



Social Protection by Design

IFPRI's evaluations of social protection programs have not only helped show how best to design such interventions but have also contributed to a culture of accountability in social programs worldwide.

The idea that the most vulnerable people in society deserve a certain level of social protection, or safety from shocks and poverty, has been around for thousands of years. But it is only in the last two decades that social protection has begun to be thought of as a strategy for economic development. In the mid-1990s, an idea emerged in Bangladesh, Brazil, and Mexico nearly simultaneously: instead of simply transferring food or cash to poor people, what if these transfers were made conditional? In order to receive a food basket or a cash voucher, beneficiaries would have to, for example, make regular visits to the health clinic or send their children to school. This change might not only lead to short-term security for vulnerable citizens, but also contribute to their longer-term welfare and development.

Testing a New Idea in Social Protection

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) became involved in this pioneering trajectory of social protection early on. Near the beginning of the 1990s, the Institute evaluated a targeted food-subsidy program in Bangladesh, finding that 70 percent of the subsidized food, mostly rice, was not reaching poor households. Primarily owing to these findings, the government of Bangladesh abolished the program in 1992 but still struggled with how to ensure the food security of 6.1 million former beneficiary households.

One year later, IFPRI contributed to a novel idea: food for education. Families would be given food transfers in exchange for ensuring that their children attended school. The government introduced a pilot food-for-education program with improved geographic targeting, and an initial assessment by IFPRI showed an increase in primary school enrollment, especially for girls; rising attendance; and a decrease in dropout rates. A later impact assessment showed that the program increased school participation in Bangladesh by up to 30 percent and girls' earning potential

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by up to 35 percent. IFPRI had provided evidence that conditional food transfers, when done right, could work. The next challenge would be to probe the effectiveness of other types of transfers.

Within the world of social protection, IFPRI's work has focused on evaluating programs centered on nutrition or nutritionally vulnerable populations, and it has sought to expand knowledge on how to design large-scale interventions and evaluations, particularly conditional cash transfers (CCTs). One of IFPRI's most influential impact evaluations early on was for Mexico's CCT program, the Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación (PROGRESA), later renamed Oportunidades, and now called Prospera. Launched in 1997, PROGRESA was based on the groundbreaking understanding that poor health, nutrition, and education are root causes of and contributors to poverty and must be addressed cross-sectorally. PROGRESA provided poor households with money transfers conditional on their use of maternal and child preventative health and nutrition care services as well as school enrollment. From its inception, the program incorporated periodic evaluation and improvement into its design and, at the prompting of the Mexican government, was the first program of its kind to use a randomized experimental design including control groups.

The government of Mexico asked IFPRI to undertake the first evaluation of PROGRESA, which found that the

program was generally effective in improving health and education, albeit in need of some minor improvements. According to an external impact assessment, IFPRI's evaluation directly or indirectly led the program to improve its survey instruments, better target the poor across regions, and expand beyond small rural communities.

On a larger scale, IFPRI's work on PROGRESA was critical in changing the entire social policy sector in Mexico by prompting decisionmakers to elevate the role of high-quality, research-based evidence in designing and evaluating programs. Its role as "an institution known for good policy-related research," according to another external assessment, may have helped preserve the long-term sustainability and expansion of the program through different political administrations. Subsequently, Mexico received widespread support to continue the program, including a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank, the largest in the Bank's history.

Promoting Widespread Innovation

The effect of PROGRESA stretched beyond Mexico's borders: the program served as a model for social protection policies and programming in other countries, and policy evaluation and accountability in general were elevated internationally. IFPRI evaluations of CCT programs in Honduras and Nicaragua and a food-for-education intervention in Uganda soon followed, also relying on state-of-the-art research methods that could help establish causality between social protection programs and changes in people's welfare.

The Institute's work in Nicaragua, for example, helped convince the government to expand its CCT program and simultaneously make recommended changes, including eliminating a weight-gain requirement, using geographic rather than household targeting, and improving communications to and monitoring of beneficiaries. IFPRI's research on Brazil's Bolsa Familia program, the largest CCT program in the world, showed that the program ensured that children increased their school attendance and pregnant women had more prenatal visits, while not creating incentives for individuals to work less. IFPRI's partici-

pation reassured the media and public that the research had occurred independent of government influence—and further confirmed the effectiveness of CCT programs.

The influential book *Conditional Cash Transfers in Latin America* synthesizes the results of IFPRI's CCT studies in Brazil, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. In fact, between 2000 and 2012, IFPRI's social protection work yielded over 350 publications, including books, journal articles, policy briefs, reports, and discussion papers.

Building on a Culture of Evaluation

By the mid-2000s, according to an external impact assessment, IFPRI had contributed significantly to a global culture of accountability and evaluation in the area of safety nets and social protection. In its continuing effort to probe the effectiveness of different types of social protection programs, in 2004 the Institute evaluated a CCT program in Bangladesh that provided cash stipends and tuition waivers to rural girls attending secondary school. The program was so successful that girls' secondary school enrollment far surpassed boys', a rare occurrence in developing countries. Based on IFPRI's evaluation and recommendations, the government and the World Bank refocused the program to target the poor directly, to include boys, and to cover the opportunity costs of attending school—an important consideration for rural families.

Following the launch of the Institute's Bangladesh Policy Research and Strategy Support Program in 2010, IFPRI researchers evaluated the country's largest safety net program, the Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest, which guarantees work for people during especially tough times of the year, potentially improving their livelihoods and food and nutrition security. The evaluation found that the program was successful in generating employment for 1.5 million people, one-third of whom are women, and had an impressively low level (2.8 percent) of fund leakage. Within a month of IFPRI's release of its findings, the government renewed the program for an additional term.

One of the best-known examples of IFPRI's work in social protection is its partnership with Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), launched in 2005. The PSNP represented the government's shift from disaster response, such as food aid, to a development approach that sought to protect poor households' consumption and assets from shocks. IFPRI evaluated the PSNP several times between 2006 and 2014 and found generally that households that participated in both public works and a complementary food security program benefited the most. According to an external assessment, IFPRI's evaluation helped lead to program improvements, such as better targeting and a stronger emphasis on asset building. This in turn resulted in welfare gains, in terms of people's food security and productive assets, worth in excess of an estimated US\$37 million. Owing to these successes, the PSNP has enjoyed widespread and continuing donor support, including donor commitment to an additional US\$2.3 billion through 2017—raising total outlays to over US\$5.3 billion.

Building capacity for evaluation of social protection programs has also been an important component of IFPRI's work. The Institute has held workshops on evaluation methods; data analysis and dissemination; and policy research and communication. This capacity strengthening has benefited governments and other key stakeholders,

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including Bangladesh's Ministry of Food, Malawi's Poverty Monitoring System institutions, Turkey's CCT program leaders, Ministries of Finance in Bangladesh and Mozambique, and Ethiopia's Central Statistical Agency.

Drilling Down into New Questions

As IFPRI's work on social protection has evolved, so have its research questions. Amid a debate within the international community about which forms of transfers are most cost-effective to administer—cash, food, or vouchers—IFPRI partnered with the World Food Programme (WFP) to investigate the question in four countries. Researchers found that food transfers tend to be more costly than cash or vouchers, even though cash transfers can be just as effective as food under the right circumstances. As a result, WFP recently introduced more flexibility into its food, cash, and voucher transfers across its portfolio of programs. Opening new lines of investigation, IFPRI has begun evaluating the impact of social protection on other outcomes, such as individuals' cognitive development, intimate partner violence, and women's decisionmaking power.

The work described here offers just a snapshot of IFPRI's role in the evolution of social protection design through the years. The Institute's work has influenced changes ranging from major policy transitions to tweaks in program design. Its role as an independent evaluator has triggered a dialogue on the importance of high-quality, objective evidence that can inform policy decisions. Just as important, IFPRI's research on social protection has helped shift thinking about what kinds of programs can best reach the most vulnerable people, leading to changes that have helped millions of poor households improve their livelihoods and become more food and nutrition secure.

Resources

For IFPRI's research on social protection, see <http://www.ifpri.org/topic/social-protection>.

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