

# NUTRITION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION ARE INTRINSICALLY LINKED

Social protection and nutrition are intrinsically linked by the fact that poverty (and the inadequate quantity, quality or access to human, economic, and institutional resources it implies) is the most important root cause for malnutrition. More specifically, there are strong complementarities between social protection and the fight against malnutrition due to the factors outlined below.

**Social protection can address immediate, underlying and basic causes of malnutrition:** Ideal nutritional status cannot be achieved without consuming a healthy diet for optimal health. Social protection interventions can directly contribute to improving diets, for example, by providing food through food transfers and school feeding programmes and facilitating access to health care through conditional cash transfers that encourage the use of health services and/or enable households to access items for personal and household hygiene and clean water. Social protection programmes can be designed to enhance households' ability to provide care to young children and other dependent family members. For example, it can be done through targeting social transfers to families with young children and/or sick dependants, or through labour regulations that enable women to breastfeed while working.

Social protection measures can not only address the immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition by adopting promotive and transformative approaches to social protection, which help people rise out of poverty. Instead, these measures also have the potential to address the basic causes of malnutrition. Indeed, solving the problem of malnutrition is a social, rather than a technical issue, in that it requires addressing fundamental social inequities, which often prevent families from adopting healthy diets, providing adequate care, and accessing health and hygiene services.

## What is social protection?

With social protection recently and rapidly moving up the policy agenda, it has been defined in various contexts and by a variety of stakeholders. No definition has so far been accepted widely enough to ensure a common understanding of social protection.

Most operational definitions include three elements of social protection:

1. social assistance;
2. social insurance;
3. social equity.

Social protection in its broadest sense aims to alleviate income poverty, for example, through the promotion of income-generating activities, to reduce vulnerability, such as through insurance against crop failure, and to foster greater social justice and inclusion, for instance, through the empowerment of marginalized groups.

Social protection interventions are commonly categorized as protective (when the focus is on recovering from shocks), preventative (when people's resilience to cope with shocks is strengthened), promotive (when the aim is mainly to enhance income or capabilities which allow people to escape from poverty), or transformative (when structural inequalities are addressed to improve social justice and inclusion).

Source: Devereux, 2012.

### **Social protection and nutrition: keys for resilience-building and linking emergency and development.**

Social protection and nutrition are also linked by their relevance to building resilience and linking emergency and development approaches. Nutrition is a necessary input for resilience-building as individuals and households affected by malnutrition are more vulnerable to shocks and stresses. Similarly, social protection measures are key tools to protect households and help them recover from shocks. Finally, to be most effective, nutrition and social protection programmes should adopt a comprehensive approach that tackles both immediate and longer-term needs.

**The necessity of a multisectoral and multistakeholder approach:** Poverty and malnutrition both have multiple causes which cannot be addressed by a single sector or stakeholder. Protecting the socially vulnerable from poverty and exclusion and ensuring improved nutrition therefore requires a multisectoral and multi-partner approach, which operates at various levels, from individuals to households to communities, all the way up to the policy level.

**The need to acknowledge and leverage the special role of women:** Nutrition and gender are closely linked. Women are more at risk of becoming malnourished than men, with higher nutrient requirements especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding. At the same time, women often eat last in many cultures and leave the more nutritious food to male household members. When women are affected by malnutrition, it concerns future generations, too: malnourished women will transmit malnutrition to their children, either directly (malnourished women are more likely to give birth to smaller and lighter babies) or indirectly (because they lack the knowledge, time, financial resources or decision-making power to care well for their children). Gender differences therefore always need to be taken into account when developing social protection policies and programmes.

**The relevance of a life-cycle approach:** Both nutrition and social protection use the life-cycle approach, acknowledging that economic and nutritional vulnerabilities differ throughout the various phases in life and that malnutrition, poverty, and social exclusion have a “hereditary” character, being passed from one generation to the next.<sup>1,2</sup> From the perspective of nutrition, the first 1 000 days in a child’s life (from conception to second birthday) are particularly crucial as its nutritional status during this time will determine to a large extent whether he or she will fully develop to their genetic potential. Social protection interventions, on the other hand, usually follow an integrated approach, which addresses vulnerabilities at various life phases, including during infancy and childhood. Since many social protection measures aim to increase income, there is a tendency for them to focus on those who are engaged in productive labour. In order to maximize the positive impact of social protection interventions on nutrition, their impact on infants and young children should always be kept in mind.

### **Reference**

Devereux, S. 2012. Social Protection for Enhanced Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa [Internet]. United Nations Development Programme. Available from: <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/Working%20Papers/Social%20Protection%20Food%20Security.pdf>

Source:

FAO. 2015. Nutrition and Social Protection. 2015. Rome, Italy. [https://www.enonline.net/attachments/2426/FAO\\_SocialProtection\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enonline.net/attachments/2426/FAO_SocialProtection_2015.pdf)

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<sup>1</sup> ACC/SCN & FPRI. 2000. 4th Report on The World Nutrition Situation - Nutrition Throughout the Life Cycle [Internet]. United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination Sub-Committee on Nutrition (ACC/SCN) in collaboration with IFPRI. Available from: <http://www.unsystem.org/scn/archives/rwns04/begin.htm#Contents>

<sup>2</sup> Bonilla-Garcia, A. & Gruat, J.V. 2003. Social Protection: A Life Cycle Continuum Investment for Social Justice, Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development [Internet]. International Labour Office (ILO). Available from: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/download/lifecycl/lifecycle.pdf>