SOCIAL PROTECTION

Opportunities for Africa

Michelle Adato and John Hoddinott

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Social protection involves policies and programs that protect people against risk and vulnerability, mitigate the impacts of shocks, and support people who suffer from chronic incapacities to secure basic livelihoods. It can also build assets, reducing both short-term and intergenerational transmission of poverty. It includes social insurance (such as health, life, and asset insurance, which may involve contributions from employers and/or beneficiaries); social assistance (mainly cash, food, vouchers, or subsidies); and services (such as maternal and child health and nutrition programs). Interventions that provide training and credit for income-generating activities also have a social protection component.

Interest in social protection is growing across Africa, fueled by persistent high rates of poverty and malnutrition; the undermining of livelihoods and family-based support systems by shocks such as the AIDS epidemic; volatile food prices and the calamities of weather and war; extensive evidence that denying children basic nutrition, health, and education has lifelong, irreversible, and intergenerational consequences; and growing evidence of the effectiveness of social protection in low-income countries throughout the world—particularly in contributing to poverty reduction and improved health, nutrition, and education. Approaches vary across regions and countries, with a notable introduction or scale-up of cash transfers for the very poor in southern and East Africa. While many programs have been undertaken on a pilot basis, successful implementation of large-scale social protection programs in Ethiopia and South Africa—each with more than 8 million beneficiaries—has demonstrated that social protection systems are no longer only within the reach of rich countries.

What Can Social Protection Achieve?

Social protection has protective, preventative, promotional, and transformational functions. In the figure below, programs are loosely placed under the objectives with which they are normally associated; for example, a food or cash transfer is often used to secure basic consumption. However, each type of program can be used to achieve any of these four objectives. For example, a cash transfer can also build assets by: 1) keeping children from leaving or missing school because fees are too expensive or children's labor is needed at home (for example, South Africa's Child Support Grant increased school attendance by 25 percent); 2) taking the form of a wage in exchange for constructing social infrastructure (for example, South Africa's public works programs have built water systems, clinics, and schools); and 3) enabling people to invest in a small business (for example, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Nets Programme increased the likelihood of households operating nonfarm businesses). These programs can also transform relations between citizens and government when they work together in targeting, monitoring, or service delivery. There are trade-offs across goals, however. As the top of the figure shows, protective and preventative interventions tend to require less capacity of implementers and beneficiaries, fewer inputs, and can be scaled up more quickly. Promotional and transformational interventions are more complex, require greater capacities and resources, and are more challenging to scale up. Countries with high levels of poverty and low institutional and financial capacities can start with simpler, protective interventions such as cash or food transfers, prioritizing interventions appropriate for the most vulnerable groups. As capacities advance, more complex interventions can be added.

What Are the Concerns with Social Protection?

Three concerns are often expressed about social-protection interventions: (1) they might create work disincentives and reduce informal transfers; (2) they might compete with growth-promoting expenditures; and (3) they are unaffordable. Existing evidence, however, casts serious doubt on all three.

In terms of creating disincentives or reducing informal transfers, most studies find that *public transfers have modest or no effect on work effort or private transfers.* The main exception is for children, where studies of conditional cash transfers have found that the programs significantly reduce child labor, a desirable outcome. Evidence from South Africa suggests that receipt of social grants is associated with increased labor-force participation, possibly because cash makes job seeking easier.

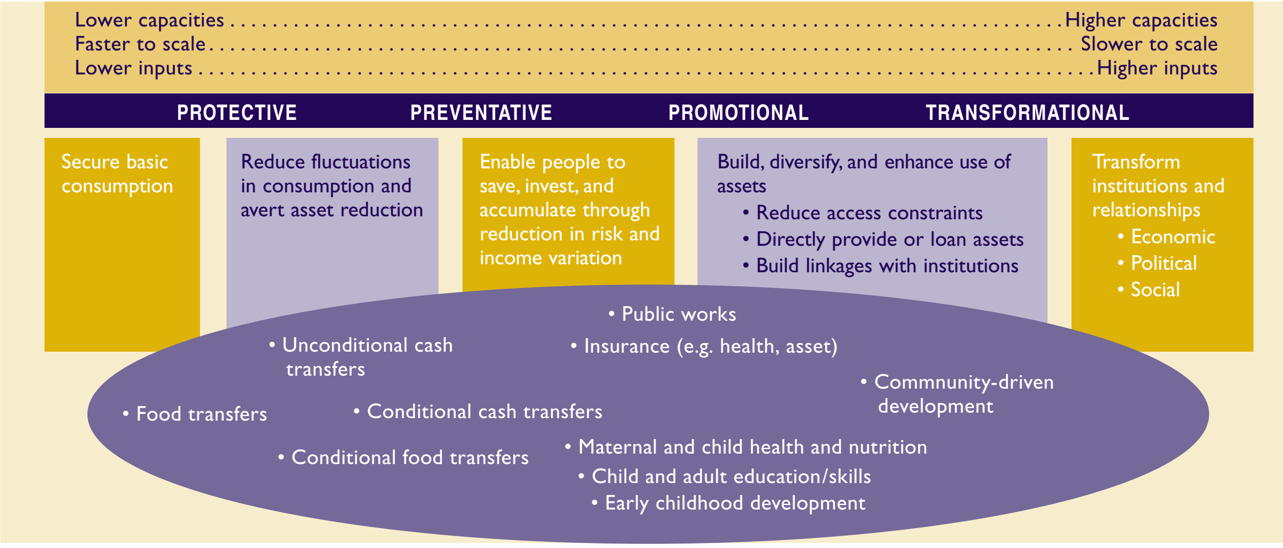
Fairness and human rights will always be an important motivation for social protection, but *social protection also has an instrumental function in promoting growth.* This can occur through increasing poor people's access to assets—by enabling them to purchase livestock, building productive infrastructure such as roads and irrigation, promoting education and health, or reducing risk so that people can use assets more efficiently. Social protection can also contribute to growth through reducing inequality.

The concern that must be taken most seriously is that of affordability in highly resource-constrained environments. This concern, however, overstates the costs of many well-targeted programs. International Labour Organization (ILO) projections for seven countries in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that *a child benefit would cost between 1.4 and 4.5 percent of GDP, and a universal old-age and disability pension between 0.3 and 0.6 percent of GDP.* Such programs can be financed by reallocating expenditures that offer little tangible benefit for the poor, as well as by increasing efficiencies of social expenditures through capacity enhancements. In low-income countries in Africa, international aid can play a large role in initially financing social-protection interventions, and in some countries, sustained aid may be needed and appropriate. Over time, however, increased levels of domestic financing signal political commitment and facilitate sustainability.

Key Considerations in Designing Social Protection

Should Programs Be Universal or Targeted?

Should social protection be universal (provided to everyone) or targeted (restricted to certain groups)? Universal programs reduce the likelihood of excluding those who need them. But universal programs such as food subsidies are expensive, and a considerable share of their benefits tends to flow to people who do not need them. Evidence suggests that in terms of reaching the poor, targeted cash transfer programs tend to perform better than untargeted subsidies. But choosing to target requires deciding who should be targeted and how. Ways of doing this include 1) means testing, which has worked reasonably well in South Africa's cash transfer programs; 2) selection by community-based committees, which has worked well on a pilot basis in Zambia and Malawi; 3) targeting categorically by characteristics such as region or age—such as old-age pensions in South Africa that have been shown to improve children's education (increasing attendance by 20–25 percent) and nutrition (increasing child height-for-age by approximately 1–5 centimeters); and 4) self targeting, where anyone can participate but the poorest tend to self-select, which has worked well in public works programs in many countries. The optimal method depends on the program objectives, administrative capacity, and social characteristics of communities.



Can Programs Be Implemented where Delivery Capacity Is Weak?

Implementing social protection requires that citizens are made aware of the program, beneficiaries are correctly identified, administrative and operational systems are put into place that deliver regular benefits and other inputs, and that there are effective monitoring-and-evaluation systems. This will be a challenge in environments where delivery capacity is weak. But it is not an insurmountable challenge—models exist of successful programs in very poor, low-capacity countries, such as Nicaragua. In such environments, it makes sense to start with simpler programs; build on community, nongovernmental, and governmental systems; put in place mechanisms that facilitate learning; and pay close attention to implementation issues.

How Can Direct Social Assistance Contribute to Building Assets?

In many countries, cash transfers are used to increase the education, health, and nutrition of children. This is achieved through making the cash (and sometimes food or nutritional supplements) conditional on households undertaking certain actions such as ensuring their children attend school or attend health check-ups, and having mothers attend health and nutrition education workshops (called "conditional cash transfers"). In Latin America, conditionality has been shown to improve school enrollment, increase the supply and quality of schools and health centers, and increase political support for cash transfers. Conditionality is administratively complex, however, and requires adequate quantity and quality of services. In Africa, where there is little experience with conditionality, and unconditional cash transfers have improved human capital outcomes, conditionality should be explored cautiously and flexibly. Experience suggests that conditional programs should not follow a blueprint; they work best when designed to respond to a specific problem, such as low secondary-school enrollment due to family financial constraints, despite an adequate supply of schools.

Another way to build assets is to link transfers to productive activities; health, nutrition, or education activities (including, for example, AIDS awareness and voluntary testing and counseling); or social services. For example, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Nets Programme (PSNP) links beneficiaries receiving transfers to agricultural extension agents, development workers, and access to credit. Evaluations indicate that transfers *plus* access to these complementary activities have a much bigger effect on a range of outcomes (such as food security and use of improved seeds and fertilizers) than just transfers alone. For example, mean caloric availability among households receiving both PSNP transfers and these complementary activities was 10 percent higher than among comparable nonbeneficiaries. In Kenya's Cash Transfer Program for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, transfers are being linked to lectures on child and maternal health, prevention and treatment of illness, and nutrition. Some programs in Latin America are experimenting with linking cash transfers to savings schemes.

How Long Should People Be Covered by an Intervention?

This depends on the program's objective and target group. In cases where groups are targeted categorically, such as the elderly, disabled, or chronically ill, these grants will need to be ongoing. For children who are targeted because their family is poor, the simplest approach is to let them "age-out" of programs, which also completes a commitment to their education. Where programs have funding constraints, however, this can mean that households that may no longer need assistance remain in the program while those that need it more do not get a chance to enter. An alternative is to reassess household eligibility after a certain period of participation, though the frequency chosen involves trade-offs between costs, equity, and security. Where a country can afford it, a "life cycle" approach to social protection is best, where different interventions cover people based on their stage in the life cycle: for example, health and nutrition programs for children 0–2 years of age, health and early childhood development for children 3–5 years, education support for primary and secondary school-age children, livelihoods support for able-bodied adults, and pensions for the elderly and disabled. However, poor countries will have to start with more modest interventions until capacity and resources enable a more comprehensive system.

Conclusion

The widespread implementation of social protection programs across Africa can play a critical role in sustainably reducing poverty and hunger across the continent. The benefits of these interventions for strengthening access to nutrition, health, and education; reducing intergenerational transmission of poverty; and promoting political stability, economic growth, and human dignity suggest that debates in Africa should turn from whether social protection is desirable and feasible to how best to design such programs to achieve development objectives.

Michelle Adato *is a Senior Research Fellow and* **John Hoddinott** *is a Senior Research Fellow and Deputy Director in IFPRI's Food Consumption and Nutrition Division.*

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

2033 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006-1002 USA • T. +1.202.862.5600 / Skype: ifprihomeoffice • F. +1.202.467.4439 • ifpri@cgiar.org • www.ifpri.org