



Unveiling Social Safety Nets

Ugo Gentilini and Steven Were Omamo

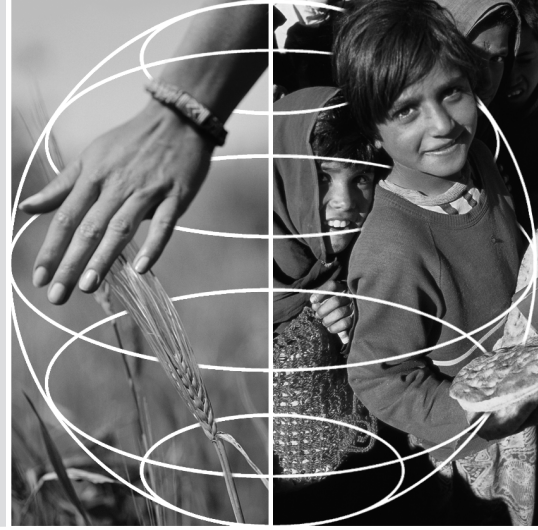
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Acknowledgements

by the authors

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Ugo Gentilini and Steven Were Omamo are with the Policy, Strategy and Planning Division (OEDP), as Policy Adviser and Deputy Director respectively. They can be contacted at Ugo.Gentilini@wfp.org and Stevenwere.Omamo@wfp.org.



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World Food Programme

Executive Summary

Interest in safety nets and social protection is growing exponentially. Ways of strengthening them are called for in high-level statements, researched in academic articles, and implemented by practitioners. Such developments are encouraging and may help to shed light on some long-standing humanitarian and development challenges. The concept remains controversial, however, and several issues must be clarified. This paper delineates core areas of tension, and lays out key issues underpinning them at the analytical, policy, institutional and implementation level. It conveys the following five messages:

1. *Social protection is a broader concept than safety nets.* Although there is no universally agreed definition of social protection, there is growing consensus that it includes safety nets, mostly in the form of cash or food transfers; social services, such as health clinics; and insurance options. Safety nets are therefore only one of the many components of a social protection system.
2. *All countries have some form of social protection, but models differ greatly.* Social protection is largely about public action, and all countries deploy some form of public measures against hunger. However, countries' different capacities and objectives lead to diverse models of social protection. These include contexts where social protection systems are limited, such as in Bangladesh; emerging, as in Brazil; and consolidated, as in Sweden. Such diversity must be recognized, and interventions tailored to meet context-specific challenges.
3. *Social protection policy cannot be formulated in isolation.* Long-standing debates should be included more explicitly in the formulation of social protection policies. These include the debates on public versus market interventions to address hunger, the effectiveness of foreign aid, and the growth effects of social protection.
4. *Social protection raises important institutional, financial and administrative challenges.* Most developing countries face critical institutional and financial challenges that can only be met gradually and progressively. However, some actors advocate for an immediate institutionalization of social protection. Inadequate attention is often paid to competing priorities and trade-offs, bringing the risk of misinforming or misguiding decision-makers.
5. *Specific implementation issues inspire lively debate.* Social protection programming typically evokes debate over traditional programming areas, including the appropriateness and design of conditionalities – whether or not to link transfers to certain activities; the

type of transfers – cash, food or vouchers; or targeting mechanisms. It is not unusual to find dogmatic positions in these areas.

of social protection. A more balanced and pragmatic approach is required – based on technical partnerships, free from pre-packaged agendas, and genuinely owned and demanded by national governments and actors.

The paper's conclusions can be summarized in the following three interlinked remarks:

- i) *Approaches need to be fully compatible with prevailing cultural, social and economic factors.*
Countries have followed different pathways to introduce and expand social protection systems. Context-specific factors should be fully recognized, and approaches tailored accordingly. There is scope for learning from each other, but it is not appropriate to simply replicate models developed in other contexts.
- ii) *In developing countries, the debate tends to overemphasize conceptual issues and underplay administrative and implementation constraints.*
Decision-makers face difficult trade-offs, some of which can be minimized while others are more difficult to reconcile. Introducing and expanding social protection systems do not allow for shortcuts or easy choices. Ignoring possible trade-offs makes debates naïve at best, and misguided at worst.
- iii) *Rhetoric has often prevailed over evidence.* There is a need to inform decision-makers more fully, and not merely to convince them. This is true for both the advocates and the critics

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Introduction

Twenty years after the publication of *Hunger and Public Action* by Drèze and Sen (1989), the need for effective public measures to address hunger remains compelling, especially in developing countries. Indeed, whether in response to sudden crises or to overcome chronic poverty, recommendations to implement social protection and safety net systems are becoming increasingly frequent. For example, this year leaders called for “...social protection mechanisms such as safety nets and social policies for the most vulnerable” (G8 Summit, 2009, p. 2), pledged significant funding “...for social protection for the poorest countries” (G20 Summit, 2009, p. 8), and committed themselves to “...support improved social protection programmes in places at risk of malnutrition or food shortages” (DFID, 2009, p. 35).

Despite mounting interest, the concept of safety nets remains elusive and difficult to grasp. Part of this difficulty stems from the blossoming of terminology and approaches, which has made the definition of safety nets particularly challenging. As safety nets are part of most national public policy discussions, debates feed into broader issues of public versus market-based interventions. Especially pressing are the debates between spurring productivity growth and promoting equity, and between increasing the pie and slicing the pie.

Such debates also intersect with another complex area: whether the resources for public action are raised domestically or externally. As public action in developing countries is largely funded by donors,

fears about dependency on safety nets are intertwined with concerns about dependency on international assistance. Despite the deep implications of these areas, much of the debate on safety nets tends to revolve around specific implementation modalities, for example, whether transfers should be cash- or food-based, or programmes conditional or not.

In other words, a number of areas require further attention. The objective of this paper is to identify those areas, unbundle their contents, and offer ways of dealing with them. It conveys five key messages, spanning core analytical and practical issues.

The document is organized as follows: the next section presents the first message, reviews the definitions and approaches underpinning social protection and safety nets, and identifies emerging common patterns; the following section on the second message lays out context-specific models, and the third and fourth set out key policy and institutional debates, respectively; the section on the fifth message discusses key implementation issues, and anticipates the concluding remarks. Taken together, the messages may help policy-makers and practitioners to navigate through contentious debates, weighing possible trade-offs and charting engagement strategies accordingly.

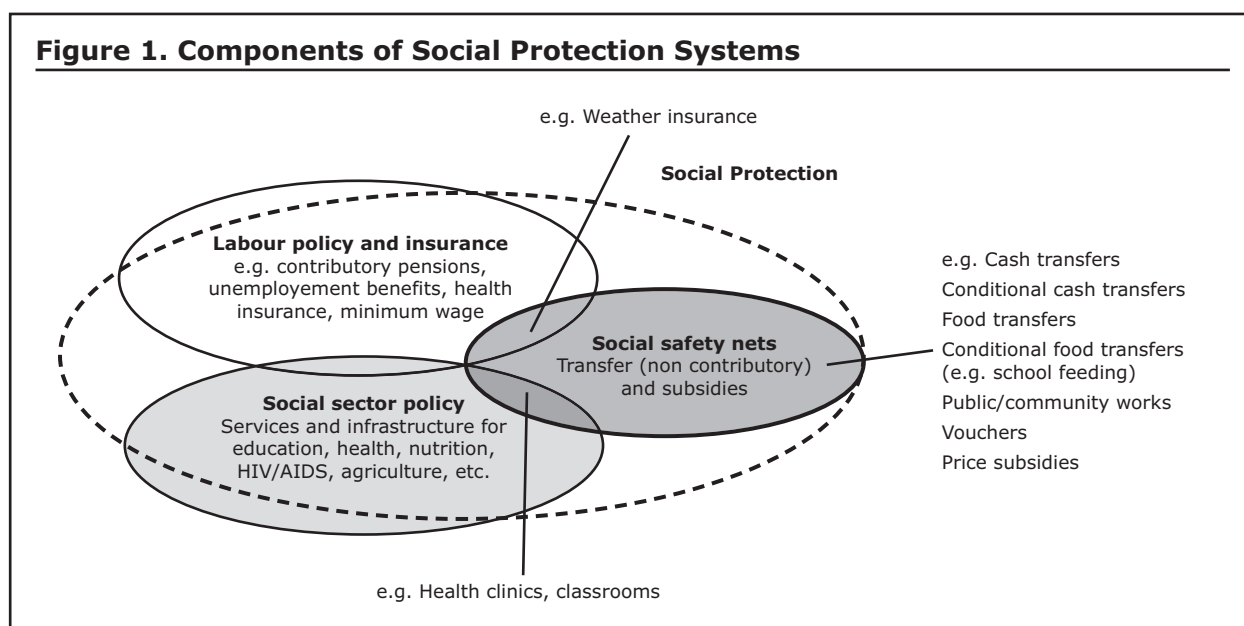
MESSAGE 1: SOCIAL PROTECTION IS A BROADER CONCEPT THAN SAFETY NETS

There are no universally accepted definitions of social protection and safety nets. Governments, donors and other partners adopt several approaches. Most definitions are broad and comprehensive, but actors adopt a range of different perspectives on the scope, objectives and composition of social protection (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2007; Sabates-Wheeler and Haddad, 2005; Conway and Norton, 2002; Whiteford and Forster, 2002).

For example, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) applies a child-sensitive approach to social protection, including access to services and provision of unconditional transfers for vulnerable groups (UNICEF, 2008); similarly, the Department for International Development (DFID) focuses on chronic poverty and social transfers, mostly in the form of unconditional cash transfers (DFID *et al.*, 2009; DFID, 2005); the German Agency

for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) leans towards health insurance, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) explores the costing of minimum standards and labour-related issues (GTZ, 2007; ILO, 2006); the World Bank centres on managing risks and economic vulnerabilities, while WFP focuses on narrower food-based safety nets (Holzmann and Grosh, 2008; WFP, 2004; World Bank, 2001).

These features map out general patterns, and there is emerging consensus on a number of areas. For example, it is widely recognized that social safety nets (or simply ‘safety nets’) are a subset of broader social protection systems. Safety nets include mostly non-contributory¹ transfers in cash, vouchers or in-kind/food, which can be unconditional or conditional – such as conditional cash transfers, school feeding, food for work and cash for work – and on other interventions to improve access to food and basic essentials, such as price subsidies (World Bank, 2008; Adato, Ahmed and Lund, 2004; Shepherd, 2004; Alderman 2002). In addition to safety



¹ In general, a contributory transfer is one that people pay for. Contributory transfers include the insurance contracts that stipulate the payment of a premium, and pension schemes in which part of the salary is deducted in payment for financing the pension in the future. Non-contributory schemes do not envision a payment from beneficiaries. There are also combinations of both; for example, under some contributory schemes, individuals pay part of the premium and the employer or the government covers the rest.

nets, social protection also includes aspects of labour market policies and insurance options, such as contributory pensions and health insurance, and aspects of other sectoral policies for education, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS and agriculture (Bundy *et al.*, 2009; Devereux *et al.*, 2008b; Greenblot, 2007). These social protection components are mapped out in Figure 1.

Weather insurance products represent a common area between safety nets and labour/insurance (Alderman and Haque, 2007). Sectoral policies sometimes overlap with safety nets, as they provide the supply side of interventions, such as physical infrastructure for schools and health clinics. However, the scope and range of labour market and sectoral policies often go beyond social protection. The next section lays out the core commonalities and differences among social protection systems around the world.

MESSAGE 2: ALL COUNTRIES HAVE SOME FORM OF SOCIAL PROTECTION, BUT MODELS DIFFER GREATLY

As mentioned in the introduction, social protection is largely about public action, and all countries deploy some form of public measure against hunger. The underlying rationale for social protection reflects long-standing debates on the roles of public action, markets and combinations of both in fostering more inclusive development pathways. This principle applies equally to developed and developing countries. It is therefore not surprising that in spite of marked diversities, a number of similarities also emerge.

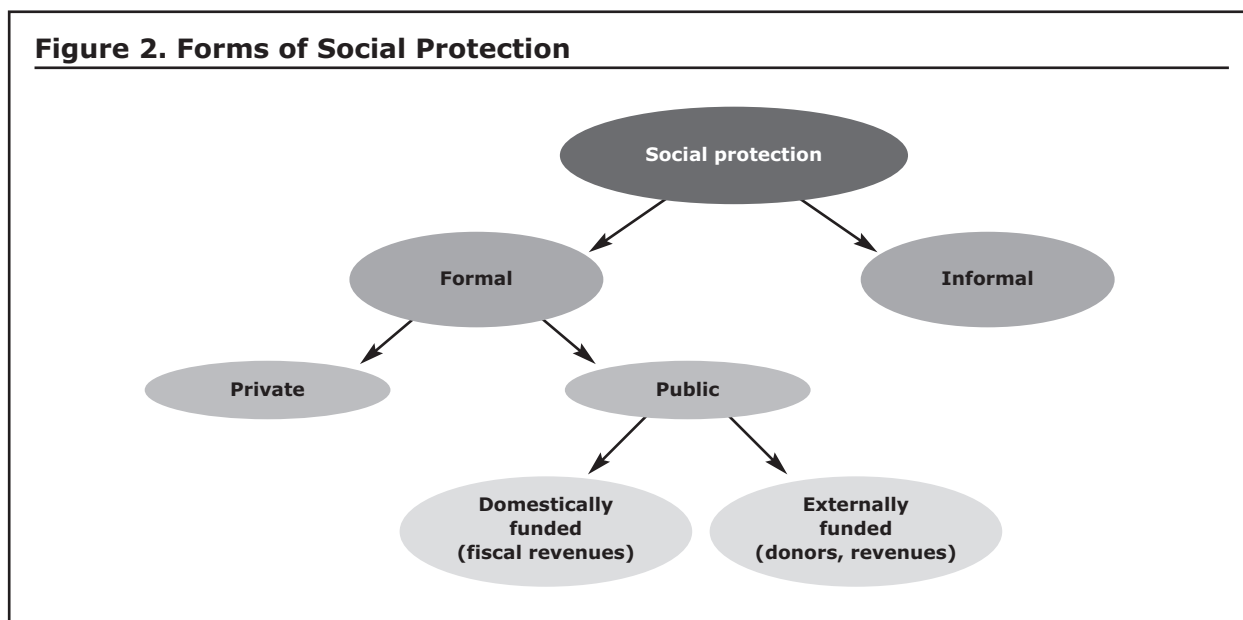
For example, vouchers and cash transfers are implemented as safety nets in both developing and high-income countries. In the United States, about 25 million people, or one-twelfth of the population, benefit from the national food voucher programme, which is now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP is the largest voucher programme in the world, with a budget of about US\$37.5 billion/year (USDA, 2007). New York City recently launched a conditional cash transfer programme, Opportunity NYC², similar to Mexico's *PROGRESA-Oportunidades* (Miller, Riccio and Smith, 2009). Middle-East countries have extensive experience with safety nets in the form of consumer price subsidy programmes, particularly food-based ones (Alderman, 2002). In Europe, countries such as Italy protected the poor from the financial crunch by distributing targeted vouchers for use in supermarkets and other outlets.³

However, there are marked differences between these programmes and those in developing countries. In high-income countries, social protection is an institutionalized feature of a social contract between the State and citizens (OECD, 2008; De Neubourg, Castonguay and Roelen, 2007; Lindert, 2005; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004). In contrast, social protection in developing countries is not really an institutionalized system, but often a collection of short-term, scattered programmes (Devereux and White, 2007; Devereux, 2006; WFP, 2005). As a result, informal arrangements often bear the burden of social protection (Morduch and Sharma, 2002). Figure 2 lays out the different forms of social protection, and their ramifications.

² For more info on SNAP and the Opportunity NYC programme see www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/snap/ and <http://opportunitynyc.org/>.

³ See www.governo.it/governoinforma/dossier/carta_acquisti/.

Figure 2. Forms of Social Protection



Informal social protection includes sharing and insurance mechanisms within and among communities, such as the *Hawala* systems in Muslim countries⁴. Formal arrangements can be either public – provided by the government – or private, provided by actors operating on markets. Public measures can be funded domestically or externally, by donors or international agencies. Safety nets usually fall into this category. Private mechanisms are mainly insurance products available on markets, such as health insurance. Developing countries tend to have large informal social protection systems and some formal public safety nets, mostly funded by donors. Advanced economies tend to have large formal social protection systems, both public and private, and few informal arrangements. These and other features delineate a number of possible models of social protection.

A key driver in shaping different models of social protection is the level of national capacity – the country’s institutional, administrative, financial and technical

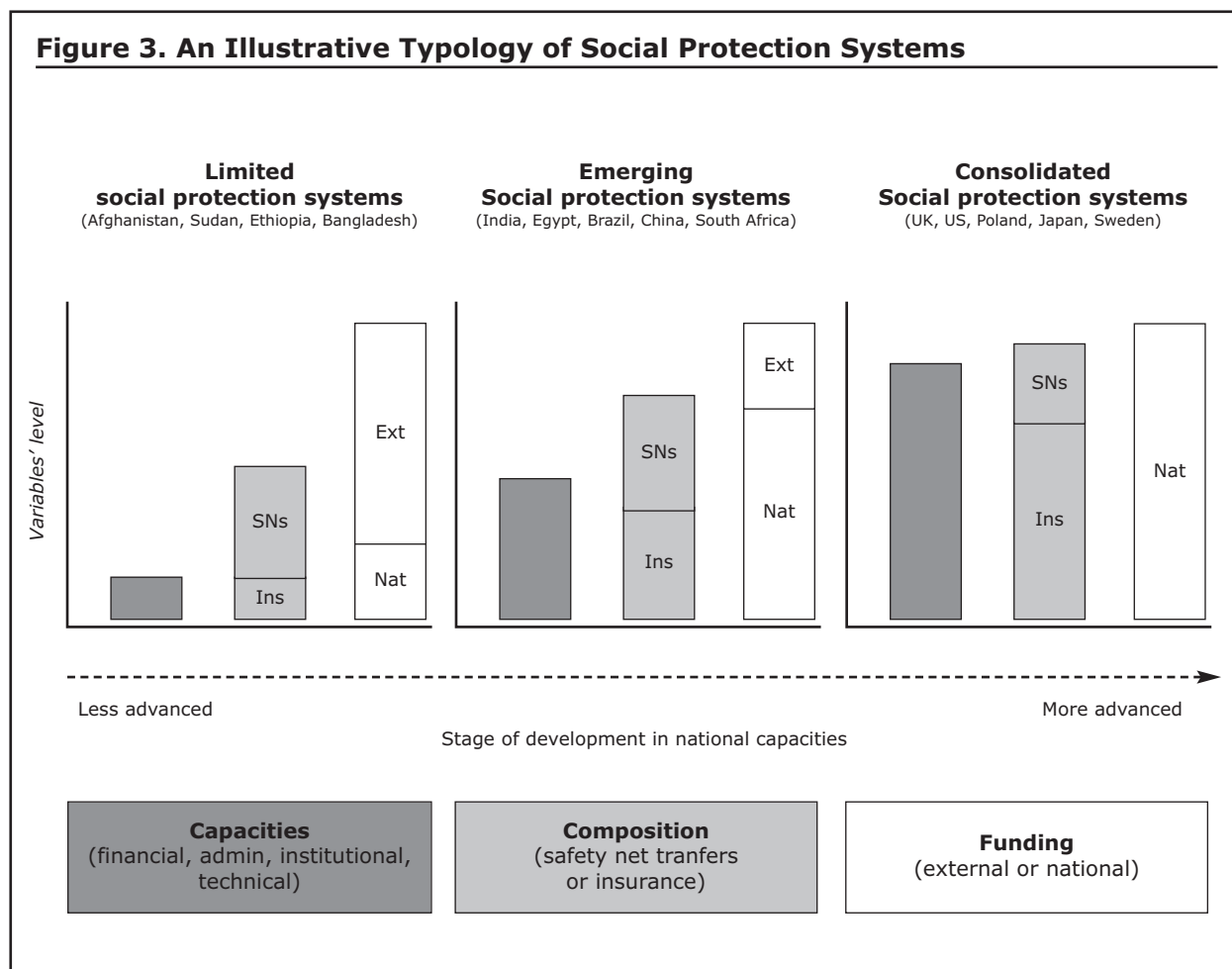
ability to introduce and sustain social protection programmes.⁵ Drawing from existing literature, case studies and data on the topic,⁶ Figure 3 proposes a typology with three core models for countries with limited, emerging and consolidated social protection systems (Gentilini, 2009; Ravallion, 2009; Barrientos and Hulme, 2008b; World Bank, 2008; Shepherd, 2004).

The definitions of these models are not categorical, and the typology does not imply a predefined linear pathway for introducing or expanding social protection. Rather, it broadly illustrates different models based on prevailing context-specific conditions. The contextual challenges that countries face need to be clearly spelt out and accounted for. Too frequently, lessons learned in higher-capacity contexts, such as the programmes in Brazil or South Africa, are blindly applied in lower-capacity settings. There is scope for learning, but not for straight replication of models developed in other contexts.

4 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawala>.

5 The political will present within a country also plays a critical role. The level of social expenditures is often used as a measure of will or commitment, mostly expressed in relative terms (e.g. % of GDP).

6 Tools developed to appraise countries’ social protection capacities include, inter alia, the World Bank’s Automated Analysis of the Distributional Impact of Social Protection Programmes (ADePT-SP) toolkit, and ILO’s Social Protection Expenditure and Performance Reviews (SPERs). The quantitative measurement of countries’ capacities, and how they have evolved, is an intriguing research area that deserves further investigation.

Figure 3. An Illustrative Typology of Social Protection Systems

Limited social protection systems

In general, countries with limited capacities are chronically food-insecure with high poverty and malnutrition rates, fragile ecosystems and extremely limited fiscal space. Two core sets of countries can be identified, based on their underlying stability. First are post-conflict and highly fragile countries, where most social protection is provided through donor-funded safety nets, often in the form of large humanitarian responses to recurrent emergencies. Examples include Liberia, Somalia, the Sudan, Haiti and Afghanistan (Harvey, 2009; Save the Children, Oxfam and CARE, 2009; Government of Afghanistan, 2008). Second are more stable countries that are laying the basis for longer-term social protection systems.

In these contexts – such as in Ethiopia, Malawi, Kenya, Nicaragua, Cambodia and Bangladesh – markets may allow a wider use of cash-based safety nets, and some insurance products might also appear (Government of Malawi, 2007; Regalia and Castro, 2007; Hess, Wiseman and Robertson, 2006; WFP, 2005). Some limited-capacity governments contribute to social protection with domestic resources, such as in Mozambique (Ellis, Devereux and White, 2009), but these national contributions are generally small compared with those provided externally. For example, the percentage of aid in gross capital formation⁷ in Mozambique is 118.9 percent, while in Liberia it reaches 473.6 percent (World Bank, 2009a). More generally, this group may include most of

7 The percentage of aid in gross capital formation measures the extent to which a country's capital – such as schools, roads, railways, hospitals and land improvements – is financed with national resources; this indicator signals the country's dependency on aid, thereby providing a proxy for its capacity to fund social protection systems domestically.

the countries that Ravallion (2009) defines as having “...little or no scope for making a serious impact on the problem of extreme poverty through internal redistribution from those who are not poor by Western standards”⁸(p. 19).

Emerging social protection systems

Countries with emerging systems are those where social protection has begun to be institutionalized. These include transitional economies, fast-growing Asian countries, and most Near Eastern and Latin American (e.g. China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa and Egypt). In these countries, international assistance has a more limited role, and systems are largely domestically funded.⁹ Basic social protection is sometimes mandated by law, such as in India (Supreme Court Commissioners of India, 2008); safety nets are mainly cash-based; formal contributory schemes have been introduced; and the private sector offers market insurance products (Alderman and Haque, 2007; Lindert, Skoufias and Shapiro, 2006). However, there is scope for significant improvements of these systems’ coverage, effectiveness and efficiency (Gao, Garfinkel and Zhai, 2009; Baulch, Wood and Weber, 2006; Giambiagi and de Mello, 2006; Sumarto, Suryahadi and Pritchett, 2003).

Consolidated social protection systems

The consolidated model reflects the sophisticated systems in most OECD and Eastern European countries. Benefits are primarily insurance-based, linked largely to formal labour markets, based on electronic and ICT infrastructure, and

financed domestically through tax bases. Social security, equity and welfare are among the key objectives that shape social protection systems in advanced economies (OECD, 2008, 2007; De Neubourg, Castonguay and Roelen, 2007; Lindert, 2005).

Taken together, these considerations convey a simple message: all countries have social protection systems in place, but their forms, objectives, composition and funding modalities vary dramatically. This diversity has generated different typologies of social protection, which call for context-specific approaches. Within this framework, the next section discusses key policy debates, including the issues of public versus market measures, the role of international assistance, and ways for social protection to foster economic growth.

MESSAGE 3: SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICY CANNOT BE FORMULATED IN ISOLATION

A number of broad policy debates have a more or less direct influence over social protection. Therefore, those issues should be recognized and addressed more explicitly also in social protection policy. This paper does not address all of these debates, but acknowledges three major areas of discussion: (i) the role of the State as a provider of social protection; (ii) the effectiveness of foreign aid; and (iii) the trade-offs between equity and efficiency. Together, these interconnected themes have a profound influence on social protection theory and practice. Any credible approach to social protection cannot be disentangled from these unfolding debates.

8 In other words, in some countries the marginal tax rate on the rich needed to close the poverty gap would be of 100% or more.

9 In countries such as China, India, Indonesia, Mexico and Brazil, the percentage of aid in national gross capital formation is less than 1 percent; in South Africa and Egypt it is less than 5 percent; and in CIS countries such as Armenia and Georgia it is about 10 percent (World Bank, 2009b).

Public action

The first debate relates to the *scope for public action* in the economy in general, and in providing assistance to needy people in particular. In a diverse world, there will always be passionate debate about where to draw the line for government action. A wide range of political, economic and ideological considerations feed policy discussions, often polarizing opinions and hampering consensus-building efforts. There are marked differences even among OECD countries – such as those between the United States and Scandinavian countries – reflecting the different approaches behind all the possible market-State combinations (De Neubourg, Castonguay and Roelen, 2007; Lindert, 2005; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004). Debates on safety nets are no exception, as safety nets are ultimately a form of public action.

The experience of higher-capacity countries shows that there are different pathways for introducing social protection systems, and that these have been anything but linear (Lindert, 2005; Noble, 1997). Neither has the process been spontaneous, but rather the result of continuous adjustments as a country's specific conditions change over time. Overall, national systems have been introduced gradually to be generally consistent with – among other factors – the level of growth that the country can generate over time. As some developing countries are advised to introduce social protection systems according to a different sequence and modality – that is, before rather than after sustained growth and adequate capacities have been established, and mostly with external rather than domestic funding – these initiatives may not necessarily lead to the same results.

Foreign aid and poverty traps

This second area of discussion is more subtle. In many contexts, social protection is funded largely by donors, especially in the limited/emerging models described earlier. Therefore, debates around social protection are closely linked to debates around *foreign aid*, its sustainability, and how it can help unlocking poverty traps (Barrett, Carter and Ikegami, 2008; CPRC, 2008). Indeed, discussions on social protection are increasingly interlinked with those on aid effectiveness. As a recent OECD policy statement put it, “[donor] actions in [social protection] must be harmonised and aligned with national policy, in line with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and Accra Agenda for Action” (OECD, 2009b, p. 15).

Calls for an expansion of social protection programmes will have to confront the “big push” approach – the theory advocated by Professor Sachs that envisages lifting people out of poverty traps by scaling up aid-funded investments (Sachs, 2006). The major detractors of this theory, most notably Professor Easterly, claim that top-down, externally funded plans have a grim record of failure in reducing poverty¹⁰ (Easterly, 2006). As debates on social protection in poor countries often entail the scale-up of donor-funded programmes, these conflicting views have a profound influence on donor aid policies, and thereby on social protection policies. What sustained livelihood impacts can be expected from a large expansion of safety net programmes? Would it be more effective to allocate scarce resources to enhancing the productivity of small farmers? These questions, which are matters of heated debate, anticipate the content of the third theme.

10 See for example a debate in the *Financial Times*: www.nyu.edu/fas/institute/dri/easterly/file/ftjune07_3.pdf.

Growth linkages

The third policy theme is perhaps the most contentious and intriguing: the *quest for growth*. This discussion is very relevant for social protection, as it helps to inform policy-makers about the impacts of alternative development-oriented interventions. In the context of limited budgets, social protection has to compete with other interventions, and its potential role as a driver or co-driver of growth is under scrutiny. The literature on presumed trade-offs between growth and equity is large, and the debate is complex (Whiteford, 2006; Ravallion, 2003; Moffitt, 2002).

In general, studies show that safety nets could foster growth in four ways:

- *Accumulating human capital.* For example, better nutrition among children may lead to higher income streams when they become adults, due to the combined effects of better cognitive development, school attainments and labour productivity; or protecting gains in human capital during times of distress.
- *Encouraging the adoption of higher-risk but higher-income livelihood options.* For example, farmers may underperform because of conservative practices but could be encouraged to shift to more rewarding practices.
- *Alleviating some market failures.* Examples include labour-intensive schemes to build bridges that connect markets; or providing cash or insurance to income-constrained households.

- *Reducing inequality.* Greater equality may enable marginalized people to participate more actively in inclusive and pro-poor growth processes.¹¹

These four linkages are changing the perception of social protection from a short-term palliative to an investment in future growth (Samson, 2009; Barrientos and Scott, 2008; Hoddinott, 2008; Alderman and Hoddinott, 2007; Dercon, 2004).

A number of information gaps remain however. For example, there is limited evidence supporting the claim that more predictable and multi-annual social protection generates higher impacts than do other approaches.¹² Moreover, long time frames are required to generate development benefits, such as human capital, while poor households face immediate trade-offs, which may not be compatible with longer-term investments. Long-term safety nets may help mitigate those trade-offs on the ‘demand-side’. But their ultimate effectiveness (in reducing inequalities in human capital for example) would also hinge on complementary investments on the ‘supply-side’ (Handa and Davis 2006). For example, if investments in education, including safety nets such as school feeding, are not matched by future job opportunities for using the skills acquired, there is little incentive for people to keep investing in education (Pritchett, 2001). Households at risk of starvation may rationally opt to keep children out of school, so that they can help raise household short-term income (Barrett, 2007). Overall, the underlying issue therefore seems to revolve around people’s incentives, the ultimate drivers of economic decisions and growth.

11 The relationship between inequality and growth is a much debated area of research. Chaudhuri and Ravallion (2006) differentiate between “good” and “bad” inequalities for growth, with the former reflecting the role of economic incentives in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, while the latter include inequalities that prevent individuals from connecting to markets and investing in physical and human capital – in other words, they reflect inequality in opportunities.

12 For example, it is unclear whether more predictability would encourage risk taking or rather foster moral hazard and negative dependencies (Barrett, 2006).

A related issue is that medium-term aims can overwhelm short-term needs. For instance, concerns over food production may prevail over the need to expand access to food, such as through safety nets. Conversely, a rapid and massive scale-up of safety net transfers in poor countries may neglect medium-term investment priorities. The design of interventions that create incentives for growth in the medium to long term, while meeting short-term needs in ways that are compatible with those incentives will likely remain an area of debate in coming years.

Further research is therefore needed for a better understanding and quantification of the overall policy and programme trade-offs involved, and ways of minimizing them. Specific research themes may include investigation of the factors shaping countries' social protection capacities and their pathways; the possible outcomes generated by prioritizing investments in social protection over other domains, such as agricultural productivity; validation of the predictability factor and related behavioural responses; and exploration of various combinations and sequences of different social protection measures, including comparison of these with other growth-promoting interventions. So far, these questions have been only partially answered.

Against this background, the next section argues that trade-offs are often overlooked or easily dismissed.

MESSAGE 4: SOCIAL PROTECTION RAISES IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONAL, FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

By definition, introducing or expanding social protection entails institutional reform and innovation. To understand the challenges raised by this imperative, the three main entry points for social protection in developing countries have to be considered: (i) breaking the cycle of recurrent emergencies requiring relief; (ii) enhancing systems' effectiveness and efficiency; and (iii) building constituencies and rights for social protection.

Relief cycles

The first entry point, breaking the cycle of relief, is based on the assumption that a group of people is likely to need long-term assistance, regardless of the occurrence of an external event, such as a covariate shock. Some chronic needs are therefore predictable, and a corresponding predictable level of support is required to address these needs in advance, rather than with post-emergency assistance. Clearly, such a risk management approach offers intriguing opportunities for embedding work on social protection within broader climate change and disaster risk reduction frameworks (Christoplos, 2009; Davies and Leavy, 2009). This common ground may include index-based risk transfer products, such as weather insurance, to reduce relief response times during crises (Barnett, Barrett and Skees, 2007; Hess, Wiseman and Robertson, 2006).

This approach is particularly relevant in contexts of limited capacities, as previously defined. Indeed, it has

triggered the shift from annual relief programmes to multi-annual support in contexts such as Ethiopia and Kenya.¹³ Some donors have a quantitative target attached to this approach. For example, in Africa, DFID aims to “...double to 16 million the number of people moved from emergency relief to long-term social protection programmes by 2009” (DFID, 2006, p. 60).¹⁴ However, most of these schemes commenced only a few years ago, and preliminary quantitative studies have been cautious about their developmental impacts (Gilligan, Hoddinott and Taffesse, 2008). The programmes also tend to be funded on a short-term basis, so the long-term outcomes triggered by more predictable social protection have yet to be fully verified.¹⁵

At the same time, social protection short-term responses to emergencies have not been very encouraging (Devereux *et al.*, 2008a; Save the Children, 2008). In general, social protection in countries with limited systems seems to lack the institutional flexibility for rapid relief response.¹⁶ Programmes are sometimes “lost in transition”, slow to tackle development problems while being unable to meet relief needs adequately. These gaps are often referred to as vertical and horizontal institutional linkages: the former concern the organizational chain and the decentralization of decision-making; the latter refer to the operational

arrangements and partnerships for linking safety nets with other food security interventions – “graduation” – or emergency responses (Slater *et al.*, 2006). Significant time is required to develop and refine capacities for making social protection responsive and counter-cyclical, or capable of being scaled up and down according to needs (Alderman and Haque, 2006).

Weaving the net

The second entry point for enhancing social protection is based on efforts to boost the effectiveness and efficiency of new and existing systems¹⁷. Frequently, several different social protection programmes are being provided by different actors with different lines of responsibility and accountability, resulting in patchwork governance and management. This may generate duplication of efforts, gaps in coverage and poor institutional coordination. In other cases, programmes are implemented in isolation and lack a coherent policy framework.

This second entry point therefore aims at “weaving the net” and harnessing its full potential. Such an objective is particularly important for emerging social protection systems, but it also has applications in other contexts.¹⁸ Activities for weaving the net include mapping, appraising, rationalizing, retargeting and costing programmes, and the overall streamlining and coordination of roles and processes.

13 Including the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia and the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) in Kenya: <http://hungersafetynet.org>.

14 DFID’s new white paper on eliminating world poverty states that “...our aim is to help build social protection systems to get help to 50 million people in over 20 countries over the next three years” (DFID, 2009, p. 25).

15 See Devereux *et al.* (2006), Sharp, Brown and Teshome, (2006) and Slater *et al.* (2006) for evaluations of Ethiopia’s PSNP.

16 In some contexts, emergency responses are considered to be an institutional activity that is separate from social protection. The latter includes long-term programmes to address chronic needs, while relief addresses short-term acute needs. In many ways, this seems a sensible distinction, since it is difficult to accomplish both short and long-term objectives at once. Progressive and flexible arrangements are needed to manage such delicate balance.

17 For example a recent IMF note argues that more social protection does not necessarily entail larger governments and that a number of options can be identified without increasing the fiscal space (Baunsgaard and Symansky, 2009).

18 See, for example, World Bank (2007b) for Pakistan; RHVP (2007), World Bank (2007a) and Devereux and Macauslan (2006) for Malawi; and World Bank (2006) for Bangladesh.

Rights and constituencies

The third entry point uses social protection as a means of enhancing social status and upholding rights-based agendas (Barrientos and Hulme, 2008a; Holmes and Jones, 2009; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Recent rights and advocacy campaigns in Southern Africa have fed into this debate, partly as a follow-up to the intergovernmental conference on social protection held in Livingstone, Zambia in 2006, with follow-up consultations in 2008. Sponsored by the African Union (AU) and civil society, those movements are building the political constituencies for social protection, calling on African governments to galvanize political and economic commitment to social protection (AU and Help Age Int., 2008; Government of Zambia and AU, 2006).

These campaigns propose the rapid institutionalization of social protection into national budgets and structures, often with little attention to countries' diverse capacities and priorities. They have raised the importance of social protection in national policy agendas, but they also risk misinforming or misguiding policy-makers.

State-provided social protection is often seen as an objective in its own right, ostensibly aiming to release people from chronic poverty. The lack of social protection is seen largely as a lack of political will. For example, at a social protection workshop in Mozambique it was declared that "...we [members of Parliament of Angola and Mozambique] reiterate that, with the requisite political will, social transfers are affordable and that our governments should explore, prioritise and implement social transfers in their various forms" (SADC Parliamentary Forum and RHVP, 2009, p. 2).

But trade-offs exist. Once a programme is institutionalized, it becomes more visible and formal. Eligible people can claim their rights to access to the programme, and governments must be accountable in meeting their obligations (Devereux *et al.*, 2005). This is a positive step, but it becomes controversial when bold long-term social protection commitments are institutionalized in low-capacity governments. As shown, such governments often rely heavily on short-term or volatile external support, and have limited possibilities for financing social protection domestically. A sequential or progressive approach to social protection is likely to be more appropriate than the shock therapy sponsored by some actors.

In Southern Africa, these trade-offs are exacerbated by, on one hand, the financial crisis, which has narrowed the prospects for fiscal revenues (OECD, 2009a); and on the other hand, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which is generating significant long-term demand for public support, especially for the elderly, orphans and care givers (DFID *et al.*, 2009). Citizens' expectations are raised, but the prospects for meeting them remain low.

Finally, national ownership of social protection is often limited, at both the conceptual and the implementation levels¹⁹ (Nigussa and Mberengwa, 2009; Chinsinga, 2007). Some actors seem more interested in convincing decision-makers about the merits of broad-based social protection, 'buying the agenda', than in informing them about real context-specific opportunities and limitations (Tibbo, 2008). In some cases, sustaining limited social protection packages seems affordable; in others, large shares of national income would be required for larger-scale programmes, such as 15 to 20

19 This may also include a longstanding concern by communities over 'top-down' approaches to social protection, and how systems can be influenced and strengthened from the 'bottom-up'.

percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in Burkina Faso and the United Republic of Tanzania, or even 45 percent of GDP in Ethiopia (Pal *et al.*, 2005). These figures are seldom mentioned in advocacy initiatives.

MESSAGE 5: SPECIFIC IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES INSPIRE LIVELY DEBATE

The programming of effective safety nets entails several interrelated choices spanning analysis, design, implementation and evaluation. These choices should be informed by solid lessons and evidence, but dogmatic views or ideology often play a role in shaping programming processes. Three examples of important implementation issues are described in the following: conditionality, transfer selection and targeting. These implementation issues tend to catalyse massive debate around social protection programming.

Conditionality

Experience with conditional transfers in Latin American countries has emphasized the importance of an integrated approach to poverty, health, education and nutrition (World Bank, 2009a). A conditional transfer programme requires beneficiaries to perform some activities in exchange for a transfer. Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes provide cash as an incentive for households to ensure medical check-ups or school attendance for their children.²⁰ School feeding programmes are a form of conditional transfer, as they require school attendance to obtain access to food (Bundy *et al.*, 2009).

There is passionate debate over not only the feasibility of conditionalities, but also their desirability. Some actors are adamant about not imposing behavioural conditions on beneficiaries (Freeland, 2007). In their view, transfers should be delivered unconditionally and free from any sort of reciprocity. Other actors suggest that conditional transfers do not force people to change behaviours, but rather promote appropriate co-responsibility between governments and citizens²¹ (Adato and Bassett, 2008). In addition to these philosophical divergences, a number of empirical gaps remain. Should outcomes be attributed to the transfer or the conditional service? How can specific outcomes be improved, for example, to address micronutrient deficiencies? And can conditional cash transfers be adapted to low-capacity contexts? These questions have started to be scrutinized empirically, but further comprehensive investigation is required (De Brauw and Hoddinott, 2008; Soares and Britto, 2007; Schubert and Slater, 2006).

Transfer selection

Another contentious programming area centres on transfer selection, or more narrowly the long-standing cash versus food debate. Devereux (2006, p. 11) noted that “...the ‘cash versus food’ debate has become unnecessarily polarised, even acrimonious. It is also spurious and misdirected”. These considerations still hold in some contexts. As outlined in the previous section, the most rigid positions envision cash transfers as almost the only modality for rights-based social protection schemes.

20 Lessons on CCTs are part of regional learning networks such as the Inter-American Social Protection Network and Social Protection in Asia, and cross-regional initiatives such as the Africa-Brazil Cooperation Program on Social Protection: www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/09/129473.htm, www.socialprotectionasia.org/newsandevents.asp, and www.undp-povertycentre.org/ipc/africa-brazil.jsp.

21 There are also approaches adopting ‘soft’ conditionalities. These are based on initiatives to induce behavioural change, but which do not envision program exclusion as a penalty for non-compliance.

However, in most cases, the debate on transfers is more constructive and less polarized than a few years ago, and there is growing consensus on the underlying conditions for utilizing a given transfer. It is now widely recognized that the choice of the most appropriate safety net transfers – in cash, food or vouchers – hinges on proper assessment of context-specific factors. These include programme objectives (e.g. nutrition, income transfer), the spatial and temporal functioning of markets, the availability of implementation capacities and delivery mechanisms, cost-efficiency analysis, and beneficiaries' preferences (Gentilini, 2007).

However, controversies remain on how to utilize different tools. Although there is growing experience with cash-based transfers in low-capacity contexts, it remains relatively limited and derives mainly from short-term and small-scale interventions, raising important technical concerns about the feasibility and knock-on effects of larger-scale operations (Devereux and Coll-Black, 2007). Almost all the evidence on longer-term impacts of larger-scale programmes comes from higher-capacity contexts, such as Brazil (World Bank, 2009b). In low-capacity contexts, there is a paucity of quantitative evaluations on, for example, the impacts of cash-based transfers on chronic malnutrition,²² measured by stunting or underweight prevalence. In this case too, empirical evidence comes almost entirely from countries such as Mexico or South Africa (Leroy, Ruel and Verhofstadt, 2009; Fernald, Gertler and Hou, 2008; Aguero, Carter and Woolard, 2007). In low-capacity contexts, areas for further investigation include long-run market-based nutrition trials, such

as vouchers for fortified food products, and seasonal transfer combinations.

Targeting

Targeting mechanisms are a third area of programming controversy. Effective targeting is key for maximizing programme impact and minimizing leakages. A number of targeting methods exist – for example, means-tested, categorical, geographical and community-based – with comparative pros and cons in each context. However, in low-income contexts where “everybody is poor”, it is challenging to differentiate rigidly between chronic and transitory poverty. Such distinction may become blurred in countries such as Zambia and Swaziland, where more than 80 percent of the population lives on less than US\$2/day, or Malawi and Mozambique, where more than 90 percent does so (World Bank, 2009b). This is particularly important for initiatives that envision a predetermined threshold for programme eligibility, such as the poorest 10 percent, who are included in cash transfer schemes in Malawi and Zambia (Schubert and Huijbregts, 2006; Schubert, 2005). These schemes have grown in popularity, but have stimulated severe criticism on their targeting methods (RHVP, 2008b). It is important to strike a balance between ensuring that benefits reach the most vulnerable populations, and avoiding artificial boundaries among and within almost equally vulnerable communities (Ellis, 2008; Mgemzulu, 2008).

22 Evidence in low-capacity contexts tends to be qualitative and descriptive, with few experimental or quasi-experimental trials to test for causal effects; Sharma (2006) is one of the few exceptions. However, also food-based interventions require more robust evaluations. Also in this case, Adelman *et al.* (2008) is one of the few studies available. In general, there is also a need for further robust comparative studies, such as the one by Ahmed, Quisumbing and Hoddinott (2007).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Interest in safety nets and social protection is growing exponentially. Ways of strengthening them are called for in high-level statements, researched in academic articles, and implemented by practitioners. Such developments are encouraging and may shed light on some long-standing humanitarian and development challenges. But the concept remains controversial, and there is a compelling need to clarify a number of issues.

This paper has delineated core areas of tension, and laid out key issues underpinning them at the analytical, policy, institutional and implementation level. Conclusions from our discussion can be summarized in the following three core remarks:

- *Approaches need to be fully compatible with prevailing cultural, social and economic factors.* Countries have followed different pathways to introduce and expand social protection systems. Context-specific factors should be fully recognized, and approaches tailored accordingly. There is scope for learning from each other, but it is not appropriate to simply replicate models developed in other contexts.
- *In developing countries, the debate tends to overemphasize conceptual issues and underplay administrative and implementation constraints.* Decision-makers face difficult trade-offs, some of which can be minimized while others are more difficult to reconcile. Introducing and expanding social protection systems do not allow for shortcuts or easy choices. Ignoring possible trade-offs makes debates naïve at best, and misguided at worst.
- *Rhetoric has often prevailed over evidence.* There is a need to inform decision-makers more fully, and not merely to convince them. This is true for both the advocates and the critics of social protection. A more balanced and pragmatic approach is required – based on technical partnerships, free from pre-packaged agendas, and genuinely owned and demanded by national governments and actors.

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Policy, Planning and Strategy Division

World Food Programme

Via Cesare Giulio Viola, 68/70
00148 Rome, Italy



World Food Programme