

Social protection as a means of combating poverty and hunger in developing countries

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Background

The fight against hunger has long been an important theme of the international work of Church of Sweden. Much of this work involves promoting people's opportunities to support themselves, partly through aid to microfinance institutions and agricultural development.

However, hunger and poverty cannot be eradicated solely by improving people's ability to earn a living. This work needs to be supplemented by methods that directly strengthen the purchasing power of disadvantaged people through various forms of social protection.¹ Documented experiences² show that direct support can be a necessary method of reaching the people who are the most vulnerable because they often lack the capacity to become self supporting, such as the chronically ill, children and the elderly. Improving people's purchasing power becomes even more important in the light of the increasingly volatile food prices seen in recent years.

The view of humanity that characterises social protection is founded on a trust in people; the idea that people are able to handle money themselves even if they live in the most disadvantaged situation and the greatest poverty.

Church of Sweden advocates for social protection based on the church's prophetic mandate, to expose injustice and provide a voice for disadvantaged people, and on the basis of the special role the Church has long had in the field of health and social care. This is thus well in line with our diaconal mission – service and care for our fellow human beings.

By advocating for social protection in developing countries, we are also forging an important link between the commitment to social issues in Sweden and our international work.

¹ There are a number of different definitions of social protection systems. The definitions of the ILO and the OECD, among others, encompass social insurance (payment based), social transfers (tax or aid-financed) and labour law. In this position paper the focus is on social transfers.

² Brot für die Welt (ed), 2005. *Gesichter des Hungers. Der Hunger Report*.

Introduction

Social protection in the form of cash transfers, such as family allowances, child benefits and social pensions, as well as public work programmes, has emerged in increasing numbers of developing countries in recent years. This trend is most prominent in middle-income countries, but there are also a series of examples in low-income countries.

A large number of scientific evaluations demonstrate that social transfers generally produce good results: malnutrition decreases, particularly among children, more children go to school and people's health improves. Experience also shows that such transfers do not make people passive; instead they give vulnerable people greater opportunities for acting with a long-term approach, taking risks and improving their means of providing for themselves. Social protection thereby constitutes an investment in people who will have a better chance to contribute to and benefit from economic growth in their country.

There is also some evidence that social protection can help create the social trust that is essential for building a democracy and sound public institutions in society – including tax systems.³

Social protection has the potential to contribute to increased gender equality, because women are more exposed to poverty than men; they are employed on an informal basis more often than men; and in general live longer than men and are therefore in more need of old age pensions. If social protection systems are designed in a gender-sensitive manner, they can contribute to a transformation of unequal gender relations and challenge unequal power relations. If, however, proper attention is not paid to gender inequality, there is a risk that women's traditional roles are reinforced, and that unequal division of labour and access to decision-making are becoming worse.

Social protection can also form a key part of a country's adaptation to climate change, because it reduces the vulnerability of poor and unprotected people to extreme weather and other climate-related risks.⁴

The expansion of social protection is clearly justified by a rights perspective. Social protection is in itself a human right⁵ and also comprises an effective way of realising other fundamental human rights. Social protection can also be justified in purely economic terms – well-nourished and educated citizens have greater conditions for contributing to a country's economic growth.

Social transfers that affect large sections of the population are expensive. For example, universal old age pensions and child benefits in low-income countries in Africa would amount to 1 percent and 2–3 percent of GNP respectively. It is therefore necessary to develop social protection gradually, while at the same time building up the tax system to enable long-term financing. In general, there is also a certain amount of scope for re-prioritising public expenditure. In many countries, for example, there are subsidy systems for fuel and food that benefit poor people to a considerably lesser extent than cash transfers would do.

The expansion of social protection in developing countries has primarily been driven forwards via internal political processes in the countries themselves and only in exceptional cases through international development aid. In recent years, however, interest in social protection has increased in a number of international organisations⁶, and today there is a consensus among donor countries that aid does have an important role to play in developing social protection in poor countries.⁷ While social protection is developing quickly in many places, in the vast majority of low-income countries, it is still entirely insufficient.

3 B, Rothstein (2010) *Corruption, happiness, social trust and the welfare state: a causal mechanisms approach*, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg

4 M. Davies, J. Leavy, T. Mitchell, and T. Tanner, *Social Protection and Climate Change Adaptation*, Policy brief prepared by the Institute for Development Studies for the Commission on Climate Change and Development, 2008.

5 The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 22); the UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (article 9); the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2008) *General Comment No. 19, The Right to Social Security E/C.12/GC/19*.

6 All UN bodies, including the World Bank, have agreed on an initiative entitled *The Social Protection Floor*. This advocates a kind of minimum package of social protection covering old age pensions, child benefit, public work programmes and basic health care.

7 OECD/DAC (2009) Policy Statement on Employment and Social Protection. In *Promoting pro-poor growth: Social protection*.

The views of Church of Sweden

Overall views

- Social protection is a central tool in reducing poverty and achieving several of the UN's Millennium Development Goals⁸, and in realising the right to food and other fundamental human rights.
- In each country the state bears fundamental responsibility for introducing and maintaining social protection. The starting point is that social protection is to be financed nationally through the tax system.
- ODA can play a very important role, above all in the initial phase of developing various transfer systems. According to the international human rights framework, countries also have an obligation to assist those states that do not have sufficient assets to fulfil this right to social protection. There is also motivation for more long-term international funding of certain social transfers, such as within the framework of industrial countries' long-term commitment to contribute financially to the climate adaptation of developing countries.
- Social protection must be designed on the basis of the unique political and economic conditions of each country.
- Social protection systems must be planned and implemented in a gender-sensitive manner. If this is done, they can contribute to increased gender equality. Otherwise, social protection systems run the risk of reinforcing unequal power relationships.
- Social protection may be conditional⁹ or unconditional; it may be means tested or cover all people in a particular category of the population. Irrespective of how it is designed in these respects, the fundamental principles of the international human

rights framework should be observed. The social protection established must, for example, not further stigmatise disadvantaged or poor people or be implemented in such a way as to risk damaging people's opportunities to support themselves. Nor may social transfers be designed in a discriminatory manner. One important rule of thumb is that the systems must be designed so simply that people themselves can tell whether or not they are entitled to support. From a rights perspective, making support conditional should be avoided because the fulfilment of rights must not be made conditional upon the behaviour of the recipient. For political reasons, however, social transfers may not be possible to introduce unless they are conditional.¹⁰

Views on the role of Sweden

Sweden's historical experience of developing its own social protection system means that we have important experiences to share. In addition, there are great expectations that Sweden should help to develop social protection systems in other countries by sharing its expertise and by providing financial support. These expectations have so far only been met to a limited extent.

- Sweden should develop a policy for social protection and actively participate in the policy development in this area now being carried out by bodies such as the World Bank.
- Sweden should contribute financially to the development of social protection in low income countries through its bilateral development aid. Within the framework of Sweden's Policy for Global Development, Swedish agencies should be charged with contributing experiences of and providing capacity support for developing social protection.¹¹

8 Particularly Goal 1 – Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and Goal 2 – Achieve universal primary education. The goals to promote gender equality and empower women (3), reduce child mortality (4), improve maternal health (5) and combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (6) are also affected.

9 Provided in return for a certain behaviour, e.g. the recipient having their children vaccinated or children attending school.

10 Sofia Nordenmark (2011) Sociala trygghetssystem stärker de mänskliga rättigheterna (Social protection strengthens human rights) In Axelsson Nycander (ed.), *Pengar i handen: sociala trygghetssystem som metod för att bekämpa fattigdom och hunger. (Cash in the hand: social protection as a method of combating poverty and hunger)* The Church of Sweden and the Nordic Africa Institute.

11 Government bill 2002/03:122 Shared Responsibility: Sweden's Policy for Global Development. See pages 28–29. <http://www.sweden.gov.se/content/1/c4/07/73/874fe3e0.pdf> In English at <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/3365/a/146966>

The role of Church of Sweden in relation to partners

The development activities that the partners of Church of Sweden are carrying out should be seen in the light of the fact that social protection plays a central role in combating poverty in both medium and low-income countries, just as was the case in Sweden.

It is the responsibility of the state to build and finance social protection systems. At the same time, civil society organisations, including churches, can play an important role by supporting and encouraging development. Civil society organisations can promote the development of social protection in several different ways (see appendix 2).

The work carried out by Church of Sweden's partners in this context needs to be made visible, and the support of Church of Sweden for different forms of such work should be developed. This might involve support to continue or expand operations that a partner organisation is already carrying out, and capacity support to enable the partner to develop new ways of working or play an active role in networks on the issue of social protection. Particular caution must be observed in terms of support for activities that complements national social protection systems. Such initiatives need to be specially justified and clearly delimited.

Appendix 1: Social protection systems in relation to the guiding perspectives

THE RIGHTS AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE: Social protection is in itself a human right. Arguments in favour of social protection are largely based on a rights perspective, a perspective that also serves as good guidance in the debate about how social protection should be designed. Social protection has the potential to particularly benefit women because women's employment tends to be more informal than that of men and women are at greater risk of poverty than men.

ECONOMICAL AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY: Social protection contributes towards local economic development in that people's abilities increase and they are able to act more in the long term and take more risks. Unlike time-limited development projects, social protection must be a permanent element in society. Even if individuals are only dependent on support during certain periods of their lives, it is crucial to people's security that protection systems are available when they are needed. To the extent that poverty and vulnerability contribute towards people overexploiting natural resources, social protection can help to reduce the pressure on such resources at a local level.

THE RECONCILIATION PERSPECTIVE: Social protection contributes towards the social cohesion that is needed if societies are to function and be able to cope with various kinds of changes. There are strong links between social trust, social protection and good institutions. Social protection can help to create the social trust that in turn makes it easier to create good institutions, including tax systems.

Appendix 2. The role of civil society in the development of social protection

Depending on the local and national context, civil society organisations can contribute towards developing social protection in different ways.¹²

- Help people to claim their rights, for example, by informing disadvantaged people of the benefits to which they are entitled, helping them to obtain identity documents, and strengthening people's capacity to demand their rights through rights-based work.
- Advocate in favour of the development of social protection.
- Monitor the implementation of social protection, draw attention to mistakes and blow the whistle when representatives of local authorities are corrupt.
- Participate in the implementation of social protection. In many cases churches and other civil society organisations have a local presence and capacity that the authorities can make use of in the implementation of social protection.
- Complement governmental social protection systems. When governmental social protection is non-existent or poorly developed, there are needs that non-state systems may be able to meet.

Synergies may arise if organisations play several of these different roles simultaneously, but so too may conflicts between goals and loyalties occur, and these are important to address.

¹² Gunnel Axelsson Nycander, 2011. Sociala trygghetssystem och utveckling: behöver vi tänka nytt? (Social protection systems and development: do we need to think again?) In Axelsson Nycander (ed.), *Pengar i handen: sociala trygghetssystem som metod för att bekämpa fattigdom och hunger*. (Cash in the hand: social protection as a method of combating poverty and hunger) Church of Sweden and the Nordic Africa Institute.

COVER PHOTO: Some of the clearest effects of cash support are higher school attendance and a reduction in child malnutrition, leading to better school results. The picture shows schoolchildren in Haiti.

PHOTO: Paul Jeffrey/ACT

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