

Executive summary

Social protection is commonly understood as:

“*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 & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004: i)

This guide provides an overview of social protection concepts, approaches, issues, debates and evidence, and a selection of key references and signposting to further resources. It primarily focuses on longer-term developmental social protection rather than humanitarian responses, and on low-income countries, including in contexts of shocks, and draws on other income contexts where appropriate. It is not intended to be an exhaustive guide.

Key rationales for supporting social protection recur across the literature. Social protection can protect and promote human rights. Social protection is instrumental to the achievement of a broad range of development goals, including poverty reduction, education, health, nutrition, productivity, social inclusion, empowerment, equity, and state-building, among others.

There is well-documented evidence of the positive impacts of the progressive extension of social protection coverage on population wellbeing in multiple countries (ILO, 2017: 7). **Evidence** on social protection is extremely robust in some areas, and weaker in others. Social assistance interventions, in particular cash transfers, are well studied and there is rigorous evidence of what works. There is stronger evidence on poverty reduction, access to education and health services, food security and dietary diversity, and growing evidence on savings/productive investments, multiplier and labour effects. But there is less evidence on higher-order outcomes and medium- to longer-term

social development impacts such as maternal and newborn mortality rates, nutritional outcomes, and longer-term educational outcomes of learning and cognitive development. On longer-term impacts, one of the challenges is working out if the lack of evidence is because there is no impact or because of the methodological challenges of identifying long-term impacts (including a lack of longitudinal studies). The literature is in agreement that social protection has important developmental effects, but that alone it is typically insufficient to lift households out of poverty, with less evidence on transformative social outcomes, such as women's empowerment (albeit with a growing evidence base) and social inclusion.

A major recent shift in thinking is away from fragmented social protection programmes towards **comprehensive social protection systems**. This has largely been driven by donors, who are now investing in supporting governments to build integrated social protection systems. It also ties to an increasing focus on fiscal space and domestic financing of social protection, to ensure secure and sustainable social protection systems over the long term. **Areas of debate remain**. These include targeting, conditionality, and graduation. The long-standing debate about targeting has re-emerged in light of increasing calls for universal social protection. In terms of conditionality, there is positive evidence for both unconditional and conditional transfers.