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The Role of Food Security and Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection in Bridging the Humanitarian-Development Divide in the Southern African Region

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Executive summary

Food security in the Southern African region is shaped by myriad socio-economic challenges, compounded by sequenced crises along with COVID-19. The region has a complex socio-economic risk and vulnerability profile led by poverty and unemployment. Economic crises, protracted conflict and recurrent climate change and related threats intensify the impact of these risks and vulnerabilities.

Over the last few decades, countries in the region have endured one crisis after another and have been in a continuous vicious circle of response and recovery, with few opportunities to build resilience. Consequently, **the baseline levels of risk and vulnerability in the region are increasing with every shock, progressively stripping communities of the ability to protect and provide for themselves.**

Given the already fragile state of recovery, the COVID-19 pandemic has plunged the Southern African region into a deeper state of vulnerability, intensifying inequalities and heightening poverty and food insecurity. **The pandemic has provided a clear example of how a global shock can compound the structural challenges of previous crises, interacting with climate risks and the legacy of chronic malnutrition and complicated by co-infections and co-morbidities, leading to reinforced global, regional, and national inequalities.** Overall, the region faces a high and diverse shock burden, and the cumulative impacts of these shocks are poised to reverse decades of improvements towards a life of dignity for people living in Southern Africa.

The role of social protection in bridging both the humanitarian-development nexus and the dilemma of meeting long-term needs with short-term humanitarian funding cannot be understated. For decades, experts have advised rethinking humanitarian responses in the Southern African region, emphasizing that emergencies are no longer isolated events and that responses must adopt a longer-term outlook. Addressing the drivers of vulnerability best builds resilience, by linking humanitarian action to a broader development agenda. Yet, countries have stood at the crossroads of development and humanitarian needs repeatedly with little progress towards bridging the humanitarian-development nexus.

In the current Global Survival Agenda,¹ social protection will be a vital support mechanism to ensure long-term development progress while keeping sight of the SDGs. Social protection offers the potential to fundamentally change the development paradigm in the face of compounding risks and protracted crises. Social protection systems open entry points for tackling multidimensional risks and responding to cross-sectoral challenges by addressing the structural drivers of risk. Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) strengthens the inclusion lens of social protection programmes.

Food insecurity and malnutrition are triggers and serve to compound different types of shocks. FSN is therefore a strong entry point for social protection. In response to COVID-19 in the Southern African region, innovation has been at the heart of social protection responses, which have adopted an FSN-sensitive lens. Deliberately designing social protection programmes with adequate transfer values, adjusted to meet food security and nutrition needs, and rapid adaptations of the modality of delivery of school meals from on-site to home-based demonstrate the agility of governments and development partners in responding to crises, amid a significant number of challenges.

There are powerful synergies between social protection and food security and nutrition, and complementarities between the right to social security and the right to food. Effective social assistance programmes can tackle chronic food insecurity, while demand-driven or scalable safety net programmes can address transitory food insecurity and malnutrition

Food security and nutrition, the fundamental building blocks of a long-term prosperous society, must be at the heart of social protection system strengthening. Nutrition security is the foundation of the capabilities that sustain this prosperity over time. In turn, achieving success in optimizing nutritional outcomes builds the foundation for the prosperity required to sustain these systems, while

building the resilience that better enables societies to deflect future shocks.

Improving food security and nutritional outcomes requires a complex interaction of multisectoral interventions, with an integrated and comprehensive strategy that strengthens development synergies. Social protection builds bridges from sector to sector and makes markets work better for the most vulnerable, strengthening the linkages that contribute to food security and subsequently, to good nutrition.

Social protection can support this through a two-step react-then-pivot strategy. Unprecedented crises like COVID-19 shorten the planning horizon to an instant, requiring an immediate reactive response. This first step, the reactive step, aligns with humanitarian instruments and objectives. The second step builds on the first, pivoting to expand from emergency measures to longer-term development initiatives while bridging the initial response into the long-term, shock-responsive social protection system.

COVID-19 presents an immediate opportunity to expand coverage rapidly to traditionally overlooked population groups. COVID-19 has highlighted the vulnerabilities of traditionally under-prioritized or invisible groups and motivated governments, development partners and donors to address the challenges of informality and the plight of the urban poor urgently. The inclusion of urban populations and informal workers is a result of a fundamental shift in thinking.

During emergencies of COVID-19's magnitude, governments seek to meet the most essential needs first. That approach often leads governments to consider hunger and food insecurity as identifiers of at-risk populations, which include population groups that may otherwise be excluded. However, **during business-as-usual, with poverty reduction at the heart of social protection, broad-based**

¹ The recent decades have demonstrated how countries transition from one crisis to another—from climatic crisis to health shocks, conflict and war. In these situations, countries often lose sight of the longer-term vision of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as they are forced to manage and mitigate the impact of the crisis at hand. These recurring patterns of shock-response and mitigation yield a keener focus on the shorter-term objective of staying afloat, often at the cost of longer-term investments in sustainable development.

risks such as those represented by food insecurity or malnutrition are often overlooked.²

A systems approach to social protection looks beyond the delivery of individual programmes and interventions and focuses on investments in the building blocks that enhance inclusiveness and promote coherence and cost-effectiveness of social protection interventions. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of investments in systems that offer the highest, long-term value-for-money returns, while delivering immediate results in the face of crisis. Social protection responses in the region have recognized food security and nutrition as an essential requirement for the achievement of human capital and socio-economic development objectives.

A comprehensive systems response requires action at three levels:

- 1. Government leadership**—both political and bureaucratic—must react immediately in the face of an emergency, to authorize the necessary actions to initiate appropriate and timely responses. A serious crisis shortens planning horizons, sometimes to only an instant.
- 2. At the programme level**, coordination of existing social protection initiatives enables effective interventions to deliver immediate humanitarian responses that leverage existing systems, while strengthening the foundation for future social protection. Crisis multiplies uncertainty and exacerbates the complex challenges that food security and nutrition represent.
- 3. The integrated system of institutions that deliver social protection** benefits plays a vital role. The pathbreaking work of the humanitarian response builds the foundation for the social protection interventions that follow. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the dramatic benefits of linking every household to, for example, digital platforms—not only to ensure more effective and inclusive delivery systems, but also to strengthen development impacts in terms of e-market access, tele-health, high-quality emergency remote learning, knowledge-intensive agricultural innovation, and more productive cognitive-capital-driven livelihoods.

COVID-19 also presents an exceptional opportunity to invest in integrated beneficiary management systems or social registries to improve the timeliness and efficiency of future emergency responses.

The resulting mitigation measures have prioritized the digitization of social protection benefits, thereby presenting opportunities for enhancing financial inclusion and realizing efficiency gains. COVID-19 has presented unprecedented challenges and a host of opportunities for encouraging, enabling, and realizing intersectoral partnerships and solidarity. Humanitarian and development actors have demonstrated the power of joint advocacy and programming.

Nonetheless, **financing bottlenecks have affected the speed and adequacy of responses across the region to meet food, nutrition, and other associated essential needs.** The protracted nature of humanitarian crises over the past decade, compounded by inadequate development interventions, have vastly increased the volume, cost and length of the donor assistance required; COVID-19 has exacerbated these needs. Experiences from the region identify four pillars of investment towards building more comprehensive and resilient social protection systems:

- 1. Risk-informed strategies** that address broad-based risks
- 2. Evidence-informed advocacy**
- 3. Investments in integrated management** information systems, technology, and development delivery mechanisms
- 4. Innovative financing strategies**

Without simultaneous and necessary investments in protecting progress made in these areas and securing future progress, COVID-19 may yet again derail progress towards the SDGs and the achievement of zero hunger and malnutrition goals within our lifetimes.

The react-then-pivot strategy can support the development of comprehensive social protection systems, built on the foundation of food security and nutrition, that ensure the development and sustenance of prosperous societies, while keeping sight of the SDGs as a compass to ensure that long-term priorities are not overlooked. This paper has compiled evidence across the Southern Africa region and the collective responses to the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, to highlight the decisive role played by food security and nutrition sensitive-social protection in bridging the divide between the humanitarian and development sectors.

² (Dafuleya, G., 2020)





Introduction

Over the last decade, countries in the Southern African region have battled numerous shocks spanning multiple dimensions – health, economic, social, and climatic. More recently, the region has suffered the impacts of the climate emergency in the form of intense cyclonic activity and ‘El-Niño’-induced droughts and frequent flooding, while simultaneously recovering from the human, economic and social capital erosion resulting from the HIV and AIDS epidemics. Extreme weather conditions and their impact on agri-based livelihoods have compounded structural vulnerabilities and chronically worsened food security and nutrition across countries, leading to an unprecedented rise in hunger levels.

COVID-19 and the mitigation measures (including lockdowns and border closures) have been devastating for the region and have further pushed millions into food insecurity of “crisis-level or higher”. The adverse impacts on livelihoods have exacerbated and will continue to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, eroding community coping capacities, deepening inequalities, and intensifying food insecurity for the most deprived in the region. At present, the physical, economic, and social resilience of individuals, families and communities hangs in the balance.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the urgency of reinforcing investments in national social protection systems. Keeping the SDGs at the forefront of development planning and building forward through an integrated system of inter-sectoral investments in social protection—where

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