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**SOCIAL PROTECTION AND
FOOD SECURITY INDICATORS:
AN INQUIRY THROUGH DATA
FROM 10 HOUSEHOLD
BUDGET SURVEYS**

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Social protection and food security indicators:

An inquiry through data from 10 household budget surveys

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Abstract

There is growing consensus that social protection constitutes an effective response to poverty and food insecurity in developing countries. While the literature on the conceptual linkages between social protection and food security is abundant, there is little data allowing to analyse it in a comprehensive manner. The aim of the paper is to provide empirical evidence on the association between social protection systems and food security conditions in selected developing countries, which will serve as a basis for building a global data set for monitoring and harmonizing indicators on these two thematic areas. Using the methodology of the ADePT Food Security and Social Protection modules and the classification of the World Bank's Social Protection Atlas (ASPIRE), we cross-tabulate indicators derived from ten Household Budget Survey to capture heterogeneity across regions. In many instances, data highlight inadequate sampling and collection techniques. Several areas for improvement are identified, especially on in-kind transfers and social assistance programs. Higher public transfers are generally associated with lower food security, while private transfers – mainly foreign remittances – are not.

Key words: Social Protection, Food Security, Household Budget Surveys, Private Transfers, Remittances

JEL codes: H53, H55, I38, O12, Q18

1 Social protection: concepts and definitions

Over the last few years, social protection has become a prominent topic in the development policy agenda. Emphasis on this topic in the Post-2015 Development Agenda was recently confirmed by the UN General Assembly's Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, which proposed social protection as one of the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 1 - *"End poverty in all its forms everywhere"*¹. Fiszbein *et al.* (2013) illustrate the reasons why social protection plays a pivotal role in the post-2015 agenda: Social protection is considered *"an instrument for the goals of reducing poverty, reducing inequality, and reducing risk and vulnerability"*. According to the High-level Panel of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in *Food Security and Nutrition Report on Social Protection* (HLPE, 2012), one reason for its popularity is *social protection tackles poverty and vulnerability directly*, so its impacts are immediate and invariably evaluated as positive – and indirectly, by making economic growth more inclusive.

Social protection was initially seen as an upgrade of social safety nets with a protection focus. Recently the concept has broadened to include additional programmes and functions. The UN Social Protection Floors Recommendation Nr. 202 (ILO, 2012 - R202) states that national social protection floors should include at least the following basic social security guarantees: *(a) access to a nationally defined set of goods and services, constituting essential health care, including maternity care, that meets the criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality; (b) basic income security for children, at least at a nationally defined minimum level, providing access to nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services; (c) basic income security, at least at a nationally defined minimum level, for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; and (d) basic income security, at least at a nationally defined minimum level, for older persons.*

Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) proposed to classify the full range of social protection functions in four distinct categories: *protection, prevention, promotion and transformation*. Protection covers the social assistance interventions; prevention relates to social insurance; promotion refers to the enhancement of real incomes and economic capabilities; while transformation addresses social rights and inclusions. This categorization provides a more

¹ Target 1.3: implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable. For more information, see <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgsproposal.html>.

comprehensive classification than FAO's twin-track approach, which only differentiates *emergency assistance* and *livelihood development*.

Such a wide range of programmes and interventions makes it difficult to define social protection and its boundaries. Brunori and O'Reill (2010) reviewed various definitions: 12 proposed by international organizations, six by academia and another 10 proposed by governments in the Sub-Saharan Africa region only. In fact there is no consensus about the boundaries of what we call social protection. One definition that has recently been often quoted is the one proposed by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the UK. This states that social protection includes “*all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups* (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004)”. This definition has been used for this paper.

The High Level Panel of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security (HLPE, 2012) report provides the conceptual linkages between social protection and food security; while the paper by Slater *et al.* (2014) provides a very good review of the evidence on how social protection contributes to food and nutrition security by linking social protection instruments with the four dimensions of food security². In the last decade there has been a proliferation of studies aimed at assessing the impact of social protection programs on food security. In the best scenario, these studies allow conducting cost-benefit analyses of the interventions, and provide the so-called value-for-money, which is more frequently requested by the donor community.

Impact assessment studies are fraught with challenges, such as selection bias, spillover effects, confounding, contamination and heterogeneity. To address these problems, studies need to rely on counterfactual scenarios and *ad hoc* surveys, generally conducted before and after the interventions. Known limitations of these studies are that they thoroughly address issues related to internal validity (cause-effect attribution), but often their conclusions can hardly be generalized (external validity). The paper by Hidrobo *et al.* (2014) aims at generalizing the impact evaluation studies on food security outcomes by conducting a meta-analysis on around 50 scientifically robust studies (generally involving experimental and quasi-experimental designs) for around 40 different programmes. Their paper found that the average social protection programme increases

² The four dimensions of food security are: access, availability, stability and utilization.

by 17% caloric acquisition and by 13% the expenditure on food, but elasticities vary widely across countries and programmes. Moreover, most of the abovementioned studies are based on conditional or unconditional cash transfers and public works, which are only one part of social protection, and are normally referred to as social assistance programmes.

This paper aims to provide a wider picture of social protection systems at a country level by covering not only social assistance but the wide range of formal and informal social protection programmes, which also include social insurance, international remittances and domestic private transfers. The overall performance of social protection systems can hardly be measured with the counterfactual approach described above, as attribution cannot be disentangled. In a macro-level set-up, moreover, the relation between social protection and food security is likely to be bi-univocal: social protection programmes do affect food security; but government decisions about such programmes are in turn affected by the food security levels in the country. For this reason, this paper is not proposing an impact evaluation.

The objectives of this paper are: i) to present empirical evidence on the relationship between social protection and food security through household budget surveys, and ii) to build the rationale for an information base that analyzes indicators at a sub-national level, including urban/rural, income quintiles, male/female, poor/non-poor and other cross-tabulation variables. The scope of the paper is to provide a comprehensive picture of social protection systems at a country level, and to facilitate the comparison with food security indicators. This will serve as a basis for constructing a global database of social protection and food security indicators, which will allow monitoring trends and conduct cross-country analyses on the relation between social protection and food security.

Investigating the causal relationship between social protection and food security, therefore, goes

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