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Public works programmes for protection and climate resilience: theory of change and evidence in low-income countries

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There is growing interest globally in the role that social protection (SP) can play in promoting resilience to climate change. Public works programmes (PWPs) have been identified as particularly suitable interventions for achieving this goal, although little conceptual understanding of how they might play this role has been developed. In this One Pager we present a broad Theory of Change (ToC), showing how PWPs could potentially increase resilience to climate change, and describe briefly the evidence base.

Theory of Change - We define resilience to climate change as the capacity of a social system to cope with a hazardous event, responding in ways that maintain its essential function, identity and structure, while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation. It also has two subcomponents: coping capacity and adaptive capacity. The first relates to the capacity to withstand and recover after a climate shock; the second, to the ability to adjust to potential damage, take advantage of opportunities and respond to consequences. The ToC indicates that PWPs have the potential to affect resilience through three main vectors: wage, assets created, and skills and work experience.

Wage - The wage can have an impact on *coping capacity* by improving access to food, preventing distress selling of productive assets and enabling savings. The specific requirements for positive impact are: (i) the wage level must be adequate to meet consumption needs; (ii) the opportunity cost of collecting the wage must be low; (iii) payment must be regular, reliable and frequent; (iv) employment must be of sufficient duration to have a significant impact; (v) the duration of individual employment should not be reduced by subdividing employment opportunities among the community; and (vi) the timing of employment should reflect seasonal variations in food security and domestic and market labour demand.

In relation to increasing *adaptive capacity*, the cash enables investment in productive inputs and capital, which can support livelihood diversification into activities less vulnerable to climate change and enable beneficiaries to move out of the least well remunerated forms of casual labour. The preconditions for positive impact on adaptive capacity are as above but with the additional requirement that the wage level must be sufficient to enable investment as well as to meet immediate needs.

Assets - The asset construction component can help increase coping capacity and contribute to positive changes in livelihoods strategies such as diversification or a shift to alternative farm-based or off-farm practices. The requirements for this impact are related to the relevance, quality and functionality of the assets, and to the accessibility of its benefits. In particular, assets must be relevant to local needs; must be designed, located and constructed in line with technical specifications, with adequate capital inputs; labour-intensive methods must be adopted; adequate technical inputs must be ensured during design, implementation and maintenance; local government and/or community ownership and management of the asset must be ensured; follow-up maintenance must take place to ensure ongoing functionality; access to asset benefits must be equitable; and the functionality and usage of the asset must be monitored.

For assets to positively affect *adaptive capacity*, PWPs must also improve returns to labour, either by increasing productivity or by enabling the adoption of alternative or diversified livelihoods which are less vulnerable to climate change. To have an impact, assets need not only to meet the requirements for coping capacity but may also require that functioning markets are in place to allow for the purchase of inputs and/or marketing of outputs.

Skills and work experience - Skills can be gained either through on-the-job training and experience or through associated skills training initiatives. These can potentially enhance resilience by increasing *adaptive capacity* by promoting increased returns to labour, either through beneficiaries' own production or through wage employment. Moreover, PWPs can be a vehicle for raising awareness relating to climate change and improve decision-making. The prerequisites for this are: (i) adequate contact time; (ii) availability of trainers; (iii) relevance of training/skills to local context and to resilience; (iv) requisite capital and resource inputs available to enable beneficiaries to use skills for their own production; (v) market demand for skills acquired; (vi) mobility of labour; and (vii) availability of relevant climate information.

Evidence in low-income countries - International evidence is mixed on the impact of the wage in general, with the value of the wage and duration of employment being the key determinants of their impact on poverty reduction. Evidence indicates that wages, when well targeted at the poor, are primarily consumed. In most PWPs in low-income countries, wages are rarely sufficient to enable significant investment in anything other than survivalist microenterprise or the accumulation of small household assets.

There is little evidence on the impact of PWP assets in general, or on livelihoods and resilience in particular (Ludi, Levine and McCord 2016). Priority is usually given to the evaluation of cash or food transfer components of PWPs, rather than the assets created, and in the few instances where they have been formally appraised their impact on livelihoods has been found to be limited, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that PWP assets are frequently of low quality and, as a result, their climate resilience potential is compromised.

PWPs have not generally been successful in promoting significant skills development. The contact time available for formal skills development is often limited, and the skills acquired are not always readily transferable

Not only is more research needed to inform reflection on the potential role of PWPs in promoting resilience, but there is also a need to invest more in the quality and relevance of the assets created through PWPs if they are to make a significant contribution to improving beneficiaries' resilience.

References:

Ludi, E., S. Levine, and A. McCord. 2016. *Assessing the Livelihoods Impact of NRM PWP Assets.* London: Overseas Development Institute.

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