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# Enhancing Food Security and Nutrition, Improving Responses to Risks and Shocks: Priorities for Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific

## UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Social protection has a significant role to play in addressing the root causes of malnutrition and providing support to prevent and protect people from shocks and risks. Over the past two decades, social protection systems in the Asia Pacific region have witnessed a substantial expansion. While this expansion is an important contribution to the region's social development and economic growth, much of it has been in social insurance rather than social assistance, which tend to reach people living in vulnerable situations and those in greatest need (ADB, 2022).

The region's social assistance landscape is predominantly cash-based, focused on tackling chronic poverty and covariant shocks. Many countries place emphasis on human capital development, especially in health and education but there is less attention on explicitly tackling nutrition. Many countries have also attempted, with varying levels of success, to incorporate mechanisms for helping households in shocks – including climate change-induced disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Refocusing efforts to ensure that social protection explicitly seeks to tackle food insecurity and malnutrition, and to reduce the exposure of vulnerable households to shocks and stresses, is key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially ending poverty and Zero Hunger.

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This briefing identifies priorities for enhancing both food security and nutrition and improving responses to risks and shocks in Asia and the Pacific. It draws on reports commissioned by WFP exploring social protection, alongside food security and nutrition and shock-responsive social protection in eight countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Samoa, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan) and one sub-region (Pacific Island Countries). The briefing also summarizes the challenges facing social protection in the region and suggests activities that WFP, governments, and other partners might prioritize to support food security and nutrition and enhance shock-responsive social protection. It concludes by highlighting the wider overall changes in perspective and ways of working that would help improve programming outcomes.

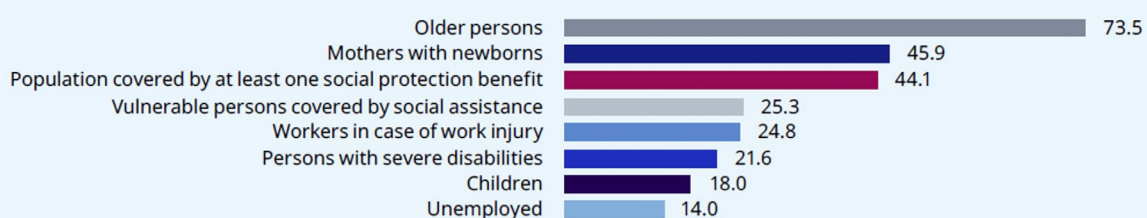
## CHALLENGES

Despite the considerable diversity found across the region, several shared challenges for social protection emerge.

Coverage, especially of social transfers, remains low, with only 44.1 percent of the population having access to at least one social protection benefit (ILO, 2021). This is notably the case for specific vulnerable groups, such as those in remote areas, marginalized groups and those depending on livelihoods in the informal sector. Coverage for older persons is far ahead of that for pregnant and lactating women, children, people with disabilities and the unemployed.

Financing shortfalls (with countries in the region spending on average 7.5 percent of GDP on social protection, compared to 12.9 percent globally (ILO, 2021)) drive a focus on building productivity in the short to medium term that can be at odds with meeting basic needs. The intersections between government social assistance and other so-called traditional or informal support systems, including Zakat, are poorly understood, especially around how they reduce dependence on social assistance and support households through difficult times.

**Figure 1: Effective social protection coverage in the Asia Pacific region by population group**



Source: ILO, 2021.

Capacity and coordination deficits are omnipresent, particularly in countries with some level of devolution of responsibility for the design or implementation of social assistance programmes. There are obstacles to coordination among the various actors working towards improved food and nutrition security and among those focused on disaster mitigation, preparedness and management.

## PROMISING ACTIONS

**For social protection to help people to meet their food security, nutrition and associated essential needs**, there are entry points at a policy and legislative level. Many national policy and strategy documents contain limited reference to food security and nutrition, and where they do, there is limited progress in practice. In some countries, especially Pakistan, Nepal and Cambodia, new governance arrangements resulting from decentralization and devolution create opportunities for more focus on sub-national actors and actions to drive food security and nutrition efforts across multiple sectors. Realizing these opportunities requires support to institutional capacity building and strengthening. Social assistance programmes have the potential to enhance food security and nutrition but require evidence-informed design. This design in turn, needs better monitoring and evaluation, especially to support transfer value





setting and more effective cash assistance paired with nutrition messaging. The response to evaluations and assessments, such as the [‘fill the nutrient gap’](#) and [‘cost of diet’ studies](#), suggests there is openness to learning in many countries, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of the dialogue on social protection remains relatively tightly focused on income poverty and shock responses and so speak predominantly to SDG1 (end poverty). There are certainly programmes focused on food security and nutrition but systemically tackling food security and nutrition is important. Communications explicitly focused on

maximizing social protection’s contribution to achieving SDG2 (zero hunger) would be timely. WFP could leverage diagnostic work leading to the establishment of these programmes, which would add significant food security and nutrition value in the wider social protection policy space. In the countries reviewed for this research, notably Samoa and Pakistan, there is a strong rationale to build a more strategic, high-level dialogue and commitment to tackling stunting and other nutrition challenges through social protection. Influencing and supporting a high-level dialogue requires solid evidence (through assessment and analyses) about the current social protection portfolio and associated nutrition interventions and how they support food and nutrition security. A further tool that could support this is social and behaviour change communications (SBCC). While many international actors are engaging with SBCC processes, few focus specifically on messages around healthy diet/food practices.

In many countries, existing programmes do not have any food security and nutrition-sensitive objectives or designs. Even those that target priority groups for nutritional support are yet to incorporate food security and nutrition considerations into their design adequately, resulting in shortcomings around transfer adequacy, and limited effectiveness of nutritional support. WFP and other actors can use their expertise to better integrate nutrition into targeting criteria, transfer type and frequency and complementary programmes. WFP’s recognized expertise in nutrition assessments (for example, fill the nutrient gap analyses), transfer-value setting and minimum expenditure basket diagnosis, and food and fortification management may provide a practical entry point.

Finally, while many programmes target women and girls, often concerning nutritional deficits, it is important to distinguish between *gender-targeted* and *gender-sensitive* programmes – something that is not currently clearly articulated, either by WFP, governments, or other international actors. Understanding how to strengthen gendered nutrition outcomes through programme design elements across programmes is key to achieving nutrition goals. Tackling exclusion from social protection is also a priority in many countries and an area where WFP has substantial expertise. Significant actions include providing technical support to strengthen beneficiary communication and feedback mechanisms in emerging social protection programmes.

**For social protection that helps people manage risks and shocks**, there is a range of varied actions to strengthen systems architecture that could be undertaken by WFP, governments and other partners, including strengthening the policy or strategic framework for shock-responsive social protection. Even where shock-responsive social protection frameworks exist and set policy direction, moving to implementation will require clarity on governance arrangements, mandates and improved coordination mechanisms among social protection and disaster management actors. In countries with the most established social protection systems, there are limitations to address, especially the low data coverage, recency of personal information and lack of system integration to enable targeting and allow data sharing. In many countries, a preliminary step towards shock-responsive social protection is establishing or revising platforms and management information systems infrastructure. International actors, including WFP specifically, can provide expertise and technical support to achieve platform improvements, but

peer-to-peer learning will also be critical to establishing systems that are not heavily dependent on sustained external support. Regarding capacities, learning from various social protection and emergency cash transfer programmes highlights capacity constraints among sub-national level actors. Some limitations lead to access and exclusion issues and only nascent preparedness capabilities.

In some countries recent developments within the cash-based social assistance system have enhanced programme designs and the utility of social assistance to deliver support in a shock. In others, there are few or no guiding principles for setting benefit size or duration nor

procedures for targeting or triggering payments. The governance and coordination of some schemes limit the scope for design changes. WFP's recognized expertise in targeting and needs assessments, transfer-value setting and minimum expenditure basket diagnosis, and logistics and supply chain management are helpful entry points for social protection system and capacity strengthening.



## PROMISING PERSPECTIVES AND WAYS OF WORKING

**More focus on climate-related and other risks is critical for improving social protection.** This focus means recognizing that climate shocks and stresses will only increase in the coming decades, so social protection needs to be (re) designed and delivered with this in mind. It means rebuilding social protection systems designed for both covariant shocks and lifecycle risks and recognizing that social protection and shock response are inextricably linked. Any advantage gained from making social protection systems more shock responsive will be undermined or indeed neutralized if the underlying stressors that drive vulnerability and the numbers of those in chronic need continue to grow in frequency and severity.

**Move beyond operational models for shock response that are predicated on short-term solutions.** The predominantly short-term perspective of many humanitarian-focused actors works neither for advancing shock-responsive social protection (because enhancing shock-responsive social protection means carefully considering ex-ante actions) nor for food security and nutrition sensitive social protection. Humanitarian actors, and WFP specifically, can play a stronger role in medium- and long-term solutions including providing orientation and information on healthy diets, sanitation and hygiene, especially through behaviour change communications as part of social protection and other programmes. WFP can also take a wider perspective on shock-responsive social protection by providing technical assistance for climate and disaster risk financing solutions, including anticipatory action and risk insurance mechanisms.

**Deploy expertise from outside the social protection sector.** WFP's social protection staff can be a helpful conduit to improve cross-sectoral programming by opening WFP's wider expertise (especially on nutrition and inclusion/protection) to other social protection actors in government and other agencies. WFP can substantially contribute and add significant value by bringing in its broader food security, nutrition, inclusion, protection, logistics, supply chain management, fortification, management information systems, targeting, digital payment solutions and other experience to social protection.

**Work with government bodies beyond those with direct responsibility for social protection, especially for shock-responsive social protection.** There has been substantial progress in strengthening government capacities to deliver shock-responsive social protection. Working through disaster risk management ministries or departments is just as important as working directly with social protection lead ministries and building broader institutional shock-responsive social protection linkages matter for improved programming.



**Recognize the importance of working in multiple ways across social protection's strategic and operational domains and find effective ways to demonstrate outcomes.**

Agencies, such as WFP, routinely work on social protection in a combination of roles, as technical advisors, service providers and/or complementary actors. For humanitarian agencies, it is important to address current monitoring and evaluation systems, which are often poorly adapted to robustly measure the outcomes of these different ways of working and so cannot demonstrate the added value of a substantial share of social protection investments.

**Think regional, act local.** Sub-national variations matter and so WFP's sub-national reach and presence can effectively support sub-national capacities and operations. For example, in several countries, provincial and district-level initiatives highlight the importance of strengthening capacities in provinces and areas with the most vulnerable and food-insecure households and where capacities to deliver social protection may be at their lowest. In these locations, the need for social protection is either greatest or growing rapidly and this should be a priority for WFP.

## REFERENCES

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