



Task Force 01

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER

Seeds of Change: Catalysing Zero Hunger through Innovative Social Protection in Fragile and Least Developed Countries

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Abstract

The midterm review of Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) towards achieving Zero Hunger reveals significant off-track progress and even regression, especially in fragile and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Urgent, evidence-based interventions are needed to accelerate progress towards Zero Hunger targets at scale. A growing body of evidence shows that social protection initiatives have significant potential to contribute to this agenda, but they are often hindered by weak multisectoral linkages and insufficient long-term investments, particularly in LDCs and fragile contexts.

This paper explores the potential pivotal role of social protection systems to enhance access to food, nutrition, and essential needs to combat intersecting inequalities, poverty, and hunger, aligning with the T20's Task Force 1. By leveraging insights from the global south, where social protection has demonstrated substantial contributions to human capital and local economic development, we argue that the UN Secretary General's call for a "new era of social protection" should prioritize food and nutrition security to address poverty and structural vulnerability comprehensively, through a revised framework of social protection for food and nutrition security.

Our paper advocates for "seeds of change" (SoC) that can, with leadership from the G20, enhance government cooperation, global development agendas, and evidence-based decision-making toward effective social protection for food and nutrition security at scale with a focus on fragile contexts and LDCs. SoC articulates the demand from countries in fragility and LDCs for investments in social protection that integrate co-created innovative solutions supporting national systems' strengthening with sustainable fiscal strategies. It offers space for G20 countries to share their lessons and contribute to accelerating the Global South's progress toward the achievement of SDG2 while ensuring that 'No One and No Country is Left Behind.'

Diagnosis of the Issue

The 2023 midterm review of the Sustainable Development Goals revealed that progress towards Zero Hunger is off-track globally and that the SDG2 targets are unlikely to be achieved without "urgent, coordinated action and policy solutions" and a "fundamental shift in trajectory" (United Nations 2023, 14). In several countries previous improvements in indicators of hunger and food insecurity have been reversed, with the worst affected being those labelled as Least Developed (LDCs), Low-Income Food Deficit (LIFDCs), or Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (FCAS).

The SDG midterm review blamed a 'polycrisis' – the Covid-19 pandemic, conflict, climate change, high food prices and growing inequalities – for the rising number of people facing hunger and food insecurity since 2015. The review also pointed to falling aid and public spending on agriculture, and inadequate coverage of and expenditure on social protection programmes.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, ILO identified a risk that spending on social protection could contract as governments retreated towards austerity, following the unexpected expenditures incurred in supporting citizens through lockdowns, mainly by using social protection instruments and modalities. ILO argued strongly against this "low road" trend in its World Social Protection Report (ILO 2021) and in favour of following the "high road" towards universal coverage with comprehensive and adequate benefits.

Although the causes of slow progress or regression vary in different contexts, in all cases, urgent interventions are needed to accelerate progress towards achieving Zero Hunger targets at national, regional, and global levels. In the long term, hunger, undernutrition, and vulnerability to food crises or famine tend to dissipate and ultimately disappear through normal processes of socioeconomic development such as economic

growth, political stability, market integration, extension of infrastructure and services, and institutional strengthening. In the short- to medium-terms, however, a growing body of evidence shows that social protection initiatives have significant potential to contribute to this agenda, if adequately financed and systematised.

This policy brief argues that one 'seed of change' that could fundamentally shift the disappointing trends in SDG2 lies in addressing this last observation and substantially increasing coverage of and expenditure on social protection in countries in the Global South, with intensified support from the G20.

“The right to social protection is deeply linked to the right to adequate food” (de Schutter and Sepúlveda 2012, 6).

The case for universal social protection can be made on both normative and empirical grounds. The normative case appeals to international human rights legislation, specifically the right to social security enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and the more recent Recommendation on National Floors of Social Protection (2012), which asserts that governments should guarantee basic income security for all residents throughout their life-course – childhood, working age, and older age. The G20 should support advocacy efforts to make the right to social protection real, even in low-income countries.

The empirical case draws on a substantial, rigorous evidence base of social protection impacts on a range of positive outcomes, including food security and nutrition, through four pathways.



1. Spontaneous reinvestment

A poor person who receives a social transfer will spend 60% or more of that incremental income on purchasing food. This has a 'multiplier effect' on the local economy because every dollar spent by the recipient is a dollar of income for the farmer, shopkeeper, or market trader who benefits indirectly from this spending. Studies using a methodology called Local Economy-Wide Impact Evaluation (LEWIE) quantified this multiplier effect in various contexts and found that \$1 of social assistance generates \$2 or \$3 or more of additional income (Kagin et al. 2014). It also strengthens markets and trade by stimulating local demand for food.

Evaluations also found that part of cash transfers is not spent on direct food purchases but is invested as working capital in micro-enterprises, for example, family farming or food vending. This 'investment effect' generates additional income and further strengthens household food security beyond the food purchased with the cash transfer itself.

2. Human capital formation

A school meal, or a cash transfer that is used to purchase food for a child, boosts that child's nutritional status, which should result in a healthier child who performs better in school. School feeding programs are especially powerful because they increase enrolment, attendance, and performance of learners, leading to higher projected lifetime earnings (Verguet et al. 2020). School feeding can also be used to address gendered inequalities, for example, by providing take-home rations to girls in secondary school to incentivise them against dropping out before boys. Additional benefits can be derived from school feeding programmes if home-grown modalities are used, where food for school meals is purchased from local farmers, who benefit from this structured demand

and enjoy higher incomes and improved food security outcomes for themselves and their families (WFP 2020).

Similar positive outcomes can be derived from conditional cash transfer programmes (CCTs), which link cash transfers to children's school enrolment and attendance. There is convincing evidence that CCTs increase children's use of education, health and nutrition services, and some evidence that CCTs can increase lifetime earnings and break the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Millán et al, 2019).

3. Linkages from protection to promotion

Some forms of social protection provide explicit support to livelihoods through complementary interventions. These packages are called 'cash plus' or graduation model or economic inclusion programmes. Typically, cash transfers are given to meet food and other basic needs, whereas additional components – productive assets like livestock or working capital, training in financial literacy, and access to savings facilities – generate streams of supplementary income for recipients. Randomised controlled trial evaluations of graduation projects in several countries found high rates of escape from extreme poverty, not only during programme participation but sustained even after programme support was ended (Banerjee et al., 2016).

Graduation projects are relatively expensive, but they can be cost-effective to the extent that participants 'graduate' out of dependence on permanent social assistance. More support is needed to scale up graduation or 'economic inclusion' projects to national programmes (World Bank, 2021). As in the spontaneous reinvestment pathway, they create two potential pathways to improved food security outcomes: the first being the food value of the transfers and the second being the stream of income that is leveraged by the complementary livelihood support.

4. Transformative social protection

The transformative social protection framework (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004) aims not only to alleviate the manifestations of poverty and vulnerability – notably food insecurity and hunger – but also to address their drivers.

One mechanism is by linking social protection to labour market legislation and the protection of **labour rights** – for example, minimum wage legislation to ensure that all workers earn a living wage. In South Africa in 2012 a farm workers’ strike led to a 52% increase in the statutory minimum wage for the agriculture sector, which substantially improved all farm workers’ living standards and food security (Hattingh, 2020).

A related example is legislation that prevents **discrimination** in the labour market against minority or marginalised groups, or promotes employment for these groups through affirmative action regulations. Such interventions have the potential to move people out of unemployment and hunger into active labour market participants who earn decent wages, pay taxes, and contribute to social insurance schemes such as their own future pensions. These interventions reduce hunger by linking social protection to social justice.

The four pathways discussed here all illustrate an important lesson. Social protection is a powerful set of policy tools that can directly reduce the incidence of poverty, hunger, and food insecurity. However, it can achieve even more if it is hooked onto investments, instruments, and policies in other social and economic sectors to achieve synergistic impacts beyond what can be achieved through simply delivering cash transfers, food, or vouchers. The transformative power of social protection works best when it operates in combination with other interventions rather than alone.

In 2012, the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food and on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights identified a role for the international community in accelerating global progress towards implementing human rights-based social protection systems. The Special Rapporteurs noted that social protection aims “to ensure the right to an adequate standard of living for everyone, including the right to food” (de Schutter and Sepúlveda 2012, 2), and they called for the creation of a Global Fund for Social Protection (GFSP) that would finance a social protection floor in Least Developed Countries and underwrite these schemes against the risks triggered by major shocks.

There is also evidence from responses to Covid-19 lockdowns across the world that 'shock-responsive' social protection can cushion or buffer people against covariate livelihood shocks. The main mechanisms are horizontal expansion (adding new beneficiaries to existing social protection programmes temporarily, for the duration of a crisis), vertical expansion (increasing benefits delivered by existing social protection programmes as compensation for shocks), and piggybacking emergency responses on elements of an existing social protection programme (O'Brien et al., 2018). The main benefit of linking crisis response to social protection programmes is efficiency – existing platforms for registration, payments, and beneficiary management can be used. Covid-19 accelerated an ongoing process of convergence between humanitarian relief programming and developmental social protection programming, which is innovative and mutually beneficial. These trends should be supported and continued, for instance, by accelerating the use of common modalities (e.g., cash or vouchers rather than food) and platforms (e.g., electronic payments rather than manual disbursement).

This new 'seeds of change' thinking is firmly grounded in the expanded definition of food security proposed in HLPE report #17 (HLPE 2017), which added two pillars – agency and sustainability – to the original four pillars of FAO's food security framework

– availability, access, stability, and utilisation (FAO). 'Agency' places marginalised people at the centre of any programming 'on their behalf', ensuring their full participation in decision-making about what should be done to address their food insecurity and hunger. 'Sustainability' ensures that any proposed intervention takes into account the implications for the environment and for the health of the planet, for instance, by moving away from extractive agriculture and moving towards food sovereignty approaches.

This logic can even be extended to **famine mitigation and prevention**, famine being the most extreme violation of the Zero Hunger goal. WFP's operational framework for addressing famine (Figure 1) aims to combat food insecurity and malnutrition across the humanitarian-development continuum. Social protection can play an important role in famine mitigation, by introducing social safety net programmes, enhancing the national social protection system's shock-responsiveness, and aligning or piggybacking emergency responses to existing social protection programmes and platforms. Social protection can also contribute to famine prevention by building political will to mobilise a multisectoral response, generating information on evolving food security risks and nutrition status, distributing resources to vulnerable people, and strengthening capacity and resilience. Of course, conflict contexts present unique challenges, requiring even more innovative thinking, especially if social protection programmes are non-existent and humanitarian access is denied. Conflict-affected countries and people can least afford to be left behind.

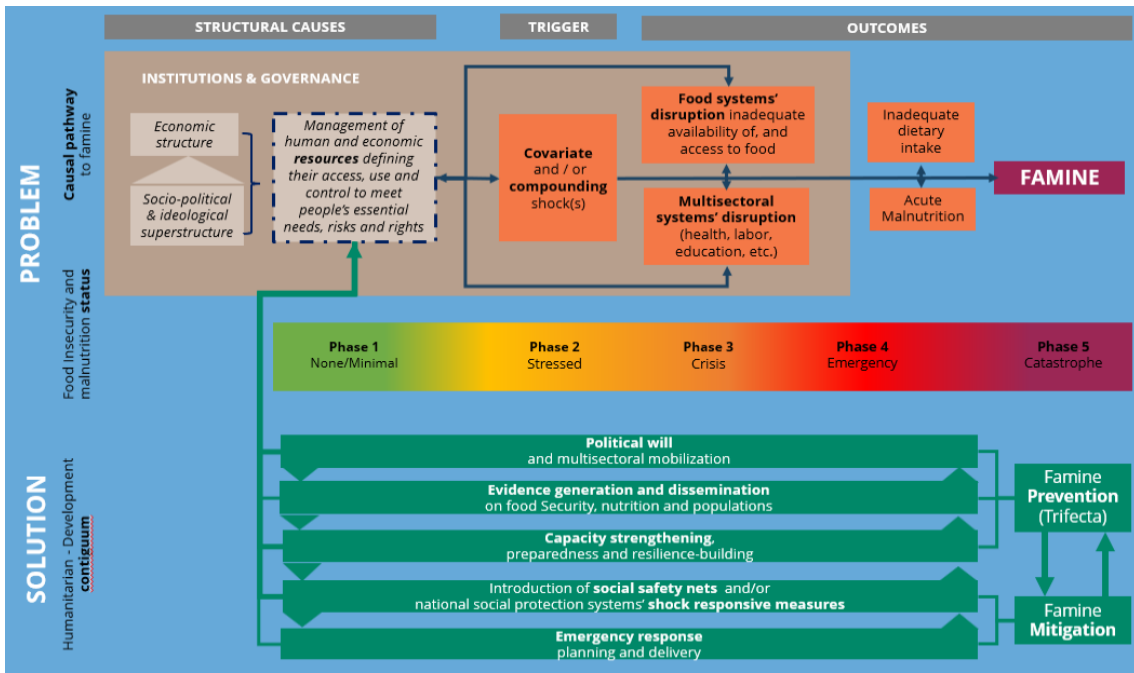


FIGURE 1. WFP’s operational framework for addressing famine

Source: WFP 2024

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. At the national level, support trajectories towards universal social protection coverage with comprehensive and adequate benefits.

Given the strong evidence base of the positive impacts of social protection on poverty reduction, household food security, local economic activity, and human capital formation (especially for children), the G20 should encourage governments to expand their investments in and coverage of social protection, and strongly resist tendencies to impose austerity cutbacks.

Recommendation 2. At the national level, support innovations in social protection that enhance food security and nutrition-sensitive outcomes.

Public investments in social protection must enhance food security and nutrition benefits by adopting innovative design features, for example, using home-grown school feeding where local procurement replaces imported food aid, delivering fresh food vouchers that promote consumption of healthy diets; and scaling up pilot projects – such as 'graduation model' projects – to national-level programmes.

Recommendation 3. At the national level, promote synergistic linkages between social protection, complementary sectors, and transformative rights-based measures.

The social impacts of social protection must be magnified by linking recipients of benefits to complementary services such as childcare, child protection, maternal health, nutrition education, and social behavioural change communication. Poor and marginalised people must also claim their economic, social and cultural (ESC) rights, such as labour rights, gender equality, and anti-discrimination legislation.

Recommendation 4. At national and global levels, accelerate programming and design innovations that converge social protection and humanitarian responses.

The lessons from Covid-19 must be institutionalised in shock-responsive social protection design and programming for crises: use existing registration databases, targeting mechanisms, and payment modalities such as electronic delivery of cash transfers to deliver humanitarian relief more efficiently, promptly and equitably.

Recommendation 5. At national and global levels, support advocacy efforts to adopt and progressively realise the human rights to food and to social protection.

All countries should be encouraged to sign the voluntary guidelines on the right to food (FAO 2004), and all signatories should be supported to take adequate measures to monitor progress towards realising this fundamental human right. Several countries have also introduced a legal or constitutional right to social protection, and this intervention should be adopted more widely with G20 support.

Recommendation 6. At the global level, convene a high-level forum to propose innovative solutions to delivering social protection in fragile contexts.

Recognising that social protection has the potential to contribute to mitigating and even preventing famine and acknowledging that social protection might be absent and humanitarian access might be denied in contexts such as civil instability and conflict, the G20 should convene a high-level dialogue on mechanisms for the international community to deliver social assistance even in such difficult contexts.

Recommendation 7. At the global level, the idea of a Global Fund for Social Protection initiative should be revived as a financing mechanism for social protection in LDCs.

The G20 should prioritise establishing a GFSP, financed by the international community, serve two important functions: it would allow resource-constrained LDCs to apply for assistance towards financing their social protection floor, and it could finance shock-responsive social protection for countries affected by major shocks such as natural disasters, health pandemics, and food price spikes.

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