for pregnant adolescents, WFP has generated evidence to advocate for improved policies and inform the design of new government social protection programmes. WFP has also played a key role in promoting nutrition-sensitive approaches within social protection, providing technical assistance to enhance the nutritional impact of school feeding and early childhood development services. Through its homegrown school feeding programme, WFP has demonstrated how a holistic approach can improve nutrition, support

local economies, and strengthen livelihoods by partnering with smallholder farmers and promoting sustainable food procurement. During the Covid-19 crisis, WFP's support enabled the rapid expansion of cash transfers to reach vulnerable populations, while also contributing to the government's efforts towards the long-term enhancement of the social protection system, in line with national priorities and objectives. Key lessons from WFP's experience in Ecuador include the importance of nurturing strong relationships with the government, using solid evidence for policy advocacy, leveraging crisis response as an entry point for system strengthening, and recognizing that social protection is a long-term endeavour requiring patience and persistence. By building on its successes and applying the lessons learned, WFP can further contribute to a more effective, inclusive and sustainable social protection system in Ecuador.



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Annex: Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interview 1, WFP Staff (2024). Interview by Laurie Spicer conducted on 7th March 2024. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Ecuador

Key Informant Interview 2, WFP Staff (2024). Interview by Laurie Spicer conducted on 8th March 2024. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Ecuador

Key Informant Interview 3, WFP Staff (2024). Interview by Laurie Spicer conducted on 12th March 2024. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Ecuador

Key Informant Interview 4, WFP Staff (2024). Interview by Laurie Spicer conducted on 12th March. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Ecuador



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