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High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition

Extract from the Report¹ *Social Protection for Food Security*

Summary and Recommendations for Policymakers

Food insecurity refers to both the inability to secure an adequate diet today and the risk of being unable to do so in the future. Social protection is a menu of policy instruments that addresses poverty and vulnerability, through social assistance, social insurance and efforts at social inclusion.

Social protection has risen rapidly up the development policy agenda. This report aims to review evidence and experience, and proposes recommendations for using social protection more effectively to protect and promote food security. The analysis is framed by the recognition that the right to adequate food and the right to social protection are human rights under international law, and that implementing social protection policies and programmes using a rights based approach is not only morally and legally appropriate but is likely to lead to improved food security outcomes.

People who are already poor are vulnerable to hunger because they lack the resources to meet their basic needs on a daily basis. They are also highly vulnerable to even small shocks that will push them closer to destitution, starvation, even premature mortality. The appropriate social protection response to chronic poverty-related food insecurity is social assistance linked to 'livelihood promotion' measures that enhance incomes. People who are not poor now but face the risk of future poverty are vulnerable to hunger if these risks materialise and they are inadequately protected against them (they will face transitory food insecurity). These people need effective 'social safety nets'.

Social protection systems should not be seen as 'deadweight' burdens on fiscal systems. Well-designed social protection interventions are good for growth. In particular, by preventing the depletion of assets and reducing the personal risk of investing for the poor, social protection can be a 'win-win' strategy: pro-poor and pro-growth.

¹ HLPE, 2012. Social protection for food security. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome 2012. Full report freely available at www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-hlpe.

Principal observations

- 1) Household-level vulnerability to poverty and hunger is most often associated with threats to livelihoods. Vulnerability can increase over time if households face repeated shocks that steadily erode their assets. One function of social protection is to install 'safety nets' to prevent this from happening – for example, by providing cash or food transfers or public works employment during periods of crisis and during the annual 'hungry season', as an alternative to poor households having to sell their productive assets or take their children out of school to buy food, thus contributing to the long run reproduction of poverty. Individual vulnerability and appropriate social protection measures can be analysed using a life-course framework. One under-appreciated feature of vulnerability is that it is persistent and recurrent, sometimes cyclical (e.g. seasonal).
- 2) Social protection covers a wide array of instruments designed to address the vulnerability of people's lives and livelihoods – through *social insurance*, offering protection against risk and adversity throughout life; through *social assistance*, offering payments and in kind transfers to support and enable the poor; and through *social inclusion efforts* that enhance the capability of the marginalised to participate fully in economic and social life and to access social protection and other social services.
- 3) A fundamental distinction must not be forgotten in social protection programming, between support to labour-constrained 'vulnerable groups' (e.g. young orphans or poor older persons), who might need long-term social assistance and have limited potential to 'graduate' out of poverty; and support to the 'working poor', who can benefit from the synergies between social assistance and growth-oriented developmental programmes, ultimately 'graduating' out of social safety nets.
- 4) Social assistance programmes that target women with social transfers or public works employment are likely to achieve greater impact on household food security than when men are targeted, because of women's dominant roles as food producers and carers within families. For this reason, women are often registered as recipients of food or cash transfers, and gender quotas are established on many public works programmes. However, the trade-offs that women are often forced to make between their productive and reproductive roles mean that careful attention must be paid to designing programmes in gender-sensitive ways.
- 5) The fact that access to food and to social protection are universal human rights, recognised by most states, provides the basis for a more effective and equitable approach to implementation, especially when these rights are underpinned by appropriate national legislation and when mechanisms are introduced into programmes that reinforce these rights by upgrading a 'handout' to a justiciable claim.
- 6) The various causes of food insecurity can be counteracted by a large array of appropriate social protection responses, while noting that complementing these with other options such as job creation and agricultural extension services may offer more sustainable solutions in the long run. Food production by smallholder farmers can be boosted with input subsidies, while harvest failures or livestock losses can be compensated with agricultural insurance. Unemployment or underemployment can be addressed, temporarily at least, by public works programmes. Problems of market access to food can be addressed on the demand side (food price stabilisation, price subsidies) or on the supply side (grain reserve management). Inadequate access to food can be addressed directly, through transfers of food (supplementary feeding, school feeding) or of cash (conditional or unconditional). While social protection is associated mainly with social transfers, this disaggregation shows that it offers a much larger menu of options. There is now enough empirical evidence on most of these instruments to draw lessons on the design and implementation of comprehensive frameworks that effectively combine several instruments into a coherent social protection system.

7) **Input subsidies** generally have positive impacts on agricultural production and farmers' incomes, reducing rural poverty and enhancing household and national food security. Subsidies can be beneficial to women farmers, whose access to commercially purchased inputs is often constrained. Notwithstanding several success stories, national-scale input subsidy programmes are extremely expensive and inefficient if generalised, and difficult to target at poor smallholders without large leakages to better-off farmers. They can result in negative secondary impacts on trade, markets, and the environment. Once introduced, input subsidy policies tend to be politically difficult to modify or abolish.

8) In contexts of high poverty, high risks and high premiums, privately provided **crop and livestock insurance** services cannot replace publicly provided social protection in the near future. There is an important role for the public sector in nurturing these nascent insurance markets. Weather-indexed insurance could provide governments with an effective social protection mechanism in the context of climate change, but much remains to be explored in expanding the uptake of this innovative approach.

9) **Public works programmes** have proved to be an effective instrument to deal with covariate shocks (e.g. floods and droughts), enabling consumption smoothing by food insecure households, but experience varies a great deal across countries. Successful programmes have made a big difference to creating or maintaining useful infrastructure (e.g. rural feeder roads), and improving farm yields (e.g. terracing and irrigation projects), thereby enhancing the incomes and food security of the rural poor. Common criticisms of public works – that heavy manual labour reduces the net nutritional value of food or cash wages and can exclude women and the labour-constrained poor, that assets often deteriorate after the project ends, and that these programmes are susceptible to corruption – can be addressed by careful design, implementation and monitoring.

10) High food prices and price volatility have become one of the most important threats to food security worldwide. The standard recommendation given to governments is to let domestic prices adjust. However, since food represents a relatively large share of developing countries' consumption basket, rapidly rising food prices cause inflationary pressure, hurt the living standards of many (frequently the majority) of the poor and near-poor and, in quite a few instances, trigger widespread social discontent. To avoid such outcomes governments often resort to a variety of interventions designed to put a wedge between international and domestic food prices, such as price controls and general price subsidies, taxes and tariff reductions, export restrictions (from export taxes to outright export bans) and releasing buffer stocks or emergency food reserves. A thorough discussion of policies to stabilise domestic food prices and macroeconomic responses can be found in the first HLPE report, on 'Price volatility and food security' (HLPE 2011).

11) A direct, untargeted **food subsidy** that lowers the price of a key staple for all consumers in a country tends to increase food consumption, especially by low-income consumers. Generalised food subsidies are politically more acceptable and administratively simpler than many alternative policies. However, they have many disadvantages. Their distributional impacts are regressive, inasmuch as the non-poor generally benefit more than the poor, while their costs (as a percentage of GDP) have risen so high as to be fiscally unsustainable in some countries, crowding out other essential social expenditures. Targeted subsidisation of staple food is a cheaper and less inefficient way to provide income support and food security to the poor, though accurate and cost-efficient targeting always presents challenges.

12) **Grain reserve management** was a major component of food security policies in the 1960s and 1970s. After a complex and difficult history, their role has greatly diminished, because they are often considered as a costly and inefficient mechanism. Nonetheless, the release of public food stocks did take place in many countries during the 2007/08 food price spike. National-level reserves can ensure that supplies of emergency food aid are readily available, and grain reserve management can complement

other social protection instruments that support national and household food security. The appropriate form, level and financing of such reserves require careful planning, and their management – procurement, storage and release protocols – requires constant vigilance.

13) **School feeding** programmes have dual objectives: reducing hunger and improving food security, particularly for children; and increasing human capital accumulation by providing incentives for children, particularly girls, to attend school and by providing food which helps children to concentrate and improve learner performance. Studies show that school feeding does increase the food consumption of learners, and many programmes have also improved learners' micronutrient status. Most programmes rely on geographic targeting, operating in localities where poverty or food insecurity is most prevalent. Sourcing food locally – 'home grown school feeding' – has an additional food security benefit, by providing a source of effective demand for local smallholders. Set against these economic and social benefits are the costs of delivering school meals. School feeding can be a valuable component of a broader approach to addressing food insecurity, especially where target populations such as adolescent girls are hard to reach with other interventions. They have additional value where they can be scaled up in response to shocks.

14) **Supplementary feeding** is used in this report in relation to children under five years of age, including the especially vulnerable group of young children from 6 months until their second birthday in need of 'complementary feeding' while continuing on breastmilk, and pregnant and lactating women. For these groups, providing nutritious food including micronutrient supplements (vitamin A, iron and folic acid in particular) can be seen as 'intergenerational social protection'. There is concern among many in the nutrition community about a new trend to promote the use of so-called Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Foods – initially designed for severely malnourished children – also for prevention of malnutrition, with the risk of creating dependency on this type of food.

15) **Conditional cash transfers** (CCTs) have three defining characteristics: they target poor regions and identify poor households within those regions; they provide cash (and sometimes in-kind transfers such as nutritional supplements) usually to the mother or primary caregiver; and in order to receive these transfers, recipients must commit to undertaking certain actions (e.g. sending their children to school and clinic). As such, CCTs aim to reduce both short-term food insecurity and the long-term intergenerational transmission of poverty and vulnerability. Studies indicate that CCTs can improve the quantity of calories consumed and the quality of diets, as well as the levels of achievement at school. Critics of conditionality point out that it increases the administrative costs and complexity of running cash transfer programmes. Some households may find the conditions too difficult to meet, and the services to which conditions are attached might not be available, or might be low quality. From a human rights perspective, some argue that it is indefensible to attach any conditions to the receipt of social transfers. This needs to be weighed against the interests of the child, not always fully represented by parents, and the gains in political support for transfer programmes when conditionalities are attached.

16) **Unconditional cash transfers** include government-run social grants for poor and vulnerable groups, as well as small-scale pilot projects usually financed by donor agencies and implemented by NGOs. While conditional cash transfers are common in Latin America, unconditional cash transfers are more popular in Africa, where public services are often less developed. Large-scale cash transfer programmes can have substantial positive impacts on food insecurity and poverty. South Africa's seven social grant schemes doubled the share of national income received by the poorest 20%, while the Child Support Grant alone has halved the poverty gap. Several studies have found a direct impact of unconditional cash transfers on food security and nutrition outcomes. Apart from direct consumption effects, cash transfers can also stimulate investment in agriculture and other livelihood activities by relaxing liquidity constraints. Cash transfers give choice to beneficiaries and support markets and local economic development. But

cash is less effective where markets are weak and food prices are high or volatile; in such cases, direct food transfers may achieve better food security outcomes.

17) The food security impacts of social protection programmes can be strengthened by linking them to **complementary interventions**. The risk of not linking social protection to sectoral programmes is that social protection will substitute for these programmes by default. This risk is exacerbated when social protection programmes are externally financed, because this reduces the incentive for government to invest either in social protection or in the under-invested sectors for which social protection programmes are compensating. This is one reason why government ownership of social protection programmes is crucial. Another reason is that government accountability follows more easily from government ownership.

18) Instead of single social protection instruments, a more effective approach is to combine several instruments that meet different needs of different groups, or the same groups at different times, into **comprehensive programmes**, thereby exploiting synergies between instruments. Examples include the Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction programme in Bangladesh, the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme in Rwanda, and Zero Hunger in Brazil. A new proposal in this report is the 'Food Security Floor', a similar concept to the 'Social Protection Floor', but which focuses on realising the right to food.

19) Several issues and challenges arise in the process of designing and implementing social protection programmes: how to target programmes accurately? how to avoid 'dependency'? etc. – and there is a growing body of evidence on each of these topics.

20) **Targeting** is any mechanism that identifies individuals who are eligible to receive support from a programme, and screens out the ineligible. There are three powerful reasons for targeting: to transfer resources to people who are food insecure, to focus limited resources where they are most needed, and for redistributive equity. But targeting needs to be well designed and implemented, to avoid the risk of transferring resources to ineligible or non-needy people (inclusion error), or of failing to transfer resources to eligible people (exclusion errors). There are also administrative costs, depending on the targeting mechanism, that take resources away from transfers to the poor. Substantive reviews indicate that targeted programmes, compared to universal transfers, provide greater resource flows to the poor and food insecure, and that there is no universally superior way of targeting among a large array of options.

21) **Cash transfers**, in contrast to food transfers, provide recipients with the freedom to choose whatever they wish to consume, can stimulate local agricultural production and non-agricultural activities, and is often cheaper than distributing food aid. But the provision of cash requires well-functioning local food markets to avoid inflationary effects, and efficient delivery systems to minimise risks of theft or corruption. Also, recipients of social assistance should have some say in the form of assistance that they receive, but beneficiary preferences are complex. For example, nominating women as recipients of cash transfers – as many social protection programmes now do – empowers them economically, but women often prefer food as they are more likely to control food than cash within their households.

22) Governments across the world are often resistant to introducing social protection, especially social transfers, because they have concerns about creating **dependency** among beneficiaries. Evidence suggests that well-designed social protection programmes do not necessarily create dependency. Instead, they help to reduce the burden of dependency within poor families and communities in the short-term, and can reduce dependency in the long-term by stimulating children's participation in education and adults' participation in labour markets.

23) **Graduation** refers to "a process whereby recipients of cash or food transfers move from a position of depending on external assistance to a condition where they no longer need these transfers, and can

therefore exit the programme”. It offers funders an exit strategy that allows programmes to be time-bound with fixed terms and fixed budgets. Unlike targeting, there is not yet a rich body of evidence to draw on to guide programme designers on appropriate graduation mechanisms. It must be recognised that some people can never graduate, that crossing a threshold does not necessarily mean the household will be self-reliant in the future, and that premature graduation could leave people worse off than before, if their informal support networks collapse because of their participation in the programme.

24) Even in countries with a well-functioning social safety net, it seems difficult to scale up this safety net to address a sudden shock such as a food price spike or an unemployment crisis. **Scaling up** means three things: introduce a new safety net programme; incorporate the new poor (as a result of higher food prices, for example); or increase the size of the transfer to compensate existing beneficiaries, at least partially, for the loss in purchasing power (when the safety net is a fixed amount of cash).

25) **Accountability** at every level is a key principle in operationalising social protection programmes in general and a human rights based approach to food security and social protection in particular. This includes putting into place accountability mechanisms at the level of both the state and service providers. To be effective, accountability has to be introduced in social protection programming, especially in government-run programmes that establish a justiciable (legally enforceable) ‘social contract’ between the state and citizens or residents to deliver food security and social protection, but also in projects financed and implemented by donors or NGOs. Systems must be in place to ensure that programmes are run as anticipated, and that eligible recipients are reached appropriately and are treated with dignity.

Recommendations to policy-makers

1. Every country should strive to design and put in place a comprehensive and nationally owned social protection system that contributes to ensuring the realisation of the right to adequate food for all.

Each country should develop a comprehensive social protection portfolio and action plan that seeks to address structural poverty and food insecurity, and to achieve MDG1 targets as part of a national food security and poverty reduction strategy. This process should be country-led with rigorous stakeholder consultation, including the active participation of local communities. One possible model for the social protection portfolio is the ‘Food Security Floor’ as proposed for consideration in this report, which would identify a minimum set of appropriate social protection and other interventions that would realise the right to food in each country. The design should start with a national food security assessment and should include: a mix of appropriate tools, goals and intended beneficiaries, targeting and registration methodologies, institutional arrangements, delivery mechanisms, accountability systems, sound monitoring and evaluation that includes impact indicators for nutrition, funding requirements and funding sources. Ensuring inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination is crucial, to ensure that social protection is integrated with broader food security programming.

2. Social protection systems should pursue a ‘twin-track’ strategy to maximise their positive impacts on food security, by providing essential assistance in the short-term and supporting livelihoods in the long-term.

Social protection is most effective when it delivers social assistance or social insurance to food insecure people, while simultaneously protecting or building productive assets that contribute to economic growth and reduce the risk of future food insecurity. Examples are public works programmes and conditional cash transfers, which transfer food or cash while investing in physical infrastructure

and human capital formation respectively. This requires strong linkages from social protection to complementary sectors such as education, health and agriculture. Social protection should also enhance poor people's access to key institutions, including markets and financial services. Any sustainable growth strategy needs a social protection component.

3. Social protection needs to be better designed and implemented to address vulnerability to poverty and hunger, for instance by being accessible on demand to everyone who needs assistance, and by putting contingency financing in place for rapid scaling up when required.

Most social protection programmes are not well designed to manage vulnerability. Chronically vulnerable individuals might need permanent assistance, recognising that not everyone can graduate out of food insecurity and reliance on transfers. Social protection must be predictable and reliable, to counteract the unpredictability and vulnerability of livelihoods that is a fundamental source of food insecurity, and it should be appropriate and sensitive to vulnerabilities at particular stages of life. Social protection systems should be designed in such a way that they can respond quickly to shocks such as droughts, floods and food price spikes. Positive examples include demand-driven employment guarantee schemes in South Asia, and safety net programmes in East Africa that added new beneficiaries during the 2011 food crisis.

4. Social protection for food security should be underpinned by the human rights to food and social protection at every level, from governments signing up to global agreements, to national legislation and programme implementation.

The right to adequate food and the right to social protection, as recognised in international human rights law, should be incorporated into national legislation, so that governments recognise their duty to implement and deliver these basic human rights and residents have a legal basis for making food security claims on the state. Following from recommendations by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, this could take the form of a 'framework law' which spells out the targets or goals to be achieved, the timeframe for achievement of those targets, institutional responsibility for the process, national mechanisms for its monitoring, as well as possible recourse procedures. Social protection programmes should include accountability mechanisms such as grievance procedures and social audits, which effectively upgrade social protection from charity or welfare to an enforceable entitlement, leading to improved service delivery and greater effectiveness in reducing food insecurity, while building a rights based approach into social protection programming.

5. Since a large proportion of the world's food insecure people earn their living from agriculture, mainly but not only as smallholder farmers, social protection for food security should support agricultural livelihoods directly.

The majority of poor food-producing smallholders in developing countries are net food buyers. Social protection instruments that promote agriculture should therefore be considered. These include input subsidies, public works projects that create agricultural assets such as irrigation, and home-grown school feeding that purchases food from local farmers, as well as integrated programmes that link cash or food transfers to agricultural livelihood packages and extension services. The 'twin-track' principle also applies here: poor farmers need support to increase or stabilise crop yields, while the poorest need immediate protection against hunger. Support to consumers (e.g. food price subsidies) should not undermine incentives for farmers. Special attention should be paid to the roles of women as food producers and care-takers with responsibility for food provision within their families.

Recommendations to the CFS

- 6 The CFS should actively encourage, monitor and report on the incorporation of the provisions on the right to adequate food and the right to social protection contained in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and in the corresponding international human rights conventions, into **national legislation and programmes** supported by an enforceable legal framework in all countries.
- 7 The CFS should support the elaboration and implementation of comprehensive national **social protection portfolio and action plans** in every country, linked to broader food security or poverty reduction strategies. Progress towards developing and implementing these action plans should be monitored and reported annually. The international community should favour funding social protection programmes that have met benchmarks for good practice to be spelt out in a Guidance Note that would need to be elaborated, and might include for example that the action plan was subjected to a rigorous civil society consultation, and that all proposed programmes observe human rights principles in their design and implementation. The CFS should promote the dissemination of good practice in social protection programming for food security, including sharing lessons from country experiences on the minimum information and institutional requirements for a comprehensive social protection system; recognising the role of non-state actors in social protection provisioning – international organisations, NGOs, civil society, farmers' organisations, the private sector, as well as informal or 'traditional' social protection mechanisms – and proposing coordination modalities for mobilising these actors to work together effectively.
- 8 While nationally owned social protection programmes for food security is the ideal, many governments will require **technical and financial support** from development partners and United Nations organisations, at least for an interim period. Reductions in food insecurity will be more rapid and more sustainable if the international community commits additional resources to expanding the provision of social protection, and the CFS should encourage this. The findings presented in this report provide persuasive evidence on the human and economic returns to investments in social protection for food security, so this argument is becoming easier to make as the evidence base accumulates.
- 9 The CFS should advocate for monitoring and evaluation of the impact of social protection programmes to include impact indicators for improvement in the **nutritional status** of beneficiaries. As a minimum, dietary diversity should be included as one such indicator, to provide a comparable measure of impact that can help to identify the most effective tools for addressing structural hunger and poverty. All monitoring systems and evaluations should include a gender audit, to capture potential heightened risks facing women and the girl child. More broadly, the CFS should support international efforts to improve the quality of evaluations, specifically for programmes related to food security and nutrition.
- 10 Many issues in social protection design and implementation remain unresolved, and many instruments are controversial, often because of bad experiences with weak programmes or because information is inadequate. Research into social protection is an international public good, so the costs should not necessarily be carried entirely by the implementing country. The CFS could play a role in ensuring that rigorous and credible **evaluations** are conducted – especially of innovative national social protection programmes with food security objectives – and that they receive appropriate levels of financial and technical support from the international community.
- 11 The CFS should encourage the establishment of a global system of **yearly notifications** on social protection, partly to share information and partly to create a platform for strengthening accountability. This would include reporting by countries on progress towards implementing social protection portfolios and action plans, also by international agencies on social protection activities they are

supporting in each country. Such reporting could be presented in an annual ‘Social Protection Monitor’ and should include progress towards establishing the right to food and to social protection in national legislation, as well as actions taken in respect of realising these rights through policies and programmes. More generally, social spending statistics in developing countries are not reported systematically by any organisation. The CFS should recommend that the regular compilation of social spending statistics, including spending on social protection and food security programmes, be assigned to one of the multilateral organisations of the UN system.

- 12 The CFS should ensure that the recommendations included in this report are incorporated into the **Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition**.