Chapter 11

# SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMS
## Building the Evidence and Defining Priorities

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## Key messages

- Over the past 50 years, social protection programs to reduce poverty, food insecurity, and vulnerability and improve economic opportunity have become increasingly prominent in low- and middle-income countries.
- Social protection policy, and in particular social assistance, has evolved over this period from a focus on food-based subsidies, rations, and distribution systems to include cash transfers and graduation and economic inclusion programs that aim to strengthen the poverty-reducing effects of social assistance.
- Research on social protection has contributed to major changes in evidence-based policymaking for poverty reduction. The use of randomized controlled trials and other rigorous empirical methods has facilitated the evaluation of large-scale programs and the generation of new evidence around the impact of social protection on a wide range of outcomes as well as the effect of complementary programs that seek to expand those positive impacts.

- Modern social protection programs have greatly increased in number, scale, and complexity, with program designs tailored to different contexts and increasingly informed by evidence. These programs have also been adapted to changes in the needs of at-risk populations, evolving policy objectives, and the increasing prevalence of crises driven by conflict, extreme weather, and health shocks.

Moving forward, research on social protection programs should focus on:

- **Building understanding** on how context impacts the effectiveness of social protection, including through better evidence on how to adapt these programs for an increasingly crisis-prone world and design them for fragile settings.
- **Strengthening the evidence base** on how to refine the design and delivery of social protection to expand the benefits within households (for example, to further benefit women and youth) and across households (to expand their effects on local economies and thereby further benefit poor households).
- **Identifying scalable designs** for social protection programs to foster greater poverty alleviation. Evidence is needed that compares the impact, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness of different models, and explores how to better integrate them.

Government social protection programs to reduce poverty, food insecurity, and vulnerability in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have become increasingly prominent over the last 50 years. Social protection programs have increased in number, scale, and complexity as program designs have been tailored to different contexts and increasingly informed by evidence of their effectiveness. New technologies have facilitated less costly, better-targeted delivery strategies, as well as adaptation to changes in the cost of in-kind and cash modalities.[1] More recently, social protection programs

1 Social protection programs can be grouped into three categories: (1) social assistance including noncontributory transfers such as food and in-kind transfers, food subsidies or rations, unconditional cash transfers, conditional cash transfers, school meals, and public works; (2) social insurance, including contributory programs such as old-age and disability pensions, sick leave, and health insurance; and (3) labor market programs that can be contributory or noncontributory, including job training, employment services, wage subsidies, and unemployment insurance (see World Bank 2018). In this chapter, we focus primarily on social assistance programs, which are more prevalent in LMICs.

have also adapted to evolving policy objectives and changes in the needs of at-risk populations, including those driven by the increasing prevalence of crises due to conflict, climate change, and health shocks.

The inception of modern social assistance programs was broadly catalyzed by world food shortages in 1973–1974. In the aftermath of these shortages, governments in LMICs expanded programs to stabilize food access, including food subsidies, grain reserves, and food-based humanitarian assistance to respond to food crises, with these programs growing in prevalence throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. As improvements in communications and transportation infrastructure fostered greater market integration in the 1990s, governments introduced targeted cash-based assistance programs, which were often facilitated by newly available electronic card payment systems. The commercial supply response through markets was generally sufficient to meet this new source of demand without triggering inflation. Over time, governments introduced a variety of cash-based transfer modalities, including conditional cash transfers, unconditional cash transfers, and eventually, "cash-plus" models, often implemented at a large scale. More recently, multisectoral graduation and economic inclusion programs have sought to expand the poverty-reducing effects of these programs (see Box 11.1 for a description of the major types of social assistance programs).

The emergence of these trends in social protection policy coincided with a period of rapid expansion in the application of randomized controlled trials (RCTs). These evaluation approaches, together with complementary expansions in the use of qualitative assessments and cost-effectiveness analyses for impact assessment, led to major changes in evidence-based policymaking for poverty reduction. IFPRI's research played a prominent role in this shift by evaluating large-scale social protection programs across a wide swathe of low- and lower-middle-income countries,[2] testing the effectiveness of delivery strategies, and working with partners in government and nongovernmental organizations to examine complementary programs that would expand the impact of these investments (Quisumbing et al. 2020). IFPRI's research has provided evidence on the effectiveness of numerous social protection program modalities and on their impacts on a broad set of outcomes, while often examining the underlying mechanisms that contribute to these results. In particular, IFPRI has played a leading role in research on the synergistic effect of

2 These countries have included Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Honduras, India, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Pakistan, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Uganda, and Yemen.

### BOX 11.1 Major types of social assistance programs

**FOOD SUBSIDIES OR FOOD RATIONS.** Food subsidies provide consumers access to food at below-market prices and can be targeted or provide general price support. Food rations provide food directly to consumers for free or at reduced prices. Egypt has longstanding food subsidies for bread, pasta, and sugar. India's Public Distribution System is a prominent example of a food ration program.

**SCHOOL MEALS.** Food provided to children at school, often as breakfast or lunch, or take-home rations for children enrolled in school are examples of school meal programs. School meals are usually subsidized or free. School meals are provided for a significant share of students in most countries in the world.

**CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFERS (CCTs).** Cash transfers are provided routinely (often monthly or quarterly) to poor households who meet certain conditions, including that school-age children must be enrolled and attending school, preschool children must receive required vaccinations, and women should attend nutrition behavior change communication sessions (if they have children under two years of age) or women's empowerment interventions. CCT programs gained popularity in Latin America in the 2000s; a prominent example is Mexico's PROGRESA program.

**UNCONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFERS (UCTs).** Cash transfers are provided routinely (often monthly or quarterly) to poor households without placing any requirements on the actions of the household. UCT programs can be implemented by governments or nongovernmental organizations and are implemented globally.

**CASH-PLUS PROGRAMS.** Cash transfers targeted to the poor are delivered along with additional components, such as nutrition education, livelihood training, financial literacy, and mental health services, which are intended to expand the program's benefits.

**PUBLIC WORKS.** Cash or food transfers are provided to the poor in exchange for work, often physical labor to build community assets. Prominent examples include India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act program and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program.

**GRADUATION MODEL OR ECONOMIC INCLUSION PROGRAMS.** These programs provide a package of interventions intended to provide a "big push" that increases household welfare and reduces poverty. Programs such as BRAC's Targeting the Ultrapoor Program typically provide an asset transfer, consumption support (routine cash transfers), financial services (savings and credit), business training (on the use of the asset), and mentoring or coaching.

social protection programs on gender inequality and women's empowerment, and on strategies to expand their impact on maternal and child nutrition and health.

In this chapter, we summarize trends in the development of social protection programs across three epochs, namely (1) food-based subsidies, rations, and distribution systems, (2) the proliferation of cash transfer programs, and (3) the emergence of graduation and economic inclusion programs. Throughout, we discuss the contribution of research to changing program approaches and social protection policies, highlighting selected seminal papers and showcasing IFPRI's contribution to evidence and research.

## Food subsidies, rations, and food distribution systems

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, concerns grew over the ability of the world to feed its growing population (Ehrlich 1968). These concerns were accelerated by the events of 1972–1973, when severe weather caused a steep decline in global grain production, followed by a spike in global food prices that was exacerbated by protective agricultural and trade policies in Russia and the United States (Hopkins and Puchala 1978). To address the resulting global food crisis, governments voiced a need for policy options to stabilize food prices and bolster food availability for vulnerable households (Timmer 2010). Popular policies in this period centered on a variety of price stabilization interventions, including broad-based staple food subsidies. Influential research examined the optimal design of food subsidies to minimize poverty, such as locating ration shops in poor communities, subsidizing only inframarginal quantities (those typically consumed at prevailing prices), and subsidizing foods primarily consumed by poor households (Besley and Kanbur 1988).

Empirical research by IFPRI researchers and others showed that food subsidies reduced food costs and stabilized prices, but noted that broad food subsidies in Egypt and elsewhere were poorly targeted and less effective than other options, such as ration cards and supplementary feeding programs, for improving food security and nutrition among individuals in poor households (Ahmed et al. 2001; Alderman et al. 1986; Kennedy and Alderman 1987; Pinstrup-Andersen 1988). A substantial body of literature on commodity price stabilization policies, such as domestic buffer stocks and international commodity agreements, similarly concluded that such policies benefited better-off households more than the poor (Bellemare et al. 2013; Newbery and

Stiglitz 1981). Ration shops, often a legacy of wartime rationing, were repurposed to distribute subsidized flour at stable prices for consumers in partially targeted schemes in Pakistan and elsewhere. In Egypt and Pakistan, food in ration shops was sourced by statutory procurement policies, which were also widely used in sub-Saharan Africa, but this system depressed prices for farmers (Alderman 1988; de Haen and von Braun 1983).

Growing awareness of global hunger, particularly in the aftermath of famines resulting from the 1974 floods in Bangladesh and the 1984 drought in Ethiopia, led to the development of emergency food assistance to respond to food shortages triggered by weather or trade shocks. This often entailed creating costly ad hoc food distribution systems and, with regard to US food assistance, inefficient approaches to monetizing food aid (Barrett and Maxwell 2005). Work by IFPRI and others showed that these responses had positive impacts, but were not nearly as effective as they could have been (Webb et al. 1992). For example, research on Ethiopia showed that food aid during the 1990s largely offset the negative effect of harvest failure on child stunting (Yamano et al. 2005), and emergency food assistance following the 2002 drought effectively increased household food consumption, with larger impacts from food-for-work for better-off households and from direct support for the poorest households (Gilligan and Hoddinott 2007). This emphasis on the impact of delivering food assistance and other safety net programs increased attention on effective strategies for targeting transfers to the poor (Coady et al. 2004b). Other research examined the effect of transfers on poverty dynamics over time, recognizing that transfers may play an insurance role in the face of impending shocks (Baulch and Hoddinott 2000).

From 2000 to 2020, governments vastly expanded investments in school meal programs as a means to transfer food directly to children and improve schooling outcomes (Bundy et al. 2024). IFPRI contributed to a growing body of research showing that school meal programs improve school attendance, often strengthen student learning (Alderman et al. 2012; Aurino et al. 2023), and can address unmet nutritional needs, such as with anemia in adolescent girls, including in a crisis (Adelman et al. 2019). Distributional issues around the benefits of school meals have received considerable attention: early evidence showed that food resources (calories and other nutrients) transferred to a child through school meals led to an equivalent increase in the child's total intake of those calories and nutrients and did not displace at-home consumption (Afridi 2011; Jacoby 2002). Later studies examined the impact of school-based meal programs on the nutritional status of other vulnerable household members including preschool children, finding that a take-home

ration modality improved weight-for-age for preschool-age siblings of school-age children in Burkina Faso. In contrast, a take-home ration had no effect on anthropometry of the targeted child's preschool siblings in Uganda, but meals provided at school improved height-for-age for the preschool siblings of targeted children (Adelman et al. 2019; Kazianga et al. 2014). IFPRI's more recent work on school meals investigates effects of school meal programs on local agriculture and the need for more evidence on cost-effectiveness (Alderman et al. 2024).

## Cash transfers

Cash transfers provided by the state have a long history (Gentilini 2024), but starting in the 1990s, governments in LMICs, particularly in Latin America, began to formalize targeted cash transfers to poor households that required these households to fulfil conditions related to child schooling, health, and nutrition. These "conditional cash transfer" (CCT) programs were more effectively targeted to the poor than food subsidies, were potentially less distortionary, and provided beneficiaries with greater control over use of the resources. Still, many were concerned that direct cash grants to the poor would not be used toward government priorities such as food security, would create dependency by reducing adult work, or would be misused through spending on alcohol.

IFPRI contributed pioneering research on the impacts of these CCT programs. From 1998 to 2000, the government of Mexico collaborated with IFPRI and academic partners on a groundbreaking randomized impact evaluation of its PROGRESA CCT program. The PROGRESA evaluation was the first RCT of a modern large-scale social protection program, documenting its impacts on a wide range of outcomes including food security, nutrition, and women's status.[3] This collaboration marked a turning point both in government policies for poverty reduction and in research to evaluate these policies. The evidence of PROGRESA's large benefits and cost-effectiveness, alongside evidence of limited work disincentives (Behrman and Skoufias 2006), contributed to a shift in how governments and donors regarded CCT programs, driving the rising popularity of these models throughout Latin America and beyond. Moreover, the PROGRESA evaluation fostered a culture of rigorous collaborative evaluations of social protection programs

3 On evaluation of PROGRESA, see Adato et al. (2003), Behrman (2010), Schultz (2004), and Skoufias (2005).

(Behrman 2010) and promoted the broader use of RCTs throughout development economics to assess the effectiveness of large-scale government programs. After the PROGRESA evaluation, IFPRI conducted impact evaluations of national CCT programs in Brazil, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

In the 2000s, cash transfer programs expanded to sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia. Compared to those in Latin America, programs in these regions were less likely to include health and education conditions due to fewer resources for enforcement, limited value of unenforced conditions (Baird et al. 2014), and a desire to avoid excluding vulnerable populations with limited access to health clinics or schools. Instead, programs often included additional complementary activities (the "plus" components in the "cash-plus" model) such as trainings, linkages to other services and sectors, such as health insurance, or transfers linked to participation in public works projects. IFPRI continued to work with governments to evaluate their large-scale safety net programs; examples include collaborating with the government of Ethiopia to evaluate several phases of its public works program, the Productive Safety Net Program (Berhane et al. 2014), with the government of Mali on its unconditional cash-plus program, Programme de Filets Sociaux Jigisémèjiri (Sessou et al. 2024), and with the government of Egypt on its conditional cash transfer program, Takaful (El-Enbaby et al. 2024).

As the popularity of cash transfer programs grew, debates arose over which program features would best promote key policy objectives. IFPRI's research has been at the frontier of guiding these design decisions. Attention to gender has been a hallmark of this work; for example, the decision to make women the primary recipients in many cash transfer programs was informed by the Institute's research that intrahousehold resource allocations mattered (Quisumbing and Maluccio 1999), and that income earned by women, as compared to men, was more likely to be used for children's needs (Haddad et al. 1997; Hoddinott et al. 1995). IFPRI was also among the first to examine whether making transfers conditional on schooling mattered for educational impacts, showing that conditionality increased primary-to-secondary-school transitions (de Brauw and Hoddinott 2011). The Institute both contributed to and consolidated the knowledge base on which forms of targeting are most effective (Coady et al. 2004a). To address a persistent policy debate on the merits of cash transfers relative to food rations or vouchers, IFPRI built on its earlier work in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al. 2010) by collaborating with the World Food Programme on a multicountry study that

compared the impact of cash, food, and vouchers in Bangladesh, Ecuador, Niger, Uganda, and Yemen.[4] The Institute's influential portfolio of studies demonstrated that the optimal modality depended on policymakers' objectives and contextual factors, but cash transfers were generally more cost-effective than food transfers at improving household food security and dietary diversity (Margolies et al. 2015).

More recently, governments have sought to design cash transfer programs to achieve a range of objectives beyond food security—notably, to improve nutrition. IFPRI's research has been instrumental in informing the effectiveness and promising designs of nutrition-sensitive cash transfer programs.[5] An influential collaboration with the World Food Programme in Bangladesh showed that providing mothers with cash transfers alone did not significantly improve child nutritional status, while providing them with a combination of cash and high-quality nutrition education delivered through behavior change communication sessions significantly reduced child malnutrition (Ahmed, Hoddinott, and Roy 2024). This evidence on the importance of well-designed complementary "plus" components, meant to inform and empower caregivers (often mothers) to use transfers toward better diets and health, influenced the design of large-scale nutrition-sensitive programs in Bangladesh and several other countries.

As cash transfer programs have become more multisectoral and have scaled up to reach more than 1 billion people globally, the evidence has grown regarding their long-term benefits and the broader impacts that extend beyond policymakers' primary objectives. IFPRI has played a leading role in demonstrating the multifaceted benefits of cash transfer programs. The Institute's influential body of research shows how cash transfers can reduce women's experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Buller et al. 2018), findings which have informed the World Health Organization's recommendations for preventing violence against women in LMICs. The Institute has also demonstrated the impacts of cash transfers on women's decision-making power and empowerment (Hidrobo et al., forthcoming; Peterman et al. 2021), child development (de Walque et al. 2017; Fernald and Hidrobo 2011), mental health (Hidrobo et al. 2023), social capital and trust (Evans et al. 2019), migration (Hidrobo et al. 2022), and agriculture (Hoddinott et al. 2012),

4 This work includes Ahmed, Hoddinott et al. (2024), Gilligan and Roy (2014), Hidrobo et al. (2014), Hoddinott et al. (2019), and Schwab (2019).

5 This literature includes Behrman and Hoddinott (2005), Leroy et al. (2008), Manley et al. (2022), and Olney et al. (2022).

among other areas. Amid fiscal constraints and mounting pressure to invest in programs with long-term benefits, IFPRI has also provided rigorous evidence on which program designs can promote sustained post-program impacts. Studies show that adding complementary "plus" components to cash transfers can increase the sustainability of benefits across outcomes including household poverty, livelihoods, and experience of IPV, thereby enhancing the cost-effectiveness of the initial investments (Ahmed et al. 2025; Roy et al. 2024). This broader range of benefits from programs operating at scale has helped to bolster ongoing support from donors and implementers.

As global crises escalate, there is growing interest in how cash transfer programs can contribute to the policy response. IFPRI's recent studies show significant promise for these programs to help poor rural households respond to crises by protecting food security, livelihoods, and nutrition, including during pandemics (Abay et al. 2023; Ahmed et al. 2024), humanitarian and conflict situations (Kurdi 2021), and climate hazards (Ahmed, Bakhtiar, Hidrobo et al. 2024; Hidrobo et al. 2024). Research on optimal designs to respond to crises has shown that providing anticipatory cash transfers, given in advance of shocks, can improve upon emergency transfers given after shocks, by improving coping, preemptive actions, and resilience capacities (de Brauw et al. 2025). IFPRI's research has also demonstrated that community assets produced by public works programs can have environmental benefits, showing, for example, that the reforestation activities implemented through Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme increased tree cover, an important strategy to mitigate climate change (Hirvonen et al. 2022).

## Economic inclusion programs

During the last 10 years, governments, donors, and other stakeholders have increasingly focused on designing multifaceted interventions to facilitate a sustainable exit from poverty by targeted households. This development in policy innovation and the associated academic literature builds on the widely documented benefits of cash transfer programs, but it represents a shift toward multifaceted interventions (generally inclusive of training, coaching, and savings groups, as described in more detail below) with a more explicit focus on building new livelihood activities and associated streams of income that could lead to longer-term exits from poverty. This approach sometimes also incorporates an explicit goal of reduced reliance on cash transfers. The shift in focus is partly motivated by evidence from some high-profile trials in Uganda and Kenya demonstrating that the effects of time-limited cash transfers did not

persist over the longer term (Blattman et al. 2020; Haushofer and Shapiro 2018). A recent systematic review found some evidence of decline in the effects of cash and cash-plus interventions over time, but the available evidence is generally drawn from evaluations conducted less than two years post-program, suggesting that relatively little is known about the longer-term effects of transfers (Leight, Hirvonen, and Zafar 2024).

While the precise elements of these multifaceted interventions can differ across contexts, they typically center around a larger lump-sum transfer (often described as a livelihoods transfer) in conjunction with some short-term (time-limited) consumption support, financial inclusion, and training and/or coaching.[6] These models are often described as graduation programs or economic inclusion programs; we preferentially use the latter term here.[7]

The first major contribution to this literature was a six-country randomized trial by Banerjee and colleagues (2015) demonstrating that a multifaceted intervention modeled on programming delivered by BRAC, a major nongovernmental organization in Bangladesh, had significant effects on reducing poverty and enhancing welfare along multiple domains (including consumption, income, assets, and health) (Banerjee et al. 2015). A similarly large trial of BRAC's intervention in Bangladesh, which centered on transfers of livestock and skills to extremely poor women, found equally positive effects at four and seven years post-intervention (Bandiera et al. 2017). Long-term follow-up surveys showed that the positive effects of these interventions persisted and even grew in India (Banerjee et al. 2021) and Bangladesh (Balboni et al. 2022), but attenuated over time in Ethiopia (Barker et al. 2024). Another recent trial suggested that incorporating a psychosocial intervention targeting women could enhance cost-effectiveness (Bossuroy et al. 2022). However, the literature on psychosocial interventions is highly variable, with some showing limited effects; the specific structure and objectives of what are considered psychosocial interventions also vary widely.

While many economic inclusion programs target women, impacts on measures of female empowerment are mixed. The multicountry BRAC

6 There is also the broader category of "cash-plus" interventions, which includes programs that disburse cash in conjunction with other interventions that can vary greatly in their goals and level of intensity. While "cash plus" often primarily describes programs in which the "plus" component is relatively low cost or low intensity, there is some continuity between more intensive cash-plus interventions and economic inclusion programs.

7 One risk of the term "graduation model" is that it can lead to confusion as to what "graduation" refers to, such as graduation from a particular program (that is often time limited, by definition), or from poverty or a state of vulnerability. For this reason, we opt to use the term "economic inclusion programs."

study showed no effects on women's empowerment (Banerjee et al. 2015), while studies in Niger and the Democratic Republic of Congo found positive impacts (Bossuroy et al. 2022). In efforts to make programs more gender transformative, some programs have tried to layer on gender norms interventions. An IFPRI study on male engagement groups found that adding this programming to other livelihood and nutrition interventions led to sustained impacts on men's gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors (Alderman, Gilligan, Hidrobo et al. 2025), but this did not necessarily lead to improvements in women's empowerment (Alderman et al. 2021). Moreover, these efforts are often intensive, requiring a deep understanding of context-specific social norms and specialized expertise outside the social protection sector (Hidrobo et al. 2025).

As the literature on economic inclusion interventions has grown rapidly, policymaker interest in experimenting with multiple types of models has also increased. In particular, the original interventions evaluated by Banerjee and colleagues (2015) were costly (between US$1,500 and $6,000 per household in total); although estimates suggested that benefits exceeded costs, there might nonetheless be reasonable doubts about the feasibility of scale-up (see Box 11.2 for a more detailed overview of the evidence on cost and cost-effectiveness of these models). IFPRI researchers have made major contributions to exploring the effectiveness of lower-cost economic inclusion models, including those embedded within existing social protection systems. In Ethiopia, a model centered around lower-cost livestock (poultry) transfers, savings groups, and training generally did not lead to transformative effects on poverty (Leight, Alderman et al. 2024) though some evidence showed improvements in nutritional knowledge and practices and household resilience to shocks (Alderman, Gilligan, Leight et al. 2025; Hirvonen et al. 2024). More recent work suggests that a nutrition-sensitive model, including short-term maternal cash grants, can be effective in shifting early childhood feeding practices and enhancing child development (Gilligan et al. 2024).

The Institute's researchers have also generated novel evidence around the effectiveness of graduation models in fragile contexts, such as urban Somalia, where a graduation model intervention significantly reduced poverty within the first three years (Leight, Hirvonen et al. 2024). These findings point to the importance of further experimentation, in conjunction with policymakers, to explore the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of economic inclusion programs implemented at scale and over the longer term. Overall, cost-effectiveness of food transfers, cash transfers, and economic inclusion programs remains an area where more evidence is needed (Box 11.2).

### BOX 11.2 Cost and cost-effectiveness of food transfers, cash transfers, and economic inclusion programs

One growing area of research interest involves examining evidence about cost and how the total costs of food and cash transfer programs and economic inclusion programs, including costs for delivery and administration, compare to the estimated benefits. Such comparisons make it possible to draw conclusions about the cost-effectiveness of these programs or the impact on specific outcomes per dollar of investment. Doing so, however, is not always straightforward.

For example, IFPRI's comparative work on the costs associated cash and food transfers benefited from the fact that those studies included the collection of detailed cost data; this showed that the cost of cash delivery is between a third and half the cost of delivering comparable transfers in other forms, such as food or vouchers (Hidrobo et al. 2014; Margolies and Hoddinott 2015).

However, it is much more challenging to assess the cost and cost-effectiveness of economic inclusion programs, as well as the whole range of cash-plus interventions that lie on the spectrum between simple cash transfers and more complex interventions. In part, this is because the cost structure of these programs varies greatly, and detailed information is not always provided. It also reflects the fact that the benefits of such interventions take multiple forms, not all of which are readily monetized. For example, the graduation models in the Banerjee and colleagues (2015) study have costs per beneficiary of between US$1,000 and $2,000, including a total transfer value of $500 to $1,000. A more recent, psychosocial-oriented graduation model implemented in Niger and analyzed reports costs per beneficiary household of between $530 and $650, including $320 of transfer value (all in PPP terms) (Bossuroy et al. 2022). In another study, a relatively lighter cash-plus intervention encompassing savings groups and training (similar to a graduation model) shows an estimated cost of $215 per beneficiary household in Uganda (of which around $80 is cash transfers) (Sedlmayr et al. 2020).

In these three examples, the total cost of the programming, inclusive of cash-plus interventions, is around twice the value of the transfer itself, implying that for the program to be cost-effective, the positive effects of the more complex intervention should be at least double any potential positive effects of cash itself (Leight et al. 2024). While these patterns may not generalize to other economic inclusion interventions, understanding more about the effectiveness of these interventions relative to their cost is crucial to informing evidence-based decisions around scaling.

## The forward-looking agenda

The next 25 years will present new challenges for the design and delivery of social protection programs to accelerate poverty reduction, reduce food insecurity and malnutrition, and improve opportunities and well-being for poor populations. Based on our understanding of emerging trends and existing evidence, we have identified three issues that will be important areas for research on social protection leading up to 2050.

First, more evidence is needed on how social protection programs can better respond to a world increasingly prone to crises from increasing extreme weather events, conflict, and health shocks. Evidence on adaptive social protection systems provides guidance on how to leverage existing safety nets designed to address chronic poverty and ensure their capacity to respond to new shocks (Gilligan et al. 2022; Hirvonen 2023). More recently, governments and international humanitarian actors such as the World Food Programme have been piloting anticipatory action models of social assistance that rely on early warning systems for droughts, floods, pests, and health shocks, which, when triggered, allow transfers to reach targeted households and communities in the weeks and months before the shock occurs to strengthen the response (de Brauw 2025; de Brauw et al. 2025; Pople et al. 2024). These strategies, while promising, are attempts to substitute for missing insurance markets. The last 50 years have produced remarkably few examples of insurance schemes available at scale to the poor in LMICs to protect their assets, livelihoods, and health (see Chapter 10). Recent evidence on index-based livestock insurance is encouraging (Jensen et al. 2024), and promising efforts to introduce insurance as part of social protection programs are underway in Ethiopia and elsewhere, but progress remains limited; further evidence on social insurance is needed.

Relatedly, we need to build more evidence on designing effective social assistance in fragile settings. In the period leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme poverty and malnutrition were increasingly concentrated in fragile states such as Somalia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as in fragile areas within states. In such contexts, formal state capacity to target and reliably deliver cash transfers and other services is weak, requiring simple, safe approaches to deliver transfers and support services (see Chapter 13).

Second, more evidence is needed on how to refine social protection program designs and delivery modalities to expand the benefits within and across households (Neihaus and Suri, forthcoming). Much has been learned about how the design of social protection programs shapes benefits for

women, not only by targeting cash transfers to women but also by including design features and complementary components that account for women's time burdens, safety, and restricted access to jobs, markets, and land (Hidrobo et al. 2025). Still, we must continue to refine these gender-sensitive design features to be applicable in more settings. Also, less is known about how to design social protection programs to better benefit youth, including to improve educational attainment and early labor market outcomes. Moreover, a better understanding of the contributions of social protection, including gender-responsive models, to local economies, alongside the costs, is needed to convince policymakers. Similarly, although previous research provided important lessons on targeting social assistance in the 2000s (see Box 11.3 for an overview of IFPRI's research on targeting social assistance programs), attention to this topic lagged until recently, with new work informing the strengths and weaknesses of different targeting approaches (such as community-based targeting, proxy means scores, and categorical targeting) (Abay et al. 2024; Brown et al. 2018). Recent evidence on the general equilibrium effects of cash transfer interventions suggests that program targeting could be designed to optimize these positive spillover effects, particularly to the extent that they further benefit poor households (Egger et al. 2022). Greater evidence on the heterogeneity of impact from economic inclusion programs could offer suggestions on how to better target these programs to those most likely to benefit, while other eligible households continue to receive consumption support.

Third, and relatedly, research on social protection should continue to focus on cost-effectiveness and identifying scalable social protection designs that foster greater poverty alleviation. Cash-plus designs have shown great promise for expanding the impact of cash transfers to outcomes such as nutrition, women's empowerment, and mental health, potentially improving their cost-effectiveness. As noted earlier, multifaceted economic inclusion programs have a positive internal rate of return but are expensive, raising questions about their scalability. Evidence is needed that compares the impact, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness of these models, as well as considering how the models could be better integrated (Allen et al. 2024). A key part of this research agenda on scalable, cost-effective social protection designs in LMICs involves finding better ways to integrate targeted transfers with strategies to promote better livelihoods and job outcomes. The literature on asset transfers shows promise to address this need, while the evidence on jobs and training programs is far more mixed and likely depends on context-specific labor market conditions.

### BOX 11.3 Targeting social assistance programs

Targeting social assistance programs involves identifying needy households, often those who are poor or most vulnerable to economic shocks. Effective targeting ensures that limited resources reach those in genuine need, increasing program impact and reducing costs. Common methods include categorical targeting, geographical targeting, community-based targeting, self-selection, and means or proxy means testing (Hoddinott 2001).

These approaches are often combined for greater effectiveness. Categorical targeting directs benefits to people based on identifiable characteristics such as age, gender, disability, or access to land. It is administratively simple and may be effective when resources are scarce. Geographic targeting prioritizes benefits for areas with the largest population of poor people. In community-based targeting, local leaders select beneficiaries based on their knowledge of households' well-being and circumstances, often using criteria unavailable under more administrative approaches. Under self-selection, program benefits are available to all, but program design incentivizes participation by the poor only. Public works programs exemplify self-targeting: due to the work requirement and low wages, only the poor tend to participate. This method is cost-effective and often politically acceptable. Proxy means testing (PMT) relies on regression models to predict consumption levels or poverty status using proxies such as household characteristics, assets, and housing conditions to identify poor households.

IFPRI has made substantial contributions to evidence on the effectiveness of targeting social assistance programs and on the relative performance of different targeting approaches. A review of targeting approaches of 122 social assistance programs across 48 countries in 2004 found that the median program transferred 25 percent more to poor individuals (the poorest two quintiles) than a universal allocation (Coady et al. 2004a). Targeting was better in richer countries, where governments were held more accountable, and where inequality was higher. Targeting also improved with means testing, geographic targeting, and work requirements. Studies by current and former IFPRI researchers addressed the effectiveness of targeting of programs in Albania (Alderman 2002), Mexico (Coady and Parker 2009), and Peru (Stifel and Alderman 2005); the effectiveness of self-targeting for food subsidies (Alderman 2001); and welfare losses due to targeting using alternative welfare indicators (Skoufias and Coady 2007).

A recent IFPRI and World Bank study of community-based targeting in Ethiopia experimented with the fiscal constraint and discretion over targeting

criteria (Abay et al. 2024). Results show that community leaders avoided exclusion errors more than inclusion errors and reduced transfer size rather than coverage under tighter budgets. Greater discretion improved access for poorer or conflict-affected households that could be missed under conventional targeting criteria. Leaders are more vulnerable to favoritism when budgets are larger and when they lack discretion.

PMT methods, which are widely used in developing countries, have received mixed support in the literature on targeting. A core critique is that PMTs are prone to exclusion errors (Kidd et al. 2017; Veras et al. 2008). Instead, targeting using a simple demographic scorecard often does as well or better at reaching the poor (Brown et al. 2018). Also, adding a small cost of applying for a program targeted using a PMT can improve targeting performance through self-selection (Alatas et al. 2016).

In response to the limitations of PMTs, IFPRI researchers applied an alternative approach for Bangladesh, using nationally representative survey data to identify indicators for categorical targeting that are strongly correlated with poverty, easily observable, verifiable, and straightforward to collect. At the request of Bangladesh's Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) and the World Food Programme, IFPRI applied the categorical targeting approach to improve the accuracy of targeting for Bangladesh's Vulnerable Group Development program and the Mother and Child Benefit program. MoWCA later adopted this approach to enhance the targeting efficiency of both programs (Ahmed 2018a, 2018b).

The current political climate highlights that social protection programs will need to become more financially stable and prioritize competing demands and objectives. For example, in cash-plus or multisectoral programs, households are more likely to invest the transfer received to boost outcomes relevant to the complementary programming provided. This behavior is beneficial and improves efficiency as households leverage the transfer to increase the benefits of the "plus" component, but it sharpens the trade-offs in program design, such as between promoting investment in productive assets or improving child nutrition.

IFPRI's ongoing research and strong partnerships with governments, international humanitarian actors, academics, and donors position the Institute to be at the forefront of informing social protection strategies to improve well-being for poor and vulnerable households over the next 25 years. IFPRI will work closely with these partners to identify cost-effective solutions that are context specific, scalable, and inclusive.

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