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COVID-19 POLICY BRIEF

Why does Food Security and Nutrition Matter in Social Protection Responses to Systemic Shocks in the Southern African Region?

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The past two decades have demonstrated the manifold pathways through which comprehensive and integrated social protection systems can enable and ensure food security and nutrition in Southern Africa. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the importance of these systems and illustrated the kinds of crises for which social protection must strengthen more effective responses.

COVID-19 is not the worst or last crisis that social protection must tackle, but it provides the world with a clear example of how a global shock compounds the structural challenges of previous crises and interacts with climate risks and the legacy of chronic malnutrition complicated by co-infections and co-morbidities. Building a resilient society requires a comprehensive approach that integrates multi-sectoral initiatives. Social protection provides a tool for harmonising these initiatives to create developmental synergies to promote food security and nutrition as the foundation for long-term regional prosperity.

How do food and nutrition security challenges affect Southern Africa?

In 2020, SADC estimates that the number of food insecure people in the region has increased by 10% from the previous year to 44.8 million people.² Policy initiatives aimed at tackling the region's food insecurity and malnutrition challenges have been unable to reverse worsening trends. The cumulative impact of cascading and interacting shocks risks reversing decades of improvements aimed at assuring a life of dignity for the people living in Southern Africa.

Climate change continues to be one of the leading causes of devastation in the region. At the same time, many continue to battle the long-term effects of the human, economic and social capital erosion from HIV and AIDS, conflict, and social instability, challenges compounded by demographic change and increasing vulnerability to global crises due to economic integration and the resulting inter-dependence. Many countries in the region face a continuous vicious cycle of shock and limited response, with few opportunities for sustained recovery and capabilities for building forward.

Compared to other parts of the world, countries in the region face a more demanding profile of development challenges, and the associated shocks generate more intense social and economic costs. The countries in the region lead an everyday battle with communicable and vector-borne

diseases (e.g. malaria, cholera), weak health care systems, low levels of education and poor and overcrowded living conditions without proper sanitation, infrastructure, and clean water. Inequalities are widespread in the region. According to the 2019 HDI report, inequalities (measured by the wealth quintile of the top 10% compared to the bottom 40%) increased in Southern Africa, and it is the most unequal region in the continent.¹ These socio-economic development challenges combined with high exposure to shocks heighten vulnerability and make communities far more susceptible to disasters.

A far higher number of people are hungry, food insecure and malnourished in the region today than in previous years. Despite rapid improvements and substantial progress in poverty reduction, food and nutrition security has worsened in recent years in several countries, including Madagascar, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe owing to the widespread droughts, generated by the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO). ENSO-related events led to the recognition of climatic emergency in the region with the catastrophic numbers of people experiencing “crisis” or “emergency” levels of food insecurity (IPC Phases 3 and 4).

In 2019, Southern Africa had 41.2 million people facing food insecurity with 30.3 million in a state of crisis or worse (IPC/CH Phase 3 or above),² up from 23.3% in 2018 and the highest in the last decade.³ In 2019, DRC experienced the world’s second-worst food crisis and Zimbabwe experienced the country’s worst hunger crisis in the past decade.³

Millions of families in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi are still recovering from the devastating consequences of Tropical Cyclones Idai and Kenneth; while Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, Mozambique, and Zambia are also suffering a destructive drought. Namibia and Mozambique had both extended their national drought emergencies to March 2020, while Lesotho declared a new drought emergency in October 2019. At the same time, vulnerability is rapidly rising as the lean season deepens and severe food insecurity already affecting nearly 15.6 million people in eleven countries across the region.⁴ Additionally, most urban poor households and those in informal settlements experience multiple deprivations, including inadequate access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities which expose individuals to microbial contamination and infectious diseases.⁵

¹ <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>. “Between 1995 and 2015 the income share of the top 10 percent in North Africa and West Africa remained relatively stable, while the share of the bottom 40 percent in Southern Africa declined... In Southern Africa the dramatic rise of the income share of the top 10 percent occurred at the expense of both the middle and the bottom of the distribution, whose income shares fell. Indeed, Southern Africa’s performance between 1995 and 2015 was highly negative (on average, the incomes of the bottom 40 percent grew 70 percentage points less than the average) and is the worst among African subregions...” (Page 117)

² <https://www.tralac.org/documents/resources/sadc/3977-synthesis-report-on-the-state-of-food-and-nutrition-security-and-vulnerability-in-southern-africa-sadc-2020/file.html>

³ While this measured increase was partly due to the addition of three countries (United Republic of Tanzania, Angola and Namibia) where data was unavailable last year, it was also due to a deterioration in the food insecurity situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe and Zambia.
(https://www.sadc.int/files/8415/8818/9448/GRFC_2020_ONLINE.pdf)

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/southern-africa-humanitarian-snapshot-april-2020>

⁵ FSN Network: <https://www.fsnnetwork.org/global-food-security-critical-role-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash>

How is the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating the crisis?

COVID-19 represents an exemplar case of the kinds of crises that compound the shocks that drive Southern Africa's increasing long-term vulnerability. A singular focus on mitigating the immediate impact of the crisis (on health and essential services) and ensuring economic stability and recovery may reduce the agenda to a risk-mitigation strategy, which might undermine prospects for long-term sustainable recovery and building forward.

Countries in the region (and globally) are reallocating expenditures, introducing budget cuts across sectors and redirecting the limited resources from chronic but “less emergent” risks such as climate change and protracted conflicts, while under-prioritising longstanding and multidimensional deprivations that continue to affect the vast majorities of the population.

Education, science, research, climate change and many other sectors have seen a reduction in expenditure. A lack of contextual considerations in what constitutes risk drivers can lead to unintentional damage. For instance, the reduction of funding for sexual and reproductive health care in the Southern Africa region will exacerbate risks of HIV infections and adolescent pregnancies with long-term implications for malnutrition, gender and socio-economic inequalities. Budget cuts are affecting most sectors, and when funds earmarked to tackle climatic shocks are reduced, it could compromise the mitigation of the effects of climate change.⁶

The compounding effects of COVID-19, economic slowdown and weak growth, rising unemployment and poverty, climate change and related risks, as well as the risks associated with a high prevalence of persons living with HIV, make navigating the various challenges simultaneously extremely important. COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of addressing risks across the full spectrum to build stronger, more resilient societies that are better able and better resourced to cope with shocks of this calibre.

Climate change exacerbates immediate risks for the large population involved in the agri-food and related sectors in the Southern Africa region, demanding a fundamental shift in development planning and response. Countries in the region have been battling a series of crises driven by climatic shocks, including acute food and water shortages, intense cyclonic activity and intensifying cyclical droughts and floods which contribute to unpredictability and economic uncertainty exacerbating risks for millions of people each year. The COVID-19 crisis, in the face of co-varying climate shocks, has demonstrated the enormous costs of “allowing it to spill over and completely overwhelm public organisations’ ability to function effectively.”⁷

The resulting impacts on social cohesion, conflict and stability can be substantial in the region. Studies have found notable increases in social and political protests in some countries since COVID-19.⁸ In fragile states and especially those with high levels of food insecurity and hunger, the risk of social instability remains high. Singular drivers of risk rarely cause social unrest and instability, but instead, commonly represent an accumulation of a complex set of interrelated factors.

⁶ Consultations from stakeholders in several countries.

⁷ Climate Change and Development in Africa Post COVID-19: Some Critical Reflections | ACPC Discussion Paper

⁸ <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/social-and-political-protests-exacerbated-by-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-increase-in-africa/>

Evidence from previous crises, including the 2008 global financial crises, demonstrates that food insecurity can multiply risks driven by low levels of economic development, demographic pressures and both the weakness or absence of social protection systems.⁹ The Southern Africa region manifests many of these compounding risk factors – weak economic growth, rising unemployment, rapid urbanisation, a high share of youth populations, and the existence of weak social protection systems—all these put countries in the region at high-risk of eroding social cohesion fuelled by incremental deterioration of food, nutrition, and income security and reduced access to quality of basic social services.

For decades, experts have recommended rethinking humanitarian responses in Southern Africa, emphasising that emergencies are no longer isolated events but rather inter-connected crises with underlying structural causes within broader socio-economic contexts.¹⁰ Addressing the vulnerability of communities best builds resilience by linking humanitarian action to a broader developmental context.

The COVID-19 crisis positions actors more squarely at the bridge spanning the humanitarian-development nexus. The recurrent crises sharply affect economic growth and resilience in the region; with direct implications for governments' capacity to respond or invest meaningfully towards redressing multidimensional deprivations. High debt ratios, and weakening economic growth continue to shrink the fiscal space for essential investments in development outcomes, as countries scramble to protect macroeconomic stability in the short-term.¹¹

Climatic, health or social shocks invariably result in secondary economic shocks. Primary and secondary economic shocks can be highly disruptive to both domestic and international sources of development financing, regardless of the source of revenue. Experts warn that the COVID-19 pandemic will have devastating consequences in this regard. The OECD estimates that if African countries were to implement the same immediate fiscal policy measures as the largest EU economies so far, all other conditions remaining equal, "Africa's government debt-to-GDP ratio would increase from 57.6% (2019) to about 85%."¹² Irrespective, governments in the region need to respond to maintain macro and microeconomic stability and continue at least basic levels of economic function. As a result, the health and economic shocks will put many countries on an unsustainable debt path, with consequences for future investments towards sustainable development.

How can social protection strengthen the response to COVID-19?

Comprehensive social protection represents an integrated system of inter-sectoral investments that tackle poverty and vulnerability and build resilience to shocks and stresses by strengthening inclusive social development and equitable economic growth.

⁹ <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5170-food-securities-and-social-conflict.pdf>

¹⁰ Holloway A., Chasi V., de Waal J., Drimie S., Fortune G., Mafuleka G., Morojele M., Penicela Nhambiu B., Randrianalijaona M., Vogel C. and Zweig P. 2013. Humanitarian Trends in Southern Africa: Challenges and Opportunities. Regional Interagency Standing Committee, Southern Africa. Rome, FAO

¹¹ https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/aldcmisc2020d3_en.pdf

¹² <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-and-africa-socio-economic-implications-and-policy-responses-96e1b282/>

An appropriate social protection strategy for Southern Africa recognises an essential and central role for food security and nutrition in building a prosperous society able to nourish all its people, and for which nutrition is the foundation of the capabilities that sustain this prosperity over time.

Social protection has the capacity to support Southern Africa in achieving fourteen of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It offers a vision of how social protection interventions can build the developmental synergies that enable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and build forward the comprehensive initiatives required to assure food security and nutrition and the prosperity this foundation promises.

Social protection systems open entry points for tackling multidimensional risks and responding to cross-sectoral challenges by addressing the structural drivers of risk. During widespread crises such as COVID-19, social protection investments broaden the policy framework, extending beyond singular goals towards a wide-ranging set of outcomes, building developmental synergies. The transformation of food into nutrition offers a clear example.

A society cannot develop based only on food security—a necessary but not sufficient driver of long-term prosperity. Nutrition, the foundation of cognitive capital and the essential capabilities upon which societies build and sustain their prosperity, requires an integrated and comprehensive strategy that strengthens developmental synergies. This complexity creates an opportunity for virtuous circles of developmental impact—but also poses risks of malnutrition traps.

At least nine core systems—food and agriculture, health, education, livelihoods, social protection, social care, infrastructure, water and sanitation—determine success in long-term nutritional outcomes. Social protection reinforces all nine. In turn, achieving success in optimising 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.

In this way, social protection offers the potential to fundamentally change the development paradigm, by bridging the humanitarian/development nexus and enabling inclusive social development and strengthening the dynamics of inclusive economic growth in the face of compounding risks and protracted crises. Social protection addresses both acute and chronic vulnerability, particularly in the context of escalating cyclical shocks. The overwhelming interest in social protection responses during COVID-19 has opened new avenues for these systems—both by demonstrating their affordability and their potential to mitigate broad-based risks, tackle the underlying structural drivers, and to contribute broadly to inclusive social development and equitable economic growth. As a result, governments are now positioning social protection as an integral component of the strategy for recovery and building forward.

Social protection can support a two-step *react-then-pivot* strategy strengthening food and nutrition security as the foundation of development and prosperity. Unprecedented crises like COVID-19 shorten the planning horizon to an instant, requiring an immediate *reacting response*. Like falling dominos, in March 2020 country after country—in Southern Africa and the rest of the world—imposed varying degrees of lockdowns and social distancing measures. The immediate impact on livelihoods and hunger demanded an emergency response. In response to COVID-19, humanitarian and development actors have demonstrated the power of joint advocacy and programming. Close coordination and support from partners such as FAO, UNICEF, and the World Bank enabled WFP to leverage its long-time comparative advantage among international agencies to move quickly and deliver results. For example, in DRC, UNICEF, FAO and WFP jointly

developed and secured substantial funding from multiple donors for a resilience-building programme at a scale that would not have been possible without the partnership. In Zambia, WFP, in partnership with other UN agencies and the government successfully implemented a comprehensive social protection response - an emergency cash transfer (ECT) for food security led by WFP, ECT for social protection led by UNICEF. Before the WFP-supported ECT was rolled out, WFP, MCDSS, ILO, UNICEF, and the Zambia Red Cross harmonised the targeting criteria, coverage and transfer value to enhance synergy and complementarity between the two forms of ECT for COVID-19.¹³

The second step builds on the first, pivoting to expand from emergency measures to longer-term developmental initiatives while bridging the initial response into the long-term shock-responsive social protection system. The primacy of ensuring food security expands to integrating the complementary initiatives that better enable food to nourish the long-term capabilities of people and the societies in which they live and work. Governments and their development partners cannot work in crisis mode indefinitely—even in the face of a protracted emergency. Bridging the humanitarian/development nexus builds the core resilience of nations, strengthens a range of developmental outcomes and provides the most effective long-term strategy for tackling shocks. Inevitably, even as the immediate shock rages, key policy actors must look to the future, for multiple reasons: (1) the costs of singular emergency response press against resource constraints, (2) the uncertainty diminishes, providing a clearer picture of medium-to-long term challenges that require careful planning, and (3) the economic costs of the crisis compound, requiring more developmental approaches. The most supportive agency will prepare for the developmental pivot even in anticipation of the initial shock. While the immediate priority always focuses on the *reacting response*, the critical determinant of success revolves around the *developmental response*, the actions that promote recovery and building forward.

The two-step react-then-pivot strategy addresses the necessary trade-offs between addressing the most pressing and emergent needs and tackling longer-term development goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals. The react-then-pivot approach addresses the most immediate priorities through humanitarian response without compromising long-term goals. Ultimately, the food and nutrition cornerstone enables comprehensive social protection to support delivering the SDGs and build the kind of resilience that is necessary to tackle the likely acceleration of global shocks. The following sub-sections review how diverse programmatic interventions can both deliver immediate humanitarian responses to crises while also enabling longer term support to recovery and developmental strategies.

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