

NUTRITION QUICK TIPS SERIES



SOCIAL PROTECTION AND NUTRITION

Social protection refers to a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing and protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life and with a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups. Comprehensive social protection and the right to adequate food are both enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹. Ensuring social protection for all who need it can be achieved through a wide range of services including both contributory and non-contributory guarantees. Social protection systems, and in particular social protection floors², are fundamental for the realisation of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development including internationally agreed targets related to ending all forms of malnutrition.

Globally, it is estimated that at least 3 billion people are unable to afford a healthy diet, the majority of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, several major drivers had knocked the world off track to end hunger and malnutrition in all its forms by 2030, including conflict, climate variability and extremes, and economic slowdowns and downturns. These drivers are exacerbated by the underlying causes of hunger and malnutrition: poverty and very high levels of inequality (for example, in terms of income, education and health)³. The war in Ukraine is further undermining the supply and availability of food and agricultural inputs and increasing global food prices⁴.

Due to the significance of poverty as a core driver of hunger and malnutrition, social protection has a vital role to play in ensuring good nutrition for all throughout their life. This is

especially the case for children, the vast majority of whom have no effective social protection coverage and who are twice as likely to live in poverty as adults, yet for whom malnutrition can have both life-threatening and lifelong consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the strong causal connection between poverty and malnutrition, while further highlighting the urgency of reducing gaps in social protection coverage in order to avoid the potential reversal of gains in maternal and child nutrition in many contexts⁵. Policy approaches to social protection that prioritise the optimisation of nutrition outcomes are crucial to accelerate progress towards internationally agreed targets for nutrition, including the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 - ending hunger and malnutrition.

1 Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

2 The ILO defines the term social protection floor as 'a nationally defined set of basic social security guarantees which secure protection aimed at preventing or alleviating poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion' throughout the life cycle (ILO 2012). In contrast, the term 'social safety nets' tends to be used to refer to a more targeted 'risk-management approach' with the central focus on shock protection and consumption smoothing.

3 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2021. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021. Transforming food systems for food security, improved nutrition and affordable healthy diets for all*. Rome, FAO.

4 <https://www.wfp.org/publications/food-security-implications-ukraine-conflict>

5 <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/2021/en/>, pp. XV-XVI

Social protection programmes can positively influence nutrition in many ways, such as by increasing/stabilising household income, thus increasing food security, improving dietary quality through facilitating access to healthy diets, removing economic and social barriers to access health and sanitation services, supporting the provision of childcare and improving intrahousehold dynamics related to, for example, access to the use of household income^{6,7}. Since the first 1 000 days of life (between a woman's pregnancy and her child's second birthday) are critical for children's nutrition, social protection interventions that support a healthy pregnancy, safe childbirth, exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding up to the age of two as part of a minimum acceptable diet are especially important for improving maternal, infant and young child nutrition.

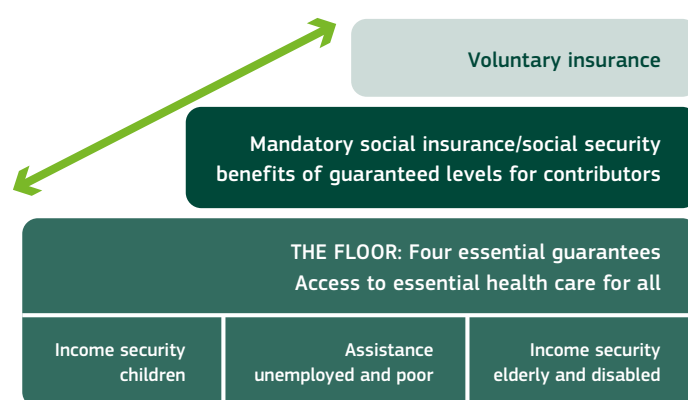
There is strong historical evidence of the positive impacts of social protection on food security and nutrition across Africa, Asia and Latin America where regular and adequate assistance has been repeatedly demonstrated to improve both the quantity and the diversity of food consumption and to help maintain dietary quality during shocks. Cash transfer programmes in countries from Mexico to Malawi have specifically demonstrated reductions in the number of stunted children⁸.

The European Union

The EU pledge underpinning its Action Plan on Nutrition is to support partner countries' efforts to reduce the number of stunted children under five by 7 million by 2025. While significant progress to reduce child stunting has been made in partner countries supported by the EU, the evidence suggests that the most vulnerable are often the hardest to reach. This underscores the strategic role of social protection in the context of a country-led, multi-sectoral and rights-based approach.

In 2016, the European Commission together with many other EU Member States signalled a commitment to support partner countries' efforts in ensuring that no one would be left behind by joining the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (also referred to as the USP2030 Partnership). Universal social protection includes adequate cash transfers for all who need them, especially children; benefits and support for people of working age in case of maternity, disability, work injury or for those without jobs; and pensions for older persons. This protection can

Figure 1: The social security staircase with the social protection floor^{9, 10}



However, social protection is yet to become a reality for most of the world's population. In 2019 only 47% of the global population were effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, while 4.1 billion people (53%) had no income security at all. Worldwide, the vast majority of children still lacked effective social protection coverage, and only one in four (26.4%) received a social protection benefit.

be provided through social insurance¹¹, tax-funded social benefits, social assistance and other schemes guaranteeing basic income security. At the same time, the EU recognises the heterogeneity in design and implementation of national social protection systems tailored to country contexts and capacities, as well as the importance of national ownership towards universal social protection and for countries to choose whether to work gradually and progressively towards the goal or aim for more immediate universal coverage.

Experience gained from external action support to partner countries in strengthening social protection for improved nutrition points to four priorities:

- **Budget support for social protection:** In the context of EU external action, direct budget support has increasingly been harnessed as one of the most effective means to support partner countries' efforts to strengthen national social protection systems¹². Along with budget support, sector reform contracts often include complementary

6 Please refer to the Introductory Quick Tips.

7 The impact evaluation of the Mchinji Social Cash Transfers Schemes (Malawi) based on a longitudinal study using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, demonstrating improved health, greater demand for schooling, reduction in child labour, accumulation of productive assets and livestock, increased agricultural production, improved food security, better ability to handle household shocks. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237756653_Impact_Evaluation_Report_External_Evaluation_of_the_Mchinji_Social_Cash_Transfer_Pilot, pp. vii-viii.

8 Yablonsi and O'Donnell, 2009. The role of cash transfers in tackling child mortality. Tirivayi et al, 2013. The interaction between social protection and agriculture. A review of evidence. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

9 https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_124454/lang--en/index.htm, p. 20.

10 South Africa's 1996 constitution (Article 27) states that all women, men and children have the right to enjoy basic social, health and welfare rights. In order to realise these rights, South Africa adopted a broad social protection framework, creating a social protection floor which guarantees social transfers and basic social services. Within this framework, the child support grant has been shown 'to significantly boost child nutrition'.

11 There is not yet evidence available for successful, sustainable, poverty-targeting insurance schemes, as premiums can be out of reach for the extreme poor and work-for-premium creates a cash shortage in the scheme. <https://www.opml.co.uk/projects/independent-evaluation-african-risk-capacity>; <https://documents.pub/document/measuring-resilience-oxfam-america-the-resilience-oxfam-america-1-the.html?page=1>; https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/PRB70_Building_climate_resilience_through_social_protection_in_Brazil.pdf

12 A global evaluation of EU budget support concluded that 'regarding the effectiveness of the EU budget support operations, there is no doubt that in the social protection sectors, but also health and education, EU operations achieved a higher-than-expected impact in relation to their financial weight'. This has resulted 'in institutional re-organisation, capacity building, and improved social protection policies.' (EU Budget Support: Trends and Results 2017)

measures focused on developing institutional capacities to deliver at all levels while strengthening public finance management and reinforcing government commitment to increasing domestic finance for social protection.

- **Ensuring a gender transformative approach¹³:** Women are currently over-represented among those unprotected by any form of social protection, despite the persistence of a gender pay gap, the high number of women working informally and the fact that women and girls are disproportionately responsible for unpaid care and domestic work. In alignment with the gender transformative approach promoted by the INTPA Gender Action Plan III (2021–2025)¹⁴, social protection can play a powerful and catalytic role in advancing gender equality and women's and girl's empowerment – a precondition for improving nutrition. Gender-responsive social protection has a vital role to play in breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition by addressing women's and girls' specific and interlinked vulnerabilities and the diversity of their experiences, compounded by intersecting dimensions of disadvantage such as income, disability, age and ethnicity. A consistent focus needs to be maintained on making sure that the most vulnerable and socially excluded have equal access to entitlements and that meaningful recipient engagement and feedback is actively sought and facilitated.

- **Designing social protection to be shock-responsive:** From the growing number and severity of climate disasters to ongoing political, social and economic upheaval, the number of children and families living in communities vulnerable to shocks and facing emergency situations is growing, with potentially devastating impacts on food security and nutrition. When crisis hits, effective social protection can be crucial in determining the ability of communities to protect and recover their livelihoods, thereby avoiding negative coping strategies that can potentially undermine progress in reducing malnutrition among women, adolescent girls and children. While, historically, national systems have often been too weak to respond, designing and strengthening them to be 'shock-responsive' and 'adaptive' can ensure they are flexible enough to adjust while the public finance management systems are adapted to cover the risk spectrum associated with a humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus approach.
- **Promoting social protection in the context of food system transformation:** Following the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, the launch of a coalition for social protection in the context of food systems transformation provides an important opportunity to further strengthen the connection between the Universal Social Protection 2030 Partnership and other policy areas relating to healthy diets and improved nutrition. For example, evaluations of cash transfer programmes suggest that nutritional outcomes can be improved when accompanied by effective social behaviour change communication (SBCC)¹⁵.

Specific recommendations are outlined below.



Strategies to strengthen social protection systems to optimise nutrition outcomes

- **Ensure social protection policies are part of a coherent strategic framework of action.** This will enable synergies within and between sectors to be developed, improving the performance of social protection systems. Support the integration of social protection as a priority component within **multi-sectoral plans for nutrition**.
- **Assess appropriate funding options.** Pilots have successfully created evidence on multiple aspects of poverty and nutrition; however, there is a risk that scalability is not taken sufficiently into account. **Budget support** or a more limited **sector support** managed by government is effective when donor and government priorities are aligned. **Domestic revenue** is the only sustainable source of funding to scale up social protection systems¹⁶.
- **Ensure that protection concerns are integral to any action.** In the humanitarian context, issues of protection are usually addressed, however this is not necessarily the case in the development context. This should be considered in line with the recommendations of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee¹⁷.
- **Adapt existing social protection programmes and system during periods of fragility, conflict or forced displacement.** This will ensure that social protection programmes are able to respond to the food and nutrition needs of affected populations during any such period¹⁸.

¹³ For further information, please refer to the Quick Tips on Nutrition, gender equality and women's empowerment.

¹⁴ GAP III promotes a transformative and intersectional approach to mainstream gender in all policies and actions by addressing structural causes of gender inequality and gender-based discrimination, including by actively engaging men and boys in challenging gender norms and stereotypes. https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/topics/gender-equality-and-empowering-women-and-girls_en#header-5139

¹⁵ <https://www.fao.org/3/ca7062en/ca7062en.pdf> (p.37)

¹⁶ https://www.oecd.org/dev/inclusivesocietiesanddevelopment/Lessons_learned_social_development_partners_for_social_protection.pdf, pp. 19.

¹⁷ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/IASC%20Policy%20on%20Protection%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action%2C%202016.pdf>

¹⁸ European Commission (2019) Tools and Methods Series - Reference Document No 26: Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus. A Game Changer in Supporting People through Crises. | Capacity4dev (europa.eu), p. 6.



Intervention areas

- **Ensure that social protection and nutrition programmes are implemented in an appropriate legal framework.** In many cases, social protection programmes are implemented in absence of an appropriate legal framework and often they are not viewed as entitlements or as a right of the beneficiaries¹⁹. Grievance systems are no replacement for appropriate social protection laws. A sound legal framework following a rights-based approach where social protection rights are clearly stipulated should be the norm. Human rights considerations incorporate a lifecycle perspective based on human rights principles and standards. Individuals of all ages are rights' holders and vulnerable to shocks and risks of different types (including the COVID-19 pandemic).
- **Check if social protection action is nutrition sensitive**²⁰. Are **population groups most at risk** adequately considered, in particular infants, children, adolescent girls, and women and girls with disabilities, pregnant and lactating mothers and also those living in remote settings and spontaneous settlements? Are the most nutritionally at-risk being reached (**coverage**) and is there sufficient support to enhance nutritional outcomes (**adequacy and comprehensiveness**)? Are there sufficient **linkages and referrals** between social assistance and other sectoral outcomes to enhance nutrition?
- **Decide on universal vs means-tested targeting to better address undernutrition.** Different dimensions of universality maybe prioritised, for example reaching out to all members of a certain category such as children through universal child grants²¹. Means-tested targeting is prone to targeting errors, the smaller the eligible part of the population is targeted²². Universal targeting of children may exclude un-registered or refugee children.
- **Ensure that the financing system covers the risk spectrum of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.** Financing systems should cover the risk spectrum from low-frequency, high-severity shocks to those of high-frequency and low-severity²³.
- **Complement social assistance with broader sector interventions.** Social protection has the potential to improve the nutrition of participants in social protection programmes, both in normal times and during crises. Even though social assistance enhances nutrition outcomes, even better outcomes are achieved when nutrition objectives are explicitly included in the design, implementation and monitoring of social protection programmes²⁴.
- **Promote evidence-based learning.** As evidence-based learning in the area of social protection and nutrition is needed, case studies or evaluations informed by longitudinal studies or randomised control trials, for example, should be budgeted into the activity.

As mentioned above:

- **Support shock-responsive social protection across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus,**
- **Support gender-responsive social protection,**
- **Promote social protection in the context of food system transformation.**



Further information and support

- EU International Partnerships https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/topics/social-protection_en#header-2153
- European Commission guidance package on social protection across the humanitarian-development nexus (SPaN) [Guidance Package on Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus | Capacity4dev \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/en/development-cooperation/development-nexus/capacity4dev)
- ILO World Social Protection Report 2020-2022 <https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/world-social-security-report/2020-22/lang--en/index.htm>
- ILO social protection floor – <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowTheme.action?id=1321>
- World Bank in social protection <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialprotection>
- Development Pathways – publications on social protection <https://www.developmentpathways.co.uk>
- ODI – social protection – different publications on social protection <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/equity-and-social-policy/social-protection-esp/>
- Handbook on social protection systems (2021) <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/handbook-on-social-protection-systems-9781839109102.html>

19 http://www.fao.org/3/i5321e/i5321e.pdf_p.1

20 For further information please refer to the Introductory and Nutrition Policy Marker Quick Tips, available at [Nutrition Quick Tips Series | Capacity4dev \(europa.eu\)](https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/handbook-on-social-protection-systems-9781839109102.html)

21 <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/handbook-on-social-protection-systems-9781839109102.html>, pp. 23-24.

22 The literature shows that inclusion and exclusion errors range between 44% and 55% when the bottom 20% of the population is covered, while it ranges between 57% and 71% when 10% of the population is covered (Kidd, Gelders, & Bailey-Athias, 2017). These errors occur due to various reasons, including: i) weak correlation between household consumption and multiple proxies; ii) errors in household survey and iii) problem in verification of the actual value of proxies (Devereux et al., 2017). Source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341966487_Targeting_efficiency_and_effectiveness_of_national_cash_transfers_program_Lessons_from_BISP_Pakistan/link/5ed673a792851c9c5e8744b4/download

23 <https://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/asia-and-pacific-regional-overview-food-security-and-nutrition-0>, p. 47

24 <https://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/asia-and-pacific-regional-overview-food-security-and-nutrition-0>, p. 41

- Inter-Agency Social Protection Assessments (ISPA) – tools and assessments <https://ispatools.org>
- ISPA – Online member-based knowledge sharing and capacity-building platform <https://socialprotection.org>
- CALP Network <https://www.calpnetwork.org/search/nutrition>
- <https://www.fao.org/social-protection/en/>
- https://www.oecd.org/dev/inclusivesocietiesanddevelopment/Lessons_learned_social_development_partners_for_social_protection.pdf, pp. 19

Relevant EU-funded actions that represent case studies for social protection and nutrition

- National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) reforms in Bangladesh (2019-2024)
- [Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme](#) (PSNP).

The project without a link can be studied further in the annex of the [6th Progress Report on the Action Plan on Nutrition](#).

The new OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) policy marker on nutrition was approved by the DAC for official development assistance reporting in 2019 with the support of the European Commission and Member States. According to this marker, 'a project should be identified as nutrition related when it is intended to address the immediate or underlying determinants of malnutrition.' An [OECD-DAC Nutrition Policy Marker Handbook](#) is available.

The EU is a global leader in promoting gender equality as a key political objective of its external action and common foreign policy, aimed at accelerating progress towards the SDGs. By 2025, 85% of new EU actions should contribute to achieving the objective of gender equality and women's empowerment, with more actions including it as a main objective. Please refer to [Quick Tips: Nutrition, gender equality and women's empowerment](#).

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