

The multiple, potential and actual effects of social protection

Nino Gogsadze, Bonn Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences (H-BRS) & German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)

Evidence is the key to assessing what actually works on the ground.

Part VII of the Handbook on Social Protection Systems (Schüring and Loewe 2021) discusses the existing evidence for social protection programmes, their challenges and the underlying theories of change.

Considering the spectrum of factors that can influence the impact of social protection policies and programmes, measuring their performance can be a challenge. To assess whether interventions are reaching the expected results and to understand if and eventually how they should be expanded or replicated, an impact evaluation must be conducted. Rigorous quantitative impact evaluation, however, can be an expensive and taxing task and are not always available for all outcome areas. There are also challenges in comparing results of similar policies across countries, especially due to different indicators used in different studies (as described in Chapter 33 of the Handbook).

Similarly, the growing recognition of the need for an evidence-informed approach to funding programmes has led many agencies to commission systematic reviews of global evidence to inform their decision-making process. Sometimes, reviews that do not meet practice standards can lead to incorrect findings and the dissemination of low-quality studies. The Handbook introduces the 'evidence and gap map' (EGM) tool under the case study on social protection interventions and related outcomes in low- and middle-income countries. EGM informs about the current state of evidence, identifying research gaps and highlighting high-quality studies, with the ultimate goal of facilitating informed judgment and improving decision-making.

The role of social protection in reducing poverty and inequality is particularly evident in times of crisis, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social transfers are a widely used tool. Focusing on monetary poverty and income inequality, the review of empirical evidence suggests that social protection is key to poverty alleviation, at least in the short to medium term. For instance, immediate effects of extra household income via cash transfers include increased consumption, changes in the approach to investment and savings, impacts on labour and education. However, the extent to which certain tools can be successful depends on many factors. For example, the impact of taxes on financing social transfers must be considered carefully, as it may negatively affect some population sub-groups and ultimately lead to an increase rather than a decrease in poverty and inequality in the long term (Chapter 34).

Social protection can contribute to long-term and inclusive economic growth. Cash transfers can enable households to conduct effective risk management, and efficiently allocate and invest additional resources in their income-generation activities. The multiplier effects of social

protection tools through, among others, asset accumulation, human capital investments and greater consumption can result in longer-term poverty and inequality reduction. With the system's approach, and when used in combination with other interventions—allowing poor households to access knowledge, inputs, and other factors of production—social protection provides contributes to the combined efforts to sustainably exit from poverty (Chapter 37).

Social protection effects on health can be generated through two major channels: by reducing the risk of immediate expenditure (financial protection) and by encouraging the prompt use of healthcare facilities. If the goal of social protection is to improve human health outcomes, income benefits seem to be more effective than an increase in healthcare utilisation, especially in the presence of poor healthcare systems (Chapter 36).

Evidence suggests that cash transfers alone, while successful in improving food consumption, usually seem to fail to improve final nutritional outcomes. When the reasons for a poor-quality diet lie in the lack of adequate information on nutrition or imperfect nutritional practices rather than budget constraints, (unconditional) cash benefits alone are unlikely to play any role in nutritional outcomes (Chapter 35).

Recently, there has been a shift towards viewing social protection through a 'social contract' lens to build equitable relational and inclusive nations. Yet, only a few of the available studies have empirically analysed the impact of such programmes on social cohesion. Social protection programmes can be difficult to operationalise in societies with deep-seated social exclusion and remote areas, and with predominantly informal economies. If programmes are designed and delivered paying specific attention to social inclusion and building trust—ideally with a notion of a rights-based social contract—they can contribute to social cohesion, trust, and nation-building (Chapter 38).

TABLE 1
Expert Voices in Part VII of the Handbook on Social Protection Systems

Chapter	Page	Expert	Video/Podcast
Introduction	5	Francesco Burchi	Introduction: Effects
33	6	Dr. Tilman Altenburg	Digitalisation

Note: The videos can be found in the [multimedia version of the handbook](#).

Reference:

Schüring, E., and M. Loewe (editors). 2021. *Handbook on Social Protection Systems*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.