

# Social Protection for Food Security and Nutrition: a Business Case



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# Executive Summary

This report presents a strategic case for investing in food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection, with the aim of mobilizing cross-sectoral action to improve food security and nutrition outcomes. A specific focus on food security and nutrition is urgently needed, in a context of high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. Globally, hunger has worsened since 2015, with children and women disproportionately affected. Good nutrition is foundational for physical and cognitive growth, education achievement, maternal and infant health, and labour productivity. Conversely, malnutrition reproduces intergenerational poverty and impedes economic growth. It is now recognized that food security is not sufficient for nutrition security, which extends beyond food availability to include diet quality, care practices, access to health services, and water and sanitation.

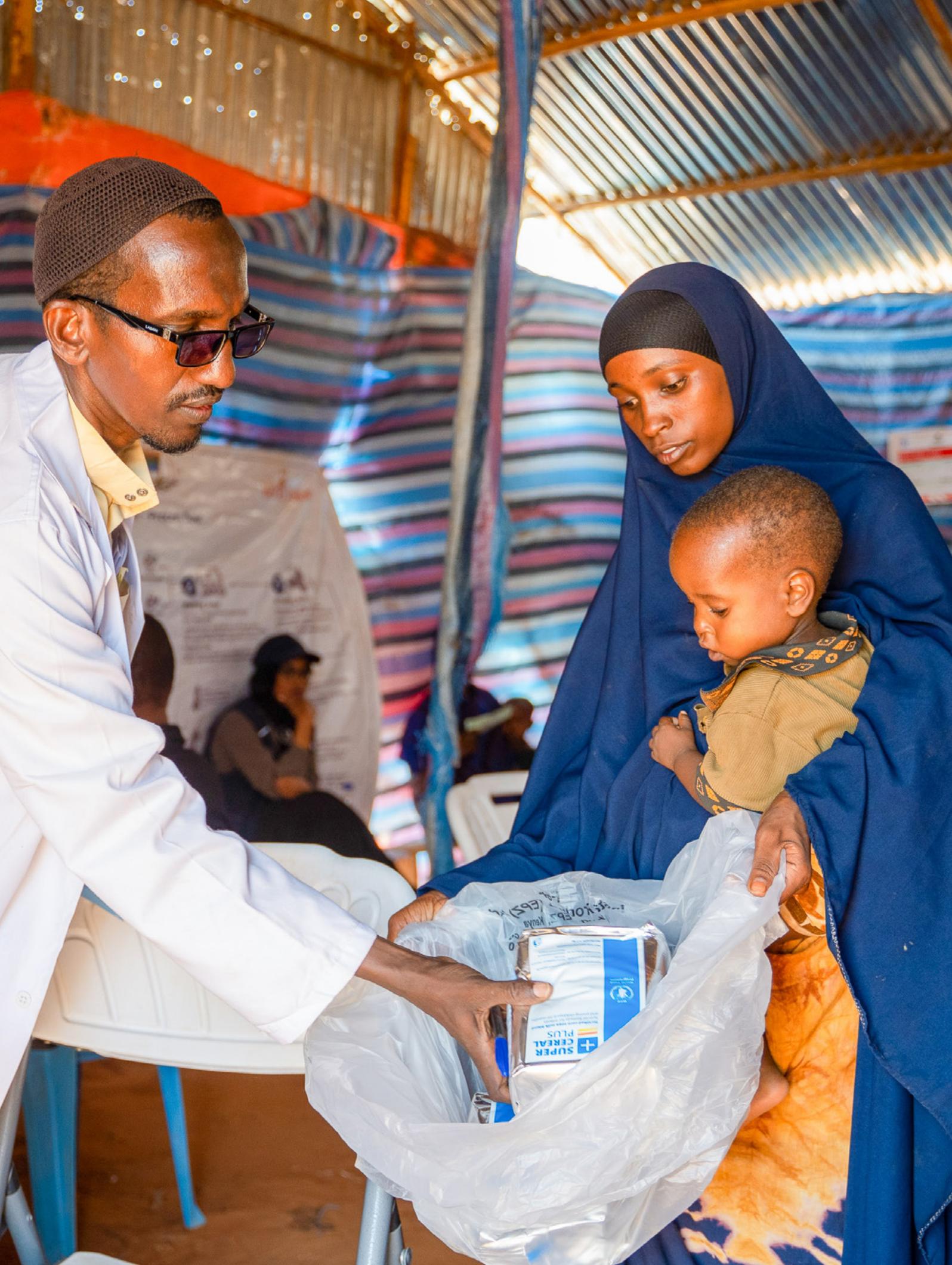
Social protection is expanding globally, but coverage remains low. A staggering 3.8 billion people worldwide still lack any form of social protection and benefits are inadequate – especially in low-income countries and amongst the most marginalized or nutritionally vulnerable groups – when the needs for social assistance and social insurance are greatest. Social protection performs several functions, including alleviating poverty, providing a safety net against life-cycle risks and livelihood shocks, and enhancing access to essential services. While social protection, particularly through social assistance (cash, food, vouchers, school meals) can enhance access to food; nutrition security requires comprehensive, context-specific interventions and multisectoral coordination.

There is convincing evidence that social assistance improves food security outcomes and can improve nutrition outcomes, especially when combined with complementary interventions. Design features (e.g. targeting and transfer amounts) and quality of implementation are critical for effective impact. Social protection can also buffer impacts of crises (e.g. conflict, climate shocks) on food security and nutrition, if it is designed to be shock-responsive, inclusive, and coordinated with humanitarian assistance.

While financing is often considered to be a barrier to delivering comprehensive social protection systems that are sensitive to food security and nutrition; the economic evidence presented highlights that such funding should be considered as an investment rather than a cost, particularly in light of the hidden costs of inaction and the returns on investment for nutrition and social protection interventions. The costs of inaction on child and maternal nutrition are estimated at USD 4 trillion every year. Conversely, every USD 1 invested in nutrition generates returns of up to USD 23. Also, social assistance in the form of cash stimulates local economies and generates income multipliers of two–three or more.

Despite the multiple benefits of well-designed nutrition-sensitive social protection, there are four key challenges facing social protection now and going forward: limited commitment, low coverage, narrow framing, and rapidly changing macro-contexts. Therefore, action is needed at global and country levels. More support should be given to relevant global commitments and country-led platforms such as the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement, the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, and the School Meals Coalition. At the same time, tailored country approaches must be designed based on political will, evidence, needs, and available financing. There are several options for expanding fiscal space, including reallocating budgets, increasing tax revenues, and climate-smart financing. For maximum impacts, social protection design and implementation must be improved in areas such as targeting for vulnerability rather than poverty, adequate transfer values, multisectoral coordination, and robust monitoring and evaluation systems.

This report calls for a forward-looking social protection agenda that integrates nutrition, climate resilience, and human capital development. Collective action is needed. Governments, development and humanitarian partners, donors, civil society and academia are urged to prioritize food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection as a strategic investment in human wellbeing.



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## *Presidente da República*

Across the globe, we are confronted with a stark and deeply troubling reality. Even as nations make remarkable strides in science, technology and economic development; millions of families continue to face hunger, poverty and exclusion. Social protection systems – where they exist – are stretched by recurring shocks, widening inequalities and the rising cost of living. Too many children still go to school on an empty stomach. Too many mothers remain unable to afford nutritious food. And too many communities, particularly in fragile and least-developed countries, are left to bear the heaviest burdens of crises they did not create. It is clear that the status quo is no longer acceptable.

It is in this spirit that I am honoured to introduce this Business Case for Food Security and Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection. This report brings together rigorous evidence and the lived experience of countries across continents to demonstrate a simple but powerful truth: investing in social protection that puts food security and nutrition at its centre is not a cost – it is one of the smartest and most just investments any society can make.

Social protection is not an act of charity. It is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of peace, stability and human development. When a pregnant woman can access nutritious food and health services, when a child receives a school meal that allows them to learn and grow, when a family has a predictable transfer that protects them from hunger and debt in the face of shocks – we are not merely alleviating hardship; we are building the foundations of more resilient and more prosperous nations.

This Business Case reminds us that food security is not enough. Households may have food, and yet children may be stunted, mothers may be anaemic, and diets may be dominated by cheap calories lacking the nutrients needed for healthy lives. The report makes a compelling argument for moving from food security to nutrition security – ensuring that every person, at every stage of life, has access to diverse, safe and nutritious diets supported by quality health; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene; and care services.

The evidence assembled here is clear. Well-designed social assistance – cash, food, vouchers and school meals – improves food security and can significantly improve nutrition, especially when paired with complementary measures such as behaviour-change communication, health services, access to clean water and sanitation, and support to local food systems. When transfers are adequate, predictable and tailored to the needs of nutritionally vulnerable groups – children, adolescent girls, pregnant and breastfeeding women – they help to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and malnutrition.

This report also highlights a fundamental truth: in an era of climate emergency, conflict and economic volatility, social protection systems must be shock responsive. They must be able to expand and adapt rapidly to reach those most at risk – particularly in fragile states, small island developing states, and countries facing recurrent disasters. In these contexts, social protection is not optional; it is a frontline instrument for protecting lives, safeguarding nutrition and preserving hope.

For governments and partners, this Business Case lays out the economic rationale in unmistakable terms. The costs of inaction – lost learning, preventable illness, reduced productivity and avoidable deaths – run into trillions of dollars. By contrast, every dollar invested in nutrition and social protection can yield many times its value through stronger local economies, healthier populations, increased productivity and greater social cohesion. This is not only a moral imperative; it is sound economic policy.

As President of Timor-Leste and Chair of the Global Task Force on Social Protection for Nutrition, I have seen first-hand how political leadership, evidence and partnership can drive real and lasting transformation. My country – born from conflict and still confronting one of the highest rates of stunting in the world – has chosen to place nutrition at the heart of its social protection agenda. Through our *Bolsa da Mãe Kondisional – SANUTRIO* programme, we are linking cash transfers with health and nutrition services and specialized nutritious foods to give our youngest children a fair start in life; while empowering women as agents of change in their communities.

We have not walked this path alone. With the support of partners – including France, the World Food Programme, and the Asian Development Bank – and through South-South and Triangular Cooperation with countries such as Pakistan, Timor-Leste has been able to learn, adapt and scale innovations that reflect our context and our aspirations. This spirit animates the Global Task Force on Social Protection for Nutrition: countries learning from one another, fragile and least-developed nations speaking with one voice, and global partners responding with solidarity and respect.

This Business Case is more than a technical analysis; it is a roadmap for action. It calls on governments to embed nutrition-sensitive social protection in national development, climate and human capital strategies; on donors and international financial institutions to align financing behind integrated national systems; and on global platforms and civil society to champion rights, generate evidence and hold us to account.

As we look ahead, let us be guided by the vision set out in these pages. Let us imagine a world where social protection systems do not simply prevent people from falling but help them rise – where every child is nourished, every family can withstand shocks without slipping into hunger, and every nation, no matter how small or vulnerable, stands in dignity.

We know what works. We know that when we place nutrition and human dignity at the centre of social protection, we unlock potential that benefits entire societies. The question before us is not whether we can afford to act, but whether we can afford not to.

I commend this Business Case to policymakers, partners, and citizens everywhere. May it strengthen our resolve, sharpen our choices, and inspire the courage to invest in the futures our people deserve.

*Obrigadu barak.*

Dili, 05<sup>th</sup> December 2025



**J. RAMOS-HORTA**  
President

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 The Business Case Approach: Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this report is to lay out a business case<sup>1</sup> for investment in social protection as a strategic approach to enhance food security and nutrition outcomes. This business case aims to provide a strategic and evidence-based rationale for investing in social protection systems that are sensitive to food security and nutrition. It is designed to support policymakers, development partners and stakeholders in understanding the multifaceted benefits of strengthening the linkages between social protection and food security and nutrition agenda and mobilizing action and investments across sectors.

The scope of this report includes:

- **Framing the urgency** of addressing global and national food security and nutrition challenges, particularly in the context of rising inequalities, climate shocks and conflict.
- **Positioning food security and nutrition as a core component of human capital development**, emphasizing its role in long-term economic growth and resilience and its contribution to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 1 (poverty) and Sustainable Development Goal 2 (hunger).
- **Synthesizing evidence** on how social protection interventions can directly and indirectly improve food security and nutrition outcomes, also in fragile contexts.
- **Exploring the economic rationale** for investment, including the costs of inaction, return on investment, and broader multiplier effects on health, productivity and poverty reduction.
- **Outlining a roadmap for action** to strengthen political will and close financing gaps, and harness cross-sectoral synergies to advance the food security and nutrition and social protection agenda and accelerate progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 1 and Sustainable Development Goal 2.

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## 1.2 The Urgency of Addressing the Food Security and Nutrition Challenge

From 2005 to 2015, global hunger saw a notable decline. However, over the past decade this progress has stalled and, in some regions, reversed. According to the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025* report, an estimated 638 to 720 million people – representing 7.8 percent to 8.8 percent of the global population – faced hunger in 2024, measured by prevalence of undernourishment (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO,

2024).<sup>2</sup> While this marks a slight improvement from the peak during the COVID-19 pandemic, the estimates are still far above pre-pandemic levels and even further above 2015 levels, with the world remaining far from achieving Sustainable Development Goal Target 2.1 on ending hunger.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, 2.3 billion people experienced **moderate**

1 A business case is a document that justifies undertaking a project or initiative, by providing evidence to decision-makers on why the investment is worthwhile.

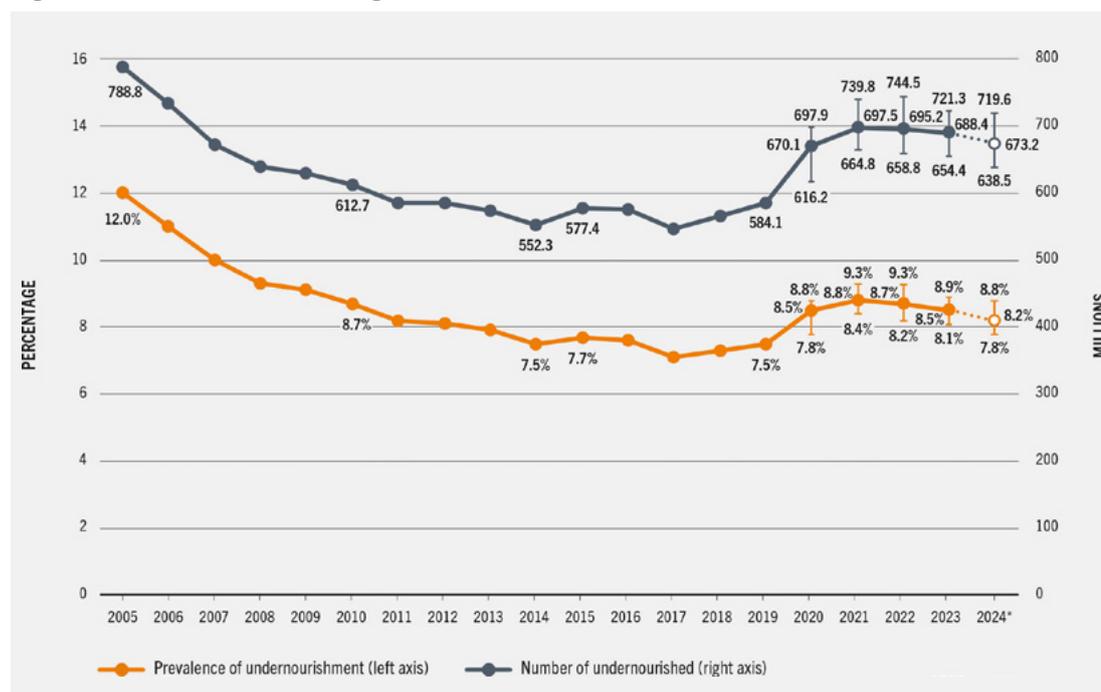
2 The prevalence of undernourishment is an estimate of the proportion of the population whose habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide the dietary energy levels that are required to maintain a normal active and healthy life. It is expressed as a percentage.

3 [United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2](#)

**or severe food insecurity in 2024** – 336 million more than in 2019, before the pandemic. Persistent food price inflation, conflict, climate shocks and economic instability continue to undermine access to nutritious diets, especially among low-income populations. In 2024, **23.2 percent of children under five years displayed stunted growth, wasting threatened the lives of an estimated 6.6 percent, and 5.5 percent were overweight.** Additionally, in 2022 it was estimated that over two-thirds of non-pregnant

women of reproductive age suffered from at least one micronutrient deficiency (Stevens et al., 2022). Different forms of malnutrition – such as undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight/ obesity – do not exist in isolation. They often co-exist within the same populations, households or even individuals, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Popkin, Corvalan and Grummer-Strawn, 2020)<sup>4</sup>, the same countries which tend to have the lowest coverage and adequacy of social protection.

**Figure 1. Trends in Global Hunger 2005-2024**



Source: FAO et al., 2025: 5, DOI: [10.4060/cd6008en](https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6008en), CC BY 4.0.

### From Food Security to Nutrition Security: Taking the Next Step

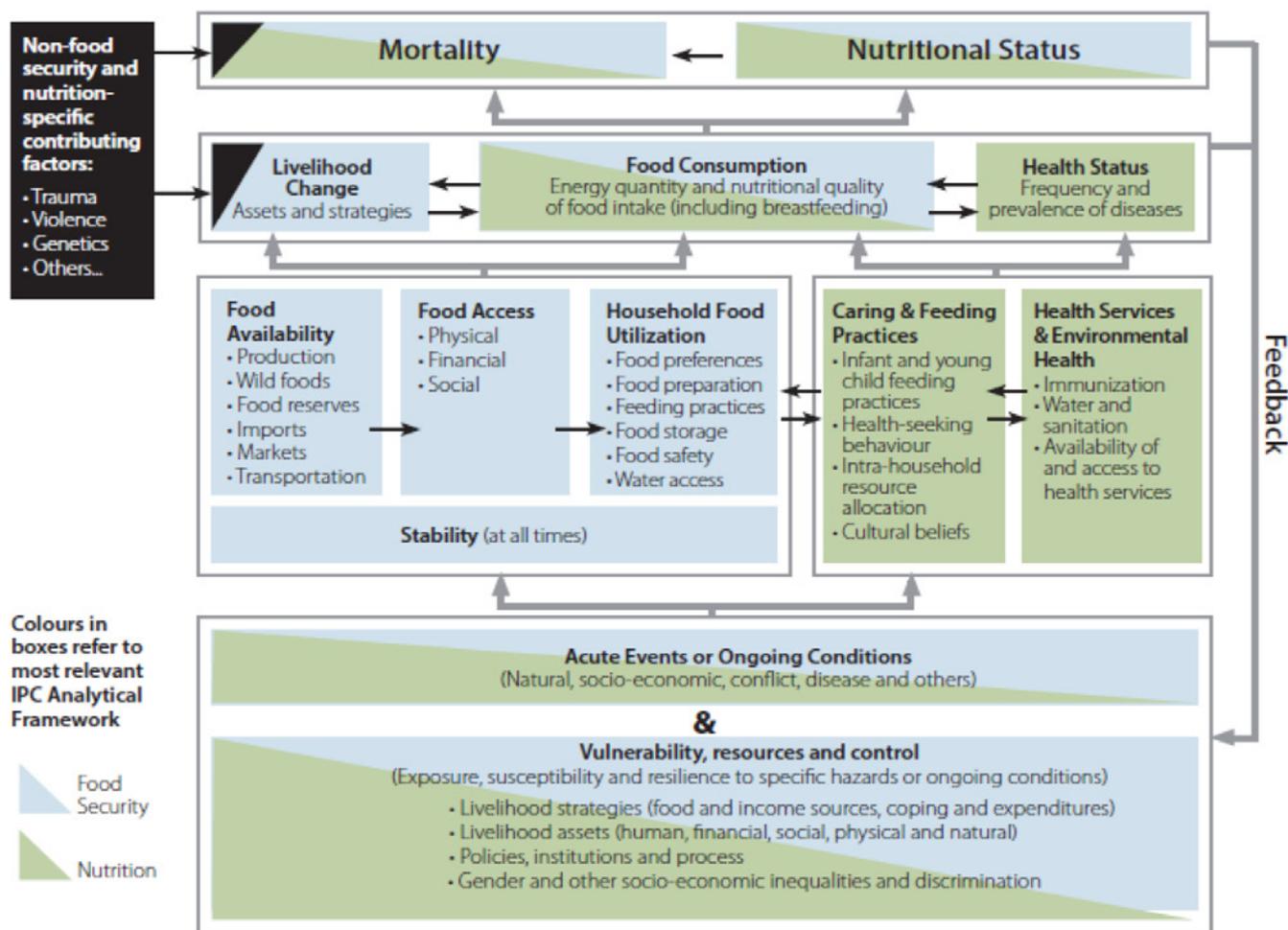
While the definition of food security established at the 1996 World Food Summit emphasizes access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food; food security interventions often focus primarily on ensuring that people have enough to eat which does not guarantee good health and nutrition if the diet lacks essential nutrients. Nutrition interventions not only encompass food security but also go a step further by addressing the quality and nutritional value of the food provided.

While food security is typically assessed at the household level – where decisions are made about what food is available and how it is distributed – nutrition security requires a deeper, more individualized lens. A food-secure household provides

the foundation, but it does not guarantee that each member’s nutritional needs are met. Nutrition security requires understanding who eats what; how food is prepared and consumed and utilized; the influence of intra-household dynamics; cultural eating and feeding practices, and individual nutrient absorption. Nutritional needs vary by age, gender, and physiological status, making it essential to assess food consumption at the individual level. This focus highlights the need for tailored approaches that consider not just household food access, but also individual dietary intake, care practices, and access to health and sanitation services. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between food security and nutrition.

<sup>4</sup> Note that undernutrition is commonly defined to include wasting, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies. Thus, an individual can experience being both overweight and be micronutrient deficient and thus would be classified as experiencing the double burden (Popkin et al. 2020).

Figure 2. The IPC Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Framework



Source: IPC Global Partners, 2021.

The framework highlights the fact that while food and nutrition security share common root causes – such as income, education, asset ownership, natural disasters, conflict, and policy environments – their immediate and underlying drivers differ. Food security is shaped by food availability, access, utilization, and stability; while nutrition also depends on quality of diet, care

practices and access to health, water, and sanitation services. Food security policies often focus on production, distribution, and reducing waste; whereas nutrition policies require multisectoral approaches that promote diverse diets, health services, and education.

### 1.3 Realising the Rights to Food: Addressing Affordability and Inequalities Through Food Security and Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection

Sustainable Development Goal Target 2.1 sets a goal of universal access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food. However, food affordability is one of the foundational challenges in achieving food security and nutrition and a key source of inequality in food security and nutrition outcomes. The cost of accessing a healthy diet is informed by wider inequalities in food environments and infrastructural costs to households (HLPE, 2023). According to the latest figures in the

*State of Food Insecurity in the World 2025 report*, the global average cost of a healthy diet rose to USD 4.46 Purchasing Power Parity per person per day, up from USD 4.30 in 2023 and USD 4.01 in 2022. Globally, it was estimated that 31.9 percent of people (2.60 billion) are unable to afford a healthy diet that meets energy requirements, essential nutrients, and dietary diversity guidelines (FAO et al., 2025).

### Box 1 Evidence from Fill the Nutrient Gap Analysis

WFP's Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis uses food price and household expenditure data to estimate the minimum cost of a nutritious diet and identify the affordability gap across countries (WFP, 2024a). The Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis can be leveraged to enhance the ability of national social protection systems in addressing the affordability gaps of nutritious diets, moving beyond calorie-based transfer values to benefits that genuinely enable access to healthy diets, thereby linking poverty reduction more directly with improved nutrition outcomes.

In Pakistan, the Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis found that households across the country faced a large affordability gap, for example people in the bottom decile of food expenditure in urban Punjab faced an affordability gap of 50 percent, even after receiving cash transfers from the Benazir Income Support Programme.

The recommendation was to make the Benazir Income Support Programme, which is also tasked to reduce stunting, more food security and nutrition-sensitive. Modelling showed that adding locally produced specialized nutritious foods for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women and Girls and children 6-23 months could reduce the cost of a nutritious diet to the household by 11-15 percent. These findings informed the design and launch of a conditional cash transfer programme called *Benazir Nashonuma* for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women and Girls as well as children aged 6-23 months of households enrolled in the Benazir Income Support Programme. This programme provides cash and a specialized nutritious food to add to their diet during quarterly visits to the health centre. The women and children enrolled in this programme also receive regular health and nutrition services such as antenatal care, iron folic acid supplements, growth monitoring, immunization and nutrition awareness sessions.

In 2023, the High-Level Panel of Experts to the UN Committee on World Food Security highlighted the need to understand the underlying drivers of inequity in food security and nutrition (the processes that drive inequalities), including inequities that are:

- **Intersectional:** how inequalities interact and can compound one another, such as being both female and from a minority that is discriminated against.
- **Intergenerational:** inequities that are passed on, for example malnourished mothers giving birth to stunted or low birthweight children.
- **Interterritorial:** inequities that are spatially and geopolitically determined.

To do so, the report highlights the need to focus on making systems fairer and more inclusive: *recognizing* these different forms of inequity, *redistributing* according to needs and ensuring *representation* in policy design and evaluation. The High-Level Panel of Experts to the UN Committee on World Food Security recommends that social protection be a key part of the means to address inequality in food systems,

but it also cautions against assuming that all social protection programmes are equitable because they naturally focus on a form of redistribution. Many may fail to adequately recognize and address different forms of inequality or to ensure adequate representation in programme design, monitoring, evaluation and learning (HLPE, 2023).

Also highlighted by the High-Level Panel of Experts to the UN Committee on World Food Security is the need for **a rights-based approach to food security and nutrition**. The right to food and the right to social security have both been recognized under international law for decades, starting with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). The human right to adequate food and the fundamental right to freedom from hunger are further elaborated in article 11 of *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR, 1966). In 2004, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations led the development of *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*. One mechanism identified for implementing the Right to Food Guidelines is social protection,

in particular through social assistance targeting vulnerable people who do not have access to adequate food for reasons beyond their control (FAO, 2004).

Social protection is also guided by two landmark pieces of international law: the International Labour Organization's *Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention 102 (1952)*<sup>5</sup> and the International Labour Organization's *Social Protection Floors Recommendation 202 (2012)*, which establishes social protection as a human right and requires member states to deliver four "basic social security guarantees": access to essential health care, and basic income security for children, working-age adults and older persons.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food monitors compliance with the right to food. However, as a "soft law" the Guidelines are voluntary and non-binding. Similarly, the International Labour Organization monitors progress on Convention 102 and Recommendation 202, but these are also non-binding. Much depends on national constitutions and laws to ensure the realization of the rights to social protection and to food.

In most countries neither the right to food nor the right to social protection is justiciable, meaning that the state cannot be held accountable if the right is violated. One notable exception is India. In 2001, civil society took the government to court when a resident of Rajasthan died of starvation. India's Supreme Court ruled that the constitutional right to food had been violated in this case and ordered the government to take action to prevent future starvation deaths. The government subsequently passed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which guarantees 100 days of paid employment every year to every rural household in India, at the local minimum wage. Later, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act became part of a platform of food and nutrition-sensitive social protection policies that were also put forward by the government to address the Right to Food case, which also mandated nation-wide access to the Targeted Public Distribution System, and the Integrated Child Development Services (which provides nutritional support to children under six amongst other services) as part of the landmark National Food Security Act. India's experience shows how the right to food and right to social protection can be realized together, as part of food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes with national scale and effectiveness.

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## 1.4 Food Security and Nutrition as Part of Human Capital Development

Investing in food security and nutrition is a strategic cornerstone of human capital development. Good nutrition is foundational to physical growth, cognitive development, educational attainment, and economic productivity (Black et al., 2013). Conversely, poor food security and nutrition is associated with significant short- and long-term costs – including increased healthcare burdens, reduced learning capacity, lower earning potential and diminished labour productivity (Kubik, Mirzabaev and May, 2023). Malnutrition in early life can cause irreversible damage to brain development and physical health, with consequences that extend into adulthood and across generations. The World Bank estimates that undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies cost the global economy USD 1 trillion annually, while overweight and obesity add another USD 2 trillion in losses (World Bank, 2024). These impacts are particularly severe in low- and middle-income countries, where the double burden of

malnutrition – the coexistence of undernutrition and overweight – undermines both individual potential and national development. Social protection systems, when designed to be nutrition-sensitive, can play a transformative role in breaking this cycle. Evidence shows that integrating nutrition objectives into social protection, can yield high returns in human capital formation (World Bank, 2015).

Human capital arguments resonate with policymakers, and while returns may take time to materialize, compelling evidence supports the long-term value of such investments. In Guatemala, children who received high-quality nutrition supplements earned up to 46 percent more as adults (Hoddinott et al., 2008). In India, children born to mothers who had benefited from school meals in their own childhood were found to be significantly taller, indicating intergenerational gains in nutrition and health (Chakrabarti et al., 2021:1).

5 which required United Nations member states to provide compensatory benefits for nine contingencies: medical care, sickness benefit, unemployment benefit, old-age benefit, employment injury benefit, family benefit, maternity benefit, invalidity benefit, and survivors' benefit.



## 2 The Evidence for Food Security and Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection

### 2.1 Expanding Social Protection Coverage: a Foundation for Addressing Food and Nutrition Security

Social protection has expanded steadily across low-income countries since the early 2000s and has proven its effectiveness both in addressing the challenges of poverty and vulnerability, and in contributing to mitigating and managing shocks, most recently the Covid-19 pandemic. One internationally accepted definition of social protection comes from the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board<sup>6</sup>:

“Social protection is a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing and protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion, throughout their life cycle placing a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups. This means ensuring adequate protection for all who need it, including children; people of working age in case of maternity, sickness, work injury or for those without jobs; persons with disability and older persons. This protection can be provided through social insurance, tax-funded social benefits, social assistance services, public works programs and other schemes guaranteeing basic income security and access to essential services.” (SPIAC-B, 2019)



6 SPIAC-B is an inter-agency coordination mechanism on social protection issues, with representatives from international organisations and bilateral agencies.

It is worth noting that the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board definition mentions neither “food” (or “food security”) nor “nutrition”. Like most definitions of social protection, it focuses on chronic **poverty** rather than chronic or acute **food insecurity**, and on **individual** (idiosyncratic) life-cycle risks rather than **collective** (covariate) shocks such as disasters, pandemics and food price spikes.

Between 2020 and 2023, the proportion of the world’s population who were covered by at least one social protection mechanism switched from less half to slightly more than half, for the first time (ILO, 2024). However, coverage varies greatly across regions, even within low-income countries. In Asia, the percentage covered by social protection in 2023 was estimated at 54 percent (up from 44 percent in 2020), but in Africa the figure was only 19 percent (up from 17 percent in 2020) meaning that 80 percent of Africans remain excluded from formal social

assistance and social insurance systems (ILO 2021; ILO 2024). Moreover, despite progress in expanding social protection coverage, significant gaps remain, particularly among the most vulnerable groups. Globally, 76.1 percent of children still lack effective social protection coverage, making them one of the most excluded populations. Women also face substantial disparities, with only 50.1 percent having effective coverage compared to 54.6 percent of men, reflecting persistent gender inequalities in access to benefits. (ILO, 2024)

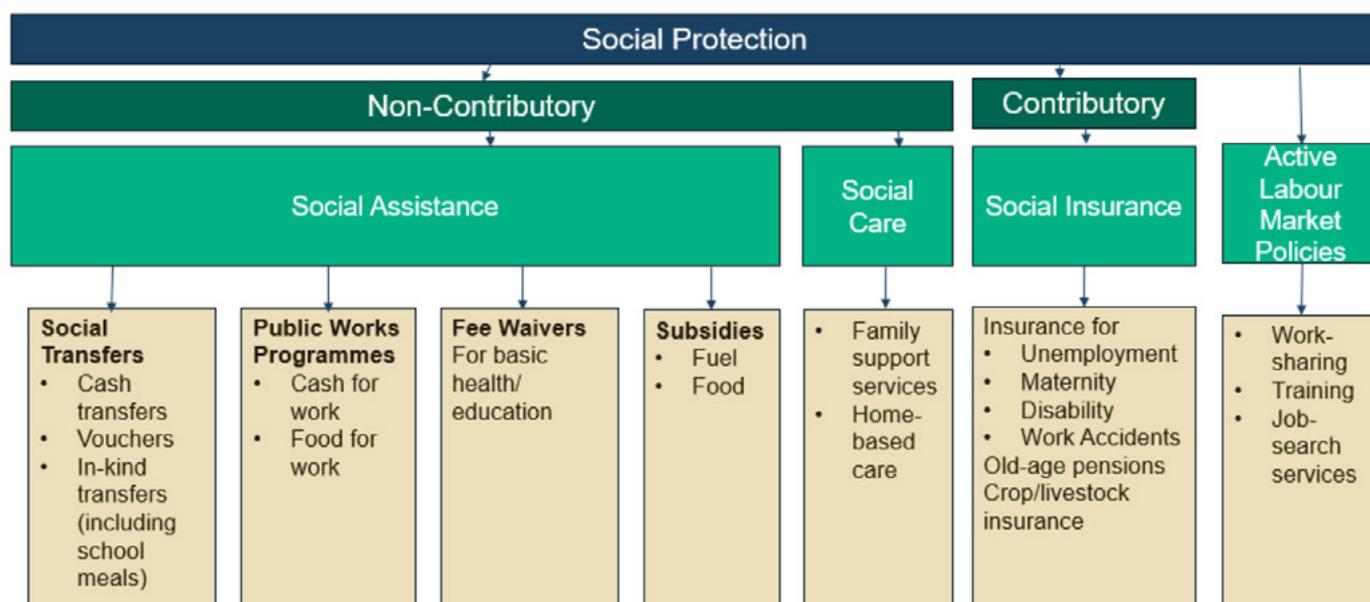
Therefore, an important first step to addressing food insecurity and malnutrition is to **raise the coverage of social protection**, especially in areas furthest behind, notably low-income countries of sub-Saharan Africa; and to **improve the targeting of the most vulnerable populations**, namely children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and adolescent girls. However, expanding coverage is necessary but not sufficient.

## 2.2 Evidence on Social Protection’s Contribution to Food Security and Nutrition Outcomes

Social protection encompasses a wide range of policies and programmes aimed at safeguarding vulnerable populations, especially during times of economic hardship. While various instruments – such as parental leave, family-friendly workplace policies, and health insurance fee waivers – can support nutrition by enabling better feeding practices and improving access to health services; **social assistance**

– particularly social transfers – remains the most direct and impactful entry point for enhancing food and nutrition security. Cash, vouchers, in-kind support, subsidies and school meals can immediately boost household resources and access to diverse, nutrient-rich diets, especially for children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and adolescent girls in food-insecure settings.

Figure 3. Overview of Social Protection Instruments



Source: Oxford Policy Management (2017).

## Box 2 Leveraging Cash-Plus Social Protection to Improve Nutrition in Uganda

Uganda faces persistent food security and nutrition challenges despite being a food-surplus country. Classified as “serious” by the 2025 Global Hunger Index, **22 percent of the population is undernourished**, while 24 percent of children under five are stunted and three percent are wasted (WFP, 2025). Diets remain dominated by starchy staples with low intake of animal-source foods, fruits and vegetables, leading to poor micronutrient adequacy. To address these gaps, the Government of Uganda partnered with WFP and United Nations Children’s Fund under the Child-Sensitive Social Protection Programme to pilot NutriCash, a cash-plus intervention targeting pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children under two during the critical 1,000-day window. The programme combined monthly transfers of UGX 48,000 (USD 13) with social and behaviour change communication, backyard gardening and financial literacy training.

A 2025 impact evaluation shows that NutriCash delivered modest but meaningful improvements in household food consumption and child growth. During Wave II, beneficiary households recorded significantly higher Food Consumption Scores (29 versus 26.6 for control households), with the largest treatment-control difference observed in Terego district (4.8 points). While minimum dietary diversity for children under two remained low and largely unaffected, reductions in prevalence of stunting

by about 9 percentage points and underweight by 4.6 percentage points were observed in the DID/PSM model (Development Pathways, 2025). Maternal anaemia fell overall between Wave I and Wave II from 61 percent to 21 percent, reflecting general improvements over time. The impact evaluation models found no statistically significant NutriCash-specific effect on maternal anaemia overall, although the DID-PSM heterogeneous analysis shows a significant decline among refugee women. Child anaemia declined slightly by 3 percentage points between Wave I and Wave II, but with no statistically significant or consistent programme effect. Positively, social and behaviour change communication contributed to reduced sweetened food consumption and improved hygiene practices, even though breastfeeding and complementary feeding indicators showed little change (Development Pathways, 2025).

Beyond nutrition, NutriCash strengthened Uganda’s social protection architecture and informed scale-up plans. The programme reached **13,428 households** in eight refugee-hosting districts before closing in April 2025. Since then, the approach has expanded to **2,156 mothers** in Karamoja and one refugee-hosting district in the Southwest, and will be integrated into the World Bank-funded NUSAF4 project targeting 20,000 mothers from 2026. Lessons from NutriCash highlight that cash transfers alone are insufficient to transform diets and in addressing deeper issues such as poor dietary diversity and anaemia. Complementary interventions, stronger links to markets, better access to nutrient-rich foods and continued education are essential for lasting impact.

Evidence on the links between social assistance and food security and nutrition outcomes has been growing over the past decade. Many studies have focused on the ways in which social protection can be made more food security and nutrition-sensitive, although the evidence is still mixed and cautions against a one-size fits-all approach (Barnett et al., 2022; Drimie and Yosef, 2016; de Groot et al., 2016; Manley et al., 2020; Olney et al., 2022 in HLPE, 2023).

“Cash plus”, “graduation” and economic inclusion programmes (World Bank, 2021) all combine social assistance (e.g. cash transfers) to meet basic needs with livelihood support (productive assets, financial literacy training, etc.) to generate sustainable

income streams for participants. Evaluations of these programmes across multiple countries have found high rates of escape from extreme poverty, and sustained improvements in household food security (Banerjee et al., 2015). A meta-analysis of the impacts of cash transfers across a range of studies found predominantly positive effects on a range of outcomes, including health and nutrition outcomes as well as improved household consumption, investment in productive assets, school enrolment and attendance (Bastagli et al., 2016). A series of systematic reviews, the most recent encompassing 129 studies, found that cash transfers improved dietary diversity and linear growth of children and reduced stunting, wasting and diarrhoea (Manley et al., 2020;

Manley et al., 2022). These studies found that the impacts on nutritional outcomes such as stunting were explained by the more “proximate” outcomes or pathways (see Table 1 below) such as increasing access to diverse diets and animal source foods and reductions in diarrhoea. Importantly, several

aspects of programme design and implementation are found to be related to the effectiveness on nutrition outcomes, as described below. Table 1, while not exhaustive, highlights some social assistance instruments that could contribute to food security and nutrition outcomes.

**Table 1. Different Social Protection Instruments and Their Potential Contribution to Food Security and Nutrition Outcomes**

Instrument	Potential contribution to food security and nutrition
In-kind transfers	Giving food insecure people food directly immediately increases food consumption, and if properly designed it can improve diversification of diet and consumption of nutritious foods.
Vouchers transfers	Can immediately increase food consumption and can contribute to improve diversification of diet and access to nutritious foods (e.g. fresh food voucher). Availability and access of foods, including nutritious foods, can be improved by contracting retailers to redeem vouchers.
Unrestricted cash	<p>Increases purchasing power on foods of recipients, which can improve diversification of diet, and size and frequency of nutritious food consumption.</p> <p>Can be used by farmers to enhance productivity, which in turn can increase the availability of food, including nutritious foods.</p> <p>Some portion can be invested in family businesses (e.g. smallholder farms) or micro-enterprises (e.g. street trading). This generates additional income which can be used for food purchase and consumption, including nutritious foods.</p> <p>Can be made conditional on use of health centres (for nutrition services such as infant health appointments, prenatal supplements, nutrition education) and school attendance (where they will receive school meals).</p>
Food subsidies	<p>Input subsidies (e.g. for seeds, fertilizers, irrigation) can boost local food production, improve yields and stabilize supply of foods, including nutritious foods, particularly in rural and food-insecure areas.</p> <p>Subsidising the price of staple and nutritious foods can boost consumption and shift dietary preferences towards healthier diets, and make them more affordable for vulnerable populations.</p>
School meals	<p>School meals provide a reliable source of food for children, especially in low-income or food-insecure households, helping to reduce hunger and ensure regular food intake.</p> <p>By covering one or more meals per day, school meals reduce the financial burden on families, freeing up household resources for other essential needs, including food for other members.</p> <p>Meals can be designed to include diverse and nutrient-rich foods, addressing deficiencies in iron, vitamin A, iodine and other key nutrients.</p> <p>When sourced locally, school meals can stimulate agricultural production and local markets, improving availability of nutritious fresh foods and economic resilience in surrounding communities.</p> <p>School meals can be provided along with nutrition education, promoting healthy eating habits that extend beyond the school environment.</p>



Some evidence is also emerging on school meals impact on nutrition outcomes, particularly when combined with complementary nutrition interventions such as micronutrient supplements and deworming (UNICEF, 2023). Particularly, evidence shows how school meals can contribute to improving girls' malnutrition. A systematic review that analysed three randomized

control trials in Jamaica, Kenya and China showed that they can support weight and height gain (Kristjansson et al., 2007). Furthermore, another randomized control trial showed that safe, nutritious and diverse school menus can reduce iron-deficiency anaemia in girls by as much as 20 percent (Adelman et al., 2019).

### Box 3 Leveraging Peru's National School Meals Programme To Contribute to Improved Nutrition<sup>7</sup>

While Peru is a middle-income country, it faces persistent socio-economic inequalities, contributing to a population that experiences the double burden of malnutrition. Specifically, Peru is characterized by a continued anaemia prevalence that is higher than the regional average, concomitant with significant overweight and obesity. In response to this, WFP has supported the government in leveraging social protection institutional demand, starting in 2017 with the national school meals programme, to advance the production and consumption of fortified rice. The introduction of fortified rice into the national school meals programme incentivized the private sector to scale up supply and prompt the government in establishing micronutrient standards, and only four years later, to enact a mandatory fortification law. The demand created by the school meals programme, which significantly boosted national production, helped creating a favourable environment for other programmes, particularly those focused on critical life stages such as the “1000 days” (from conception to the child’s second birthday) – a period when effective nutrition interventions have the highest potential for long-term impact. In 2022, fortified rice was included nationwide in Cuna Mas, a large-scale early childhood development programme which provides meals to children under three living in poverty at early childhood day-care centres. Currently, the school meals programme is transitioning to a home-grown school feeding model, enabling the purchase of local fresh foods and provision of hot meals, to contribute to the reduction of overweight and obesity.

There is robust evidence that social assistance improves the purchasing power of low-income households, with a significant investment on food (Smith et al., 2013; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre et al., 2021). However, increased spending does not automatically lead to improved nutrition outcomes, especially in contexts where essential services are limited and nutritious foods are unaffordable or unavailable.

Firstly, social assistance alone is often insufficient to improve nutrition outcomes. Without coordination across key sectors – such as health, agriculture, education and WASH – stand-alone social assistance programmes do not address the multiple drivers of malnutrition. Complementary interventions, including behaviour change communication, food system activities and access to essential services, are critical to help families adopt better feeding and care practices. Evidence shows that cash transfers are more effective and sustainable when combined with other forms of support, such as asset transfers, skills development and nutrition education (Bastagli et al., 2016; Roelen et al., 2017).

Secondly, design and implementation challenges can undermine nutrition outcomes:

- **Targeting limitations:** programmes may exclude geographical areas and/or vulnerable groups due to reliance on targeting criteria that are not reflecting nutrition indicators. Even when a more nutrition-sensitive targeting (e.g. children under five, pregnant and lactating women) is applied it can fail if health services and registries are weak.
- **Inadequacy of the transfers:**
  - **Inadequate modality and value:** the selection of modality and definition of transfer value may be inadequate to enable households access to healthy diets. Households facing financial constraints often make trade-offs between basic needs, compromising dietary diversity. Moreover, many transfers are not indexed to inflation or responsive to market shocks, reducing their real value over time. Finally, context matters: cash transfers may enhance dietary diversity in areas with functioning markets, while food transfers may be more appropriate in settings affected by market disruptions (Hidrobo et al., 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Further information can be found at [Lessons from Peru: Strengthening linkages between social protection and food systems to enhance nutrition | World Food Programme](#)

- **Insufficient duration and frequency:** short-term or irregular programme delivery limits the potential for sustained impact. Nutrition improvements require consistent support, particularly during critical life stages such as pregnancy and early childhood. Sporadic transfers may address immediate needs but are unlikely to influence long-term nutrition outcomes.
- **Complexity and weak implementation:** the integration of food security and nutrition into social assistance programmes requires specialized expertise, particularly in nutrition and behaviour change, as well as gender dynamics. Without adequate capacity or when programmes are overloaded with multiple objectives, implementation fidelity suffers, and nutrition impacts may not be realized (Nisbett et al., 2016).
- **External shocks and environmental constraints:** social assistance often operates in fragile contexts affected by political instability, climate events or economic crises. These shocks can undermine programme effectiveness on food security and nutrition unless systems are designed to be shock-responsive (see Section 2.3 below).
- **Weak monitoring and evaluation systems:** many programmes lack robust mechanisms to track nutrition specific outcomes. Without clear indicators and regular data collection, it is difficult to assess impact, identify gaps or adapt interventions to improve effectiveness.

## 2.3 The Role of Social Protection in Addressing Food Security and Nutrition in Contexts of Shocks and Crises

Food insecurity is both a driver and consequence of crises, including armed conflict, climate shocks and economic instability. The United Nations Security Council recognizes food insecurity as a threat multiplier that can fuel conflict dynamics (Fakhri, 2021; Hendrix and Brinkman, 2013). Crises affect all dimensions of food security – availability, access, utilization, stability, agency and sustainability – as well as nutrition outcomes (HLPE, 2020).

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, weak institutions and systems pose major barriers to realizing the right to food. Vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected, with crises exacerbating existing inequalities and contributing to large-scale displacement. As of 2024, 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced globally, including 73.5 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2024).

Acute malnutrition, the most life-threatening form of undernutrition<sup>8</sup>, often spikes in response to shocks. Climate-related events – now affecting over half of the global population – can increase the risk of wasting and underweight by nearly 50 percent (World Bank, 2023), while a 5 percent rise in food prices can increase child wasting by 9 percent (World Bank, 2024). These impacts

are magnified in low-income households, which already struggle to afford a healthy diet (HLPE, 2023).

In an increasingly globalized food system, shocks have cross-border effects. Conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, disrupt supply chains and trigger food price volatility, undermining food access even in distant regions. Farmers may abandon production, markets may collapse, and households face rising costs for basic staples.

Social protection is a critical tool for mitigating the impacts of shocks and crises on food security and nutrition. Evidence from the Better Assistance in Crises programme in Borno, Nigeria, shows that social protection can reduce poverty and food insecurity in complex crisis settings (Shepherd et al., 2025). Social protection systems can help households absorb shocks, stabilize consumption and prevent negative coping strategies such as reducing food intake or withdrawing children from school (UNICEF, 2023).

Recent global initiatives – including the United Nations Global Action Plan on Child Wasting, the World Health Organization Guidelines on Acute Malnutrition (2023), and the World Health

<sup>8</sup> Wasting is the most lethal form of malnutrition, accounting for 1 in 5 deaths of children under-5 worldwide (Child alert: Severe wasting | UNICEF 2022)

Organization Complementary Feeding Guidance (2023) – highlight the importance of multisectoral approaches, with social protection identified as a central system for prevention and management of malnutrition.

To be effective in crisis contexts, social protection systems must be:

- *Shock-responsive*: able to scale up or adapt in response to sudden changes in need (O'Brien et al., 2018).
- *Inclusive*: reaching displaced populations and marginalized groups, even in areas with limited state capacity.

- *Integrated*: coordinated with humanitarian assistance and linked to health; nutrition; and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene services.

However, challenges remain. In humanitarian settings, limited state legitimacy and capacity, combined with fragmented service delivery, can strain social protection systems. Displaced populations are often excluded from routine coverage, underscoring the need for stronger links between social protection and humanitarian response (SPaN, 2023).



#### Box 4

### Shock-Responsive Social Protection for the Prevention of Malnutrition in Somalia

Somalia experiences a predominantly arid and semi-arid climate, making it highly vulnerable to recurrent climatic shocks such as drought and floods. Between 2020 and 2022, Somalia experienced five consecutive failed rainy seasons, resulting in severe drought conditions. In 2023, the situation reversed as heavy rains triggered devastating floods (Impact Initiatives, 2024). Governance remains fragile due to decades of conflict, insecurity and weak institutions. These combination of stressors contribute to persistently high levels of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. According to the 2020 Demographic and Health Survey, 27 percent of children under five are stunted, 12 percent are wasted and 21 percent are underweight.

The Baxnaano social protection programme has played a crucial role in supporting livelihoods and promoting economic inclusion. While it targeted chronically poor and vulnerable households with children under five, the cash transfer value has been insufficient to enable access to a nutritious diet or to strengthen uptake of health and nutrition services, which themselves face challenges in quality and reach.

Although Baxnaano has been leveraged during shocks, such as locust infestation, drought and floods, this support has been ad hoc, lacking an institutionalized process, formalized inter-ministerial collaboration (especially with the health sector), and adequate preparedness. These gaps have substantially limited its efficiency.

As Baxnaano Phase I concludes in 2025, Somalia is transitioning to a new phase: Building Opportunities and Outcomes in Social Protection and Youth Employment in Somalia (Boost You) 2026-2028. WFP is supporting this transition, including the development of Standard Operating Procedures to formalize institutional arrangements for shock responsive social protection. These standard operating procedures and shock responsive social protection strategy will offer a critical opportunity to **integrate nutrition-sensitive objectives and mechanisms, such as adjusting transfer values, linking cash transfers to health and nutrition services, coordinating with the health sector** to ensure timely referrals and service uptake, as well as systematically **using early warning systems** to trigger anticipatory action that protects nutritional status before deterioration.

By embedding these elements, **shock-responsive social protection can become a frontline strategy to prevent wasting and stunting**, especially during shocks, while also contributing to long-term human capital formation and economic resilience.



# 3 The Economic Rationale for Investing in Food Security and Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection

This section demonstrates that food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection is a smart investment for governments, both economically and politically, drawing on evidence on: the cost of inaction, return on investment, and the multiplier effects of investing in nutrition and social protection.

Cost-effectiveness and cost-efficiency can be increased by combining multiple interventions to create economies of scale and scope. The first 1,000 days (from conception to the second child's birthday) is a critical window of opportunity for addressing stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies, as it is a crucial time of cognitive and physical development, when undernutrition can have life-long irreversible effects (Black et al., 2013). It is then important to consolidate and maintain the nutrition gains, extending the focus to an 8,000-day paradigm that recognizes the key role that nutritional requirements continue to play in human

development through childhood and adolescence (WFP, 2020b; Norris et al., 2022). Schools can play a vital role in delivering an integrated package of health and nutrition services at this life stage. Investing in nutrition and health for this age group has the potential to contribute significantly to education outcomes and human capital development (WFP, 2020a), and to break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition.

The relationship between costs, benefits, effectiveness and efficiency is not always straightforward, and there may be trade-offs to consider. For example, greater requirements in terms of time, resources and skills for greater integration of services with multiple additional components may entail higher costs. Nonetheless, if larger investments result in higher effectiveness of the programme, then the benefits will outweigh the costs (McLean et al., 2020).

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## 3.1 Costs of Inaction

The World Bank has estimated the costs of inaction on child and maternal nutrition at **USD 41 trillion over 10 years**, with USD 21 trillion in economic productivity losses resulting from undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies and an estimated USD 20 trillion in economic and social costs from overweight and obesity. Inaction also has significant human costs, including 6.2 million more child deaths, 27 million more stunted children, 47 million more episodes of child wasting, and 144 million more cases of maternal anaemia over the next 10 years (World Bank, 2024).

Studies on the costs of the double burden of malnutrition focus on three main areas:

### Health

The most serious health-related consequence is **increased risks for morbidity and mortality**, particularly among children under five. Nearly half of deaths among children under five years of age are linked to undernutrition, mainly in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2024).

The burden of disease associated with both under- and over-nutrition **increases health care costs**. In Ecuador and Mexico, the highest cost is caused by the treatment of undernutrition, which represents nearly 90 percent of the total health cost (ECLAC and WFP, 2017). If no action is taken, treating the diseases associated with overweight will cost, on average per year, nine percent of total health expenditure in Mexico and approximately eight percent of total health expenditure in Bulgaria and South Africa (World Bank, 2024).

## Education

A study of eight Latin American countries has estimated that undernutrition leads to a **schooling gap of two years of study on average**. This results in a significantly higher rate of incomplete primary education and a lower level of completed secondary education among those who experienced undernutrition (Martínez et al., 2024).

Food deficit affects the ability to concentrate in the classroom while a deficiency of micronutrients, particularly iron, zinc, iodine and vitamin A, is linked to a cognitive impairment. Both factors contribute to **compromised learning and lower educational outcomes** (ECLAC and WFP, 2017; Martínez et al., 2024).

The Cost of Hunger in Africa initiative has estimated the social and economic impact of child undernutrition in 21 countries in the region. Collectively, the studies have found that stunted children in these countries achieve between 0.2 and 3.6 years less in school education, with up to 18 percent of all school repetitions associated with stunting (WFP, 2020c).

## Productivity and Economic Consequences

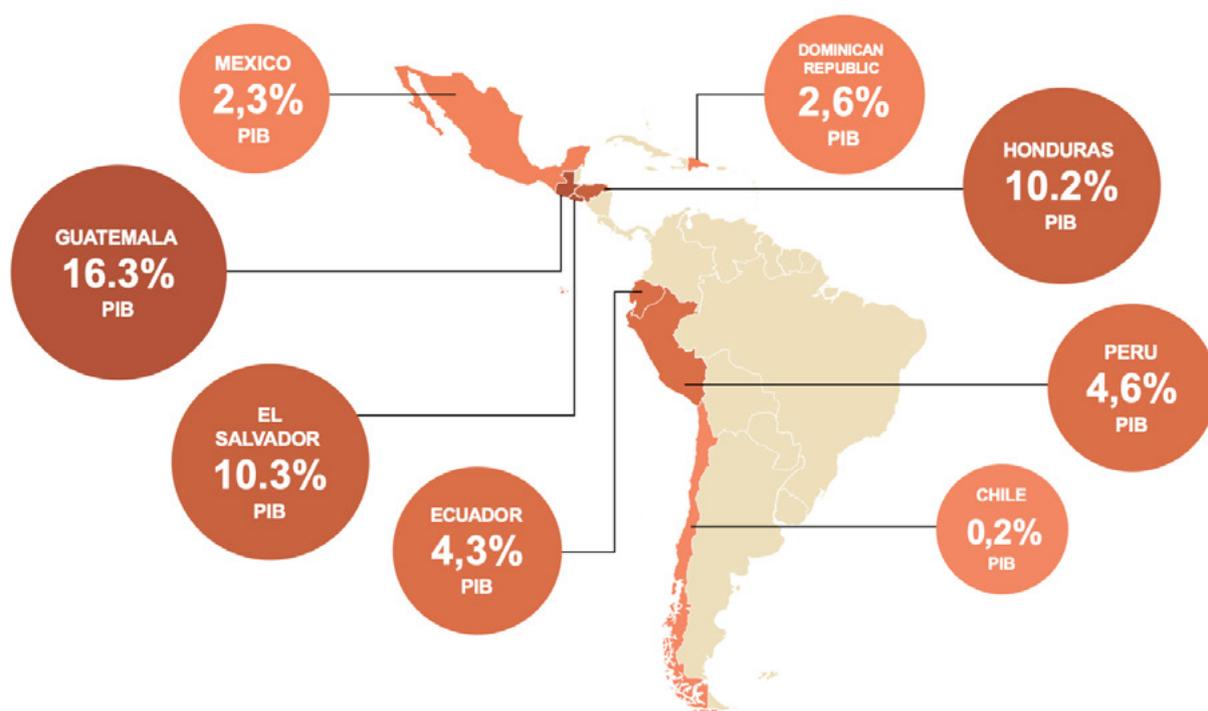
The combination of negative health and education outcomes due to the double burden of malnutrition in turn impacts future productivity, with related economic consequences at individual and societal levels. The economic costs and losses arising from the

educational consequences of child undernutrition are estimated to total **between USD 500 million and USD 22 billion** in the year of analysis for the Latin American countries studied. On average, these costs account for five percent of the respective annual GDP of each country (Martínez et al., 2024). Studies in Zimbabwe show that the loss of 0.7 grades of schooling (less than one year) and a seven-month delay in school enrolment results in a **12 percent loss of wealth over a lifetime** (ECLAC and WFP, 2017).

An African Union report, based on the Cost of Hunger in Africa studies, estimates that the total losses in productivity due to child undernutrition are approximately **USD 26.8 billion** and that African countries lose **between 1.9 percent and 16.5 percent of their GDP annually due to stunting** (African Union, 2022). In Latin America, the average national cost is approximately **USD 11 billion, around 4.6 percent of aggregate GDP** (ECLAC and WFP, 2017). An average of 64.9 percent of these costs arise from the lower potential productivity created by educational gaps and 30.8 percent stem from the mortality rate. Meanwhile, the average cost is 3.6 percent for the health system and 0.7 percent for the education system (Martínez et al., 2024).

Figure 4 (below) illustrates the combined costs of the double burden of malnutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean, estimated to be up to 16 percent of GDP (in the case of Guatemala).

Figure 4. Costs of the Double Burden in Latin America and the Caribbean



Source: ECLAC and WFP, 2017; Martínez et al., 2024.

## 3.2 Return on Investment

The cost of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 by 2030 is considerable (around USD 39-50 billion a year), but the potential economic and social gains from such investment in nutrition could reach **USD 5.7 trillion a year by 2030 and USD 10.5 trillion a year by 2050** (Development Initiatives, 2021). The World Bank Investment Framework for Nutrition 2024 estimates a **cost-benefit ratio of 23**: for every USD 1 invested in addressing undernutrition, a return of USD 23 is expected (World Bank, 2024).

The economic returns on investment in social protection provision can also be quantified (Devereux, forthcoming). For example, increasing social protection spending by 1 percent of GDP in Rwanda generates a 1.9 percent increase in GDP, a fall in the national poverty rate from 39 percent to 35 percent,

a 1 percent increase in the percentage of men and women who are employed, and a 2.7 percent increase in tax revenue (ITUC, 2020).

The return on investment for school meal programmes has been found to be exceptionally high, estimated to be **between USD 7 and USD 35 for every USD 1 invested**, taking into account the value of local wages (International Parliamentary Network for Education, 2024). This is for a number of reasons. School meals can have multi-sector impacts, including increased school attendance and improved health, especially when nutritious and fortified foods are provided. Home-grown school meals can also benefit local smallholder farmers, value chains and economies. In addition, national school-based programmes can benefit from economies of scale and have a positive impact on women and girls by encouraging retention for adolescent girls at school (Verguet et al., 2023).



### 3.3 Multiplier Effects

There is convincing evidence based on a range of multi-country studies and reviews that social protection can create **added value** to the local and national economy – in addition to the direct benefits to individuals and households (Gassman et al., 2023; Bastagli et al., 2016).

When cash transfers (even those that target non-working vulnerable groups such as children and older persons) are spent on purchasing food and other goods and services, this generates income for farmers and local traders and service providers. This “multiplier effect” has been quantified in several countries using the Local Economy-Wide Impact Evaluation methodology: **USD 1 of social assistance typically generates USD 2–3 or more** of additional income (Kagin et al., 2014).

Cash transfers alone can create economic multiplier effects, as demonstrated by the impact evaluations of the Child Grant Programme and Multiple Categorical Transfer Programme in Zambia. These two schemes respectively provided **50 and 70 percent** more in terms of net benefit to the household, for each Kwacha transferred. These benefits had large impacts on consumption and improved food security of beneficiary households, specifically increasing the percentage of households eating two or more meals a day to 99 and 95 percent respectively (MCDSW and AIR, 2016a; MCDSW and AIR, 2016b).

Cash transfers can also generate multiplier effects to non-beneficiaries. A study of cash transfer programmes across seven African countries found **local economy income multipliers ranging from 1.3 in Malawi to 2.5 in Ethiopia**, mostly accruing to local shopkeepers and service providers (Handa et al., 2017). A global study of the multiplier effects of government spending on social protection has found that **the cumulative multiplier exceeds 1 for 30 of the 42-country dataset** and that the positive impact of social protection spending on GDP increases over time. Mexico has the highest impact multiplier (5) and cumulative multiplier (7.4) (Cardoso et al., 2025).

Where cash transfers have been combined with other interventions, the cost-benefit ratio of both cash transfers and productive interventions have been further amplified. For example, in Lesotho the Child Grants Programme – both alone and in combination with a rural development programme – has generated total benefits that exceed programme costs. This is achieved largely through local-economy spillover effects and integrating with outside markets which can contribute to substantial cost-effective income gains (Daidone et al., 2023).

It emerges that investing in food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection is not only a moral imperative but a strategic economic decision. The economic evidence presented highlights that the costs of inaction – manifested in increased healthcare expenditures, diminished educational outcomes and lost productivity – far outweigh the investment required. The return of investment and multiplier effects of social protection spending make the economic rationale compelling: social protection spending stimulate local economies, enhance human capital and foster long-term growth. By targeting critical life stages and integrating services, governments can break the cycle of malnutrition and poverty, yielding substantial social and economic dividends across generations.

# 4 Reinvigorating the 'Social Protection for Food Security and Nutrition' Agenda and Commitment to Action

**Section 2 and 3** identified the rationale for investment in social protection to enhance food security and nutrition. Building on this evidence, **Section 4** translates the findings into concrete action required to advance this agenda at country level, positioning it as a priority and strategic response for human capital development to break the vicious cycle between poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

Prioritization of policy and programmatic action at country level on food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection requires action at different levels from various stakeholders. While governments are the main decision makers in this area, several enabling factors can support and accelerate their actions. These enablers can unlock opportunities for new and enhanced strategic partnerships and investments in food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection.

Required action can be summarized in four main areas:

- Global commitments to better link poverty with hunger and malnutrition.
- Global platforms to connect partners for accelerated country action.
- Evidence generation to support advocacy efforts, guide strategic investments and inform policy and programme design.
- Tailored country approaches grounded in political will, coordinated action, robust evidence and innovative, and consistent financing.

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## 4.1 Global Commitments to Better Link Poverty with Hunger and Malnutrition

Growing evidence demonstrates that social protection plays a vital role in advancing food security and nutrition, positioning it as a key strategy for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2. Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 is especially critical in the face of accelerating climate change, demographic shifts, urbanization, displacement and persistent high levels of malnutrition. However, social protection alone is not sufficient. Achieving food security and nutrition outcomes requires a systems approach – one that recognizes the interconnections between social protection, food systems, health and other sectors (HLPE, 2023).

Since the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted in 2015, social protection has emerged as one of the key mechanisms for ensuring income and food security for all, and this must be reflected in any future global and national targets for ending hunger and malnutrition. An important lesson should be taken forward by governments and development partners: the “zero hunger” target of Sustainable Development Goal 2 cannot be achieved without a food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection floor, building on the recommendation reached at the International Labour Conference in 2012. The social protection floor incorporates the notion of “basic income security” for children, working-age adults and older persons, to provide guaranteed access to sufficient food and nutrition.

## 4.2 Global Platforms to Connect Partners for Accelerated Country Action

Global interest in tackling food security and nutrition challenges is high, with several initiatives in recent years involving multiple stakeholders, often government led. These are aimed at accelerating coordinated efforts at country level, by increasing global attention on specific topics, mobilizing

resources and investments, and sharing knowledge and learnings. National social protection systems, including school meal programmes, are positioned as critical entry points for sustainable action at scale for food security and nutrition. A few examples (not exhaustive) are included in Box 5 below.

### Box 5

#### Global Multi-Stakeholder Platforms for Food Security and Nutrition Coordination

**Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty (GAAHP)**: led by the Government of Brazil, the Global Alliance currently has 104 member countries, 53 foundations and others, and 44 international organizations and international financial institutions. The initiative aims to mobilize national and international support through two pillars – Financial Support and Knowledge – to combat hunger and poverty, by implementing evidence-based policies and programmes at scale. The core tool of the Alliance is its Policy Basket, a menu of cost-effective social protection and other policy instruments with high impact potential, that can be adapted to specific national or subnational contexts.

**Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement**: launched by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2010, Scaling Up Nutrition members include 67 countries, 4,000+ civil society organizations, 1,400 businesses and five United Nations agencies. The Scaling Up Nutrition Movement is a global effort to fight malnutrition, by supporting the development of strategic nutrition initiatives and national nutrition plans, promoting integrated intersectoral solutions, and amplifying country voices in international advocacy. The Scaling Up Nutrition Movement is country owned and government-driven, with national multi-stakeholder platforms that bring partners together from across society to align policies, resources and programmes, including from the social protection sector.

**School Meals Coalition (SMC)**: was launched at the United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021. The School Meals Coalition network currently includes 105 member countries, 140 partner organizations and six regional bodies. Its principal objective is to ensure that every child – globally, not only in low-income countries – receives a healthy, nutritious meal at school by 2030. The School Meals Coalition has five Initiatives: Research, Data and Monitoring, Sustainable Financing, Cities Feeding the Future, and School Meals Accelerator. Although the School Meals Coalition Secretariat is hosted by World Food Programme, it is led by governments, not the United Nations. Member countries prepare national commitments that guide their school meals efforts until 2030, with support from School Meals Coalition initiatives and partners.

**Global Task Force for Social Protection and Nutrition**: led by Timor-Leste and supported by WFP as its Secretariat, this presidential initiative promotes nutrition-sensitive social protection as a key driver of sustainable development. It focuses on facilitating South-South learning and exchanges, advocating for nutrition-sensitive approaches globally, and amplifying the voices of Least Developed Countries and Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (FCAS). Through these efforts, the Global Task Force for Social Protection and Nutrition aims to foster collaboration, innovation and political commitment to end hunger and malnutrition worldwide.

Academics, practitioners and development partners can support governments through these and other multi-actor platforms, by providing research and evidence as well as technical advice, policy inputs and

financial support. For example, development partners can support country-to-country learning and exchanges with learning facilities and South-South Triangular Cooperation at global, regional and country levels.

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### 4.3 Evidence Generation to Support Advocacy Efforts, Guide Strategic Investments, and Inform Policy and Programme Design.

Academics working with practitioners can identify and fill existing evidence gaps and ensuring global evidence-based advocacy.

An international working group of research organisations and technical agencies has developed a set of current food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection research gaps (see Annex A). These include:

- understanding **programme effectiveness** by different instruments, target groups, intermediary and final outcomes, and contexts
- **indirect effects** on non-beneficiaries and **unintended impacts** of programmes and policies
- **cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness** of alternative programme design and implementation choices
- developing low-cost, rapid but also effective and reliable **methods and metrics** for assessing nutrition and dietary outcomes across large multisectoral programmes.

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### 4.4 Tailored Country Approaches Grounded in Political Will, Coordinated Action, Robust Evidence and Innovative, Consistent Financing

#### Building on governments' political will

A large international literature has focused on how political will, political commitment, “agenda setting” and “issue attention” work in different political contexts, including for food security and nutrition (Heaver, 2005; Shiffman and Smith, 2007; Shiffman, 2010; Pelletier et al., 2012; Nisbett et al., 2014; Baker et al., 2018). While there is no universal formula for how political momentum develops, research has identified several common enabling factors:

- **Strong coalitions:** collaborative efforts among civil society organizations, parliamentarians, faith leaders, and media can be instrumental in building political will and advocating for equitable access to nutritious foods (Harris, 2019). Similar coalitions have been effective in other sectors, such as HIV/AIDS and maternal health.
- **Strategic framing of issues:** the way nutrition is framed can significantly influence its visibility and priority in political and public discourse. For example, presenting nutrition as an investment in human capital and economic growth has proven effective in gaining traction among policymakers (Pelletier et al., 2012; Shiffman, 2007; 2010). Other successful frames include nutrition as a human rights issue or as essential for national development.
- **Credible, context-specific data is crucial:** for instance, the Cost of Hunger in Africa studies have demonstrated how child undernutrition leads to substantial GDP losses, making a compelling economic case for action.
- **Political windows of opportunity:** certain moments – such as food crises, health pandemics, elections, or the release of influential global guidance – can serve as catalysts for policy change. For example, a food crisis may heighten public awareness and demand for better food systems (Kingdon, 1995; Shiffman, 2007; 2010). Similarly, the release of new World Health Organization guidance on wasting has emphasized the importance of a multisectoral approach, with social protection being increasingly recognized as a key sector.

Developing political will at country level for food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection needs to call on all these factors: differing by country according to the type of political system, current and historical events, the strength of civil society and other contextual factors.

**Box 6**  
**Building on Political Will to Advance**  
**Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection**  
**in Timor-Leste**

Timor-Leste, a small island nation emerging from fragility, faces one of the highest stunting rates in Asia, with 47 percent of children under five affected, alongside widespread maternal malnutrition and anaemia (UNICEF, 2020). Recognizing that malnutrition is not only a health issue but a barrier to human capital development, the Government of Timor-Leste placed nutrition at the heart of its social protection agenda. This political commitment translated into the design and launch of Bolsa da Mãe Kondisional – Saúde no Nutrisaun ba Inan no Oan (BdMK-SANUTRIO), a pioneering nutrition-sensitive social protection pilot programme aimed at preventing stunting among children under three. The SANUTRIO model links conditional cash transfers to maternal and child health services and the consumption of specialized nutritious foods, creating a holistic approach to early childhood development.

Strong leadership from the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion has been instrumental in moving from vision to action. The Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion's efforts have been complemented by WFP's technical support – initially made possible through generous, catalytic funding from the Government of France. In 2024–2025, the Government of Timor-Leste leveraged its role as co-chair of the Global Task Force on Social Protection for Nutrition to mobilize South–South and Triangular Cooperation. Two high-level exchanges – to a study visit by the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion to Pakistan in 2024 and a technical mission from Pakistani experts in 2025, facilitated by WFP – helped the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion to adapt best practices from Pakistan's Benazir Nashonuma Programme and refine programme design.

The Government's leadership, political and financial commitments, complemented by early support and show of confidence from the Government of France through WFP for technical assistance, helped unlock further multilateral financing from the Asian Development Bank in March 2025, significantly boosting resources needed for both the pilot launch and long-term system strengthening. Building on this momentum, the Government in August 2025 committed USD 4.8 million in multi-year domestic funding, solidifying state leadership and sustainability.

The SANUTRIO initiative combined strong national ownership with coordinated international support: WFP providing technical expertise on evidence-based programme design, monitoring systems and integration of nutrition objectives, while other partners contributed complementary financing, knowledge, and platforms for peer learning and advocacy. By framing nutrition-sensitive social protection as an investment in resilience and human capital, Timor-Leste transformed political vision into operational reality. The SANUTRIO experience thus demonstrates how strong political will, catalytic donor support and strategic partnerships can converge to transform social protection into a driver of improved nutrition and human capital development and deliver systemic change.

### Consistent and innovative financing

Financing is often considered to be a barrier to delivering comprehensive social protection systems, and to expanding them to incorporate additional component focused on food security and nutrition. However, such funding should be considered as an investment rather than a cost, particularly in light of the hidden costs of inaction and the returns on investment for nutrition and social protection interventions identified in Section 3 above. Ortiz et al. (2017) argue that fiscal space exists in all countries and needs to be a priority. They propose eight financing options for funding social protection as follows:

- 1. Re-allocating public expenditures:** this approach requires a re-prioritization of social spending where fixed – or even contracting – budgets lead to a zero-sum game scenario. This approach can be contentious and requires political will, with interest groups competing to influence allocations. Strategies include: ongoing assessments of budget allocations through Public Expenditure Reviews; replacing high-cost, low-impact investments with those with larger socio-economic impacts; eliminating spending inefficiencies and tackling corruption.
- 2. Increasing tax revenues:** this approach has the potential to mobilize additional public resources and support equity objectives. It can be achieved by raising tax rates across several broad tax areas such as income tax, corporate taxes, import/export tariffs, and natural resource extraction, or by increasing tax compliance by strengthening the efficiency of tax collection methods and closing loopholes. Tax increases must be progressive, not regressive, and should never increase the cost of nutritious food commodities for the poor.
- 3. Expanding social security coverage and contributory revenues:** financing social protection through social contributions is predictable and reliable. Increasing coverage would expand the contribution towards social security, freeing fiscal space for other social expenditures. Providing social protection benefits linked to employment-based contributions may also encourage the formalization of the labour market.
- 4. Lobbying for aid and transfers:** governments have three main channels for increasing international transfers: 1) lobby for increased North-South

aid; 2) lobby for South-South transfers and development assistance, and 3) limit South-North financial flows.

- 5. Eliminating illicit financial flows:** illicit financial flows are estimated at ten times the total aid received. Curtailing these flows could therefore redirect these lost resources towards economic and social investments. Key areas to address are: trade mispricing, reducing bribery in public contracts and reducing tax evasion.
- 6. Using fiscal and foreign exchange reserves:** fiscal reserves can be spent without incurring debt, for example sovereign wealth funds; while foreign exchange reserves have counterpart liabilities such as currency or bonds. Surplus foreign exchange reserves in the central bank can be used for domestic and regional investments.
- 7. Managing debt:** borrowing or restructuring existing debt: this approach involves exploration of domestic and foreign borrowing options at low cost, following a careful assessment of debt sustainability. For countries with high levels of sovereign debt, it may be possible to restructuring existing debt through debt re-negotiation, debt relief or debt swaps. This is particularly justifiable if the legitimacy of the debt is questionable and/or the opportunity cost in terms of worsening deprivations of vulnerable groups is high.
- 8. Adopting a more accommodative macroeconomic framework:** recognizing that in recent decades, macroeconomic frameworks have emphasized short-term stabilization, this approach is being challenged in terms of its effects on human and social development. Particularly in the context of economic shocks, there is now a greater consideration of allowing increased deficit spending and higher levels of inflation to support social investments.

Innovative financing mechanisms are needed to address the significant financing gaps that exist for food security and nutrition, as well as social protection. Such mechanisms include: results-based budgeting which has been a promising mechanism to manage social protection and nutrition programme funding in Peru, encouraging coordination across government ministries and nutrition programmes and leading to greater efficiency and transparency



(Acosta and Fanzo, 2012); multi-sectoral planning and budgeting, for example through the Common Results Framework under the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement; and directing revenues from taxes on products such as sugar-sweetened beverages towards health and nutrition interventions. Thailand and French Polynesia are two countries that allocate revenues from such taxes to health promotion, including obesity prevention (Thow et al., 2010; BMJ, 2024).

Opportunities for aligning financing modalities with food security and nutrition objectives can be found in global funding mechanisms for climate (Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, Global Environment Facility), agriculture (Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme, Global Donor Platform for Rural Development), and education (Global Partnership for Education). With domestic financing growing in

many cases, including where countries graduate in terms of Development Assistance Committee status (e.g. to lower middle income, upper middle income etc.), further solutions might be presented in terms of climate-smart financing and debt swaps. Prepositioning of funds to anticipate spikes in needs is also essential, supporting recent efforts to revive the idea of a Global Fund for Social Protection<sup>9</sup> (Pruce, Nisbett, Devereux et al., 2025).

9 The idea to establish a dedicated Global Fund for Social Protection was initially proposed in 2012 as part of the post-2015 development agenda. Such a fund can build on existing structures with the aim of closing the social protection financing gap, particularly for low-income countries facing shocks, through increased international solidarity and financial support. In the wake of Covid-19, the urgent need for a Global Fund for Social Protection was reiterated in the 2021 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

## Improved programme design features informed by evidence

Strengthening social protection programmes for better food security and nutrition outcomes requires intentionality, particularly in the design, implementation and monitoring, as described in Table

2 below (also see challenges listed in Section 2.2). The approach needs to be adjusted to different types of contexts, based on the maturity of national systems, level of fragility and income.

**Table 2: Strengthening Activities to Address Programmatic Challenges to Increase Social Protection’s Contribution to Nutrition Outcomes**

<b>To strengthen coordination across systems</b>	Ensure linkages with complementary activities, such as social and behaviour change; food system activities; health; and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene services.
<b>To improve the targeting</b>	<p>Identify vulnerable populations, with systems in place using established tools for country wide diagnostics and population level targeting and registration.</p> <p>Assess vulnerability via the lens of multiple intersecting inequalities, including gender, income, geographic and climatic vulnerability, disability, ethnicity, citizenship status, food security and nutrition status.</p> <p>Target nutritionally vulnerable groups.</p>
<b>To address the inadequacy of the transfer</b>	<p>Undertake multisectoral context analyses for problem identification and programme decision making, such as Fill the Nutrient Gap.</p> <p>Select appropriate transfer modalities to meet programme objectives.</p> <p>Ensure transfer value, quality, frequency and timing are adequate to meet needs of target groups.</p>
<b>To improve the implementation</b>	<p>Ensure high programme uptake and implementation quality/fidelity through timely process monitoring.</p> <p>Guarantee adequate workforce and skills, including in nutrition, behaviour change and gender dynamics.</p>
<b>To reduce the impact on shocks and crises</b>	<p>Social protection, food and health systems are strengthened to ensure resilience against future shocks, for example by moving towards digital registration and payment platforms and coordinating with disaster risk management and humanitarian relief agencies.</p> <p>To ensure that shock responsive social protection is food security and nutrition-sensitive, install mechanisms such as vertical expansion with a nutrition top-up (in cash and/or in-kind, as required) in times of shocks.</p>
<b>To strengthen monitoring and evaluation</b>	<p>Food security and nutrition indicators are included into the social protection monitoring framework.</p> <p>Guarantee proper and systematic monitoring of food security and nutrition indicators to inform programme design.</p> <p>Ensure to evaluate social protection in view of food security and nutrition outcomes.</p>

## 4.5 a Call to Collective Action

The above actions need to be prioritized by different actors to realize efficient and effective food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection:

- **Governments:** Institutionalize food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection within national development, climate, and human capital plans and agenda. This includes establishing cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms, ensuring policy coherence, and allocating domestic resources to scale up integrated programmes that address both social vulnerabilities and food and nutritional needs.
- **International financial institutions and donors:** Prioritize food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection within affordable, sustainable and innovative financing frameworks. This includes integrating food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection objectives into the design, criteria and allocation of global funding mechanisms, such as those for climate, agriculture and education. This includes involvement of philanthropies and public private partnerships as part of co-financing mechanisms for innovative design and scale-up. Funding for food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection should be framed not as a cost, but as a strategic investment with high returns and significant potential to reduce the hidden costs of inaction.
- **UN agencies and multilateral platforms:** Provide coherent technical leadership and harmonized advocacy to support countries in designing and implementing food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection systems. This includes developing global guidance, facilitating knowledge exchange, supporting capacity building, and aligning efforts across sectors and agencies to avoid fragmentation and duplication.
- **Civil society and academia:** Continue generating evidence, fostering accountability and amplifying community voices. This is critical in ensuring that policies are inclusive, rights-based and responsive to local needs and realities.



# Conclusion

Finally, efforts by all stakeholders to enhance food security and nutrition outcomes from strategic investments in social protection must address four challenges:

- 1. Limited political and financial commitment,** especially in fiscally constrained low-income countries. This document aims to contribute to building political support, by demonstrating the positive returns to social protection, and by highlighting global multi-stakeholder platforms where technical and financial support can be found.
- 2. Low coverage and inadequate provision** of existing social protection interventions. Only half of the world's population have access to any form of social protection, which often delivers low benefits, and social protection systems are weakly institutionalized in countries with the greatest need. Ongoing attention must be paid to these fundamental concerns – getting the basics right and building sustainable social protection systems.
- 3. A limited analytical framing, leading to a limited effectiveness of interventions.** To date, social protection has mainly focused on income poverty, single indicators of vulnerability (e.g. gender, disability), and a limited range of interventions for food security (e.g. cash, food or vouchers). Going forward, food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection must pivot towards a multidimensional understanding of vulnerability, which systematically take both food security and nutritional security into account.

- 4. A rapidly changing macro-context,** for which social protection is not well prepared. These contextual factors include climate change, intersecting inequalities and rapid technological change. Climate change requires more than shock-responsive social protection; it demands coordinated intersectoral strategies. Intersecting inequalities require more than “cash plus” solutions; they require new modalities for identifying and responding to complex social protection needs. Artificial intelligence is already changing the workforce and will increasingly challenge the employment-based nature of social insurance systems.

Social protection therefore needs to look behind and forward at the same time. Behind, to strengthen its foundations – conceptually and programmatically – in national systems that deliver the right to social security to everyone as a human right, as promised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

A forward-looking social protection agenda is one that supports appropriate human capital development – starting with nutrition security for all – while also supporting adaptation to climate change and strengthening the resilience of food systems, communities and households against future shocks in an increasingly unpredictable world.



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# Annex A: Research Gaps Identified by the Social Protection for Nutrition (SP4N) Collective

Source: SP4N Collective (2025). *Nutrition-sensitive social assistance programmes (NSSAP): Common principles for programme design and implementation, and priority evidence gaps. Unpublished internal document.*<sup>10</sup>

## Program Effectiveness

- By NSSAP type:
  - Especially for 1) vouchers; 2) public works, resilience, and “graduation” programs; and 3) alternative school meal implementation models (including Home-Grown School Feeding, and options for combining nutrition interventions with school meals programs)
- By target group:
  - Especially for 1) preschoolers; 2) adolescents; and 3) youth; women of reproductive age or women during pregnancy and/or lactation
  - Marginalised groups including e.g. indigenous people
- By outcome:
  - Especially for 1) overweight/obesity/NCD prevention; 2) micronutrient status; 3) diets (e.g. for school meal programs or vouchers for healthy foods) for households or targeted individuals within the household.
  - Intermediary outcomes on program impact pathways, including women’s empowerment, and care practices, knowledge and practices related to nutrition, healthy diets, healthy lifestyles.

- By context:
  - Especially 1) urban/peri-urban; 2) emergency contexts.

## Unintended Effects and Indirect Effects

- Impacts on non-beneficiaries and on indirect beneficiaries.
- Unintended impacts on rises in overweight/obesity and risks on NCDs associated with cash or unhealthy food transfers/vouchers.
- Impact on intimate partner violence and gender relations more broadly.
- Impact of micronutrient fortified foods in areas of high-prevalence of helminth infections.

## Cost, Cost-Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness of Alternative Design and Implementation Choices

- What are the optimal targeting mechanisms to address different types of nutrition problems across populations and contexts.
- On program design features:
  - Rigorous evidence on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of including different nutrition-related design features.
  - Issues related to quality, frequency, duration, and intensity, e.g. in SBC.

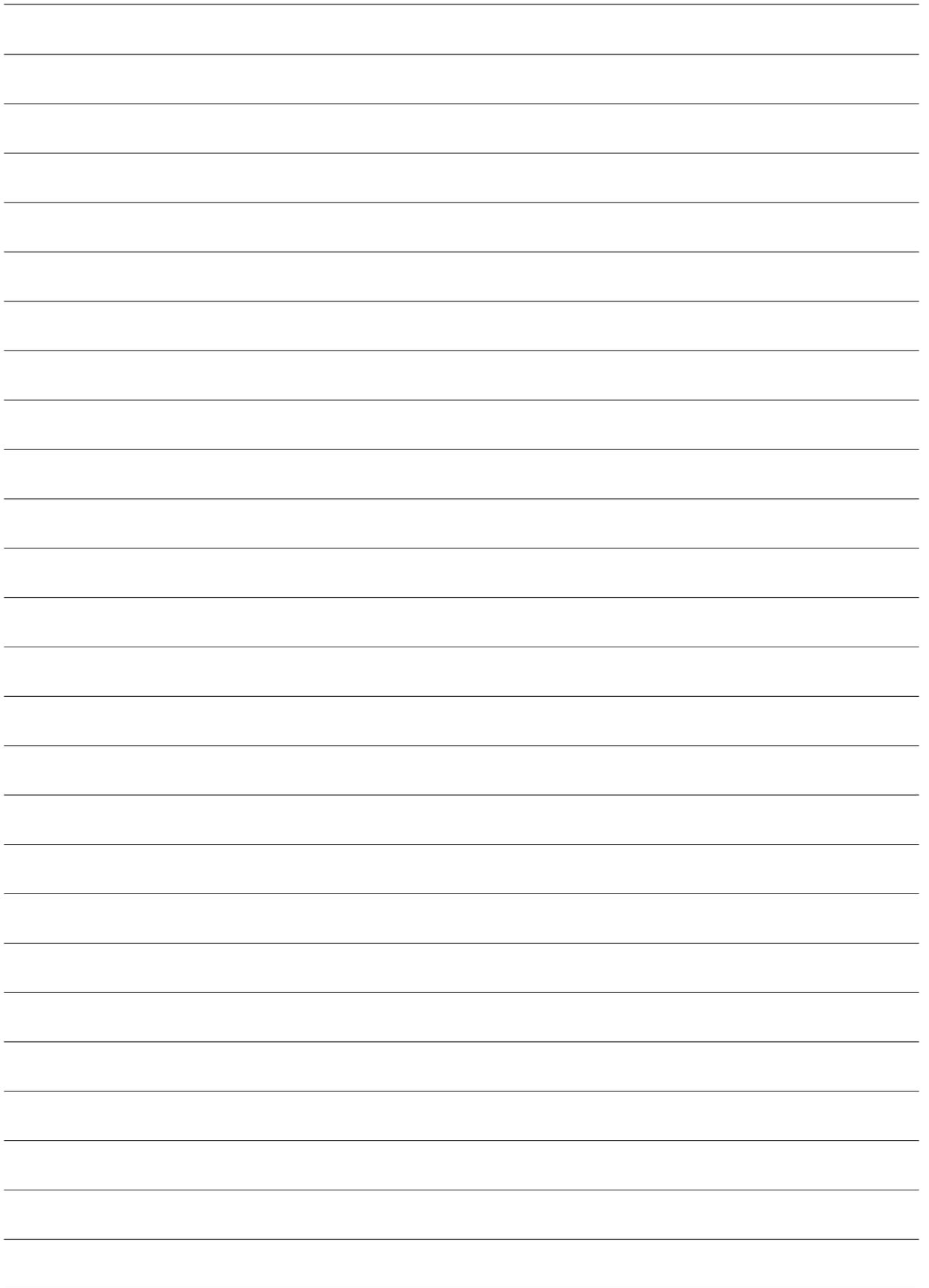
<sup>10</sup> The Social Protection for Nutrition (SP4N) Collective is an informal global network of professionals working at the intersection of social protection and nutrition, including from organizations such as WFP, IDS, IFPRI, Nutrition International, The Power of Nutrition, The World Bank, and UNICEF. Its purpose is to pool knowledge, share evidence, and advocate for integrating nutrition goals into social protection programmes to accelerate progress against malnutrition

- Issues around combining interventions across delivery systems and sectors (social protection, health, etc).
- How to ensure adequate program uptake:
  - What are the barriers and facilitating factors for program participation among excluded, discriminated, and disadvantaged groups and individuals.
  - What is the role of conditionalities and their positive and enabling potential (in Cash-Plus approaches).
- How to scale-up successful pilot programs based on high quality, participatory testing, and evaluation.
- What are the longer-term effects of programs targeting different lifecycle stages, and how to establish monitoring systems of adequate duration to understand and capture these impacts.

### Development of Methods and Metrics

- Assessing dietary outcomes in children 2-5 years of age, school-aged children, and adolescents, and women (including food consumed away from home).
- Cost and cost-effectiveness, for multisectoral NSSAPs, including the relative cost-effectiveness of alternative implementation models.
- How to measure NSSAP coverage in large scale surveys.
- How to meaningfully aggregate the multiple benefits of NSSAP programs for economic evaluation.





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