

Do social protection programs in South Asia have the potential to be nutrition-sensitive?

Insights from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan

Research Note 11

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ABOUT THIS NOTE

Social protection programs (SPPs) are designed to help individuals and households cope with chronic poverty, destitution, and vulnerability (World Bank, 2018). In the context of food systems, SPPs can help tackle the challenge of affordability of healthy diets. Nutrition-sensitive SPPs include conditions or additional interventions that enhance impacts on nutrition (Ruel and Alderman, 2013). This research note organizes SPPs in South Asia using an existing framework, describes their characteristics (scale, entitled benefits, and eligibility) and provides examples of features that can be added to SPPs to make them more nutrition-sensitive.

KEY MESSAGES

Existing social protection programs can be made more nutrition-sensitive by incorporating design features such as:

- Targeting households with pregnant women and/or young children (under 2 years old).
- Using targeting mechanisms to reach the poorest, most food insecure households with limited access to nutritious foods.
- Including a nutrition behavior change communication (BCC) component.
- Linking the program to health services and ensuring that beneficiaries have access to – and use – preventive/curative health services/
- Including interventions to empower women.
- Providing or ensuring access to foods (or food vouchers) with a high nutritional value.
- Including other measures to promote healthy diets and improve nutrition outcomes.

TYPES OF SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMS

The World Bank's ASPIRE project classifies SPPs into eight categories. We did not consider two of the eight categories (fee waivers and targeted subsidies; other social assistance including scholarships and tax exemptions) that are not direct transfers. We identified and summarized SPPs in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan under the other six categories shown in **Figure 1**.

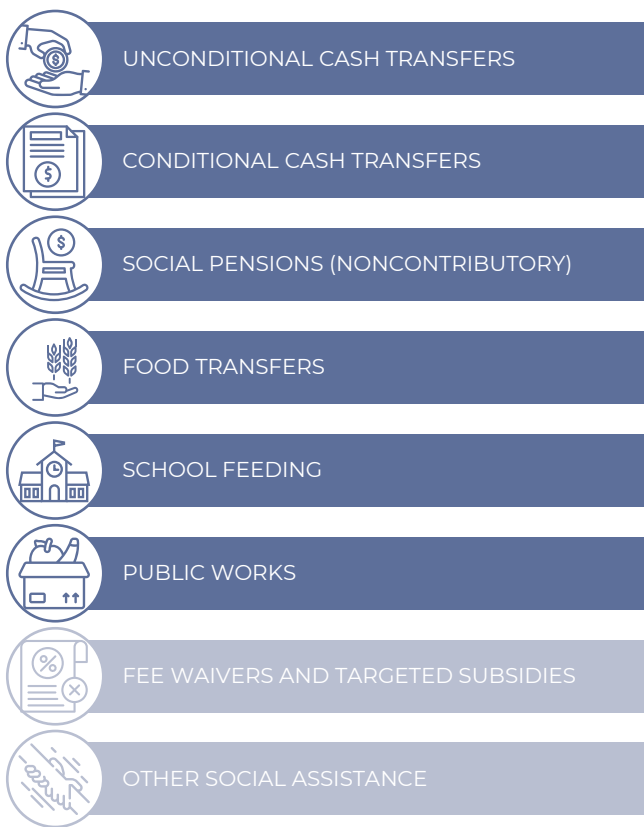


Figure 1. Categories of social protection programs

Source: World Bank Atlas of Social Protection: Indicators of Resilience and Equity (ASPIRE) project (World Bank, 2018).

DEFINING NUTRITION-SENSITIVE

What makes an SPP nutrition-sensitive? There is no standard formal definition of nutrition-sensitive, but in this note, we offer a working definition and provide examples of how SPPs can be made more nutrition-sensitive.

While all transfers, whether cash or food, can increase food consumption, nutrition-sensitive SPPs enhance their nutritional impact through design features such as targeting, behavior change communication (BCC), linkage to health services, empowering women, or other measures to improve nutrition outcomes.

Cash may or may not be nutrition-sensitive, depending on the nature and objectives of the transfer (Manley et al., 2022). Any cash that a household receives is an additional resource to purchase food, and poor households typically spend more than half of their income on food (Lipton, 1983). However, to be nutrition-sensitive, the transfer should be linked with nutrition goals and objectives. For example, a cash transfer that includes BCC on healthy food purchasing behaviors would be more nutrition-sensitive than a cash transfer without such BCC.

Food transfers may or may not be nutrition-sensitive, depending on the type of food provided and the nature of the nutrition problem in the population targeted. For example, a cooking oil subsidy in a population with high rates of overweight/obesity and micronutrient (MN) deficiencies would not be expected to lead to improvements in MN status and could worsen overweight/obesity.

The contribution of food transfers to nutrition relative to cash transfers can be enhanced by judicious choice of foods and by the inclusion of (bio)fortified foods, especially in areas where MN deficiencies are prevalent. As with cash, a full assessment of the nutrition sensitivity of food or other in-kind transfers includes the role of design features beyond the budgetary support from the transfer.

Programs that empower women or that are linked to a nutrition intervention such as BCC are likely to increase the nutrition sensitivity of the SPP; and there is evidence that they indeed have greater impact on nutritional outcomes when incorporated into the SPPs (Manley et al., 2022).

Similarly, programs can be made more nutrition-sensitive by targeting households with members in the “1,000 days” period from pregnancy to the child’s second birthday, a critical window for improving nutrition.

It should not be forgotten that coordination across multiple agencies responsible for planning or delivering different intervention components is critical for achieving nutrition impacts through SPPs. Some of the best opportunities for improving nutrition may lie at the intersection of agriculture, food system, education, and health sectors. For example, a school meal program may be enhanced through tie-ups with local farmer organizations and healthcare workers to introduce fresh vegetables to meals and educate students about healthy diets. Without proper interministerial coordination, however, such a program would likely have limited success.





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HOW TO MAKE SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMS MORE NUTRITION-SENSITIVE

The following features can be considered in the design of new SPPs or as add-ons to existing SPPs to make them more nutrition-sensitive:

- Targeting households with pregnant women and/or young children (under 2 years old).
- Using targeting mechanisms to reach the poorest, most food insecure households with limited access to nutritious foods.
- Including a nutrition BCC component.
- Linking the program to health services and ensuring that beneficiaries have access to – and use – preventive/curative health services/
- Including interventions to empower women.
- Providing or ensuring access to foods (or food vouchers) with a high nutritional value.
- Including other measures to promote healthy diets and improve nutrition outcomes.

There is evidence that including several of these features may lead to greater nutrition impacts. For example, in Bangladesh, a randomized controlled trial found that including both agriculture and nutrition trainings led to larger impacts on dietary diversity than either training alone (Ahmed et al. 2023).

In **Table 1** on the following pages, we list different types of SPPs and indicate potential opportunities to make them more nutrition-sensitive. We note that not all SPPs were designed with nutrition in mind or have obvious entry points for adding nutrition-sensitive components, hence we judge that some types of SPPs have limited scope for enhancing nutrition sensitivity. However, the examples provided for increasing nutrition sensitivity are illustrative, and each program team should discuss the best ways to make their program more nutrition-sensitive based on available resources, beneficiary needs, and the context.

Table 1. Opportunities for increasing nutrition sensitivity of SPPs by program type

Program category	Program subcategory	Potential for adding nutrition-sensitive components ● Low ● Med ● High	Examples of possible opportunities to increase nutrition sensitivity
Unconditional cash transfers	Poverty-targeted cash transfers, last-resort programs	●	Ensure 1,000-day households are targeted; use existing nutrition surveys to target poor, undernourished, or over-nourished populations
	Family, children, orphan allowance, including orphans and vulnerable children benefits	●	Add BCC on healthy diet and physical activity
	Noncontributory funeral grants, burial allowances	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
	Emergency cash support, including support to refugees and returning migrants	●	Add malnutrition screening/treatment; preventive interventions (including distribution of specially formulated foods for infants and young children); ensure availability of preventive and curative health services.
	Public charity, including zakat	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
Conditional cash transfers	Women/pregnant women	●	Condition transfer on participation in BCC for healthy diets; completion of ANC visits and immunization/well baby clinics for 0-23 mo old children; use program to target preventive nutritional supplements to pregnant women and to children 6-23 mo old if appropriate. Add BCC to encourage healthy diets; and discourage consumption of unhealthy foods while in transit to/from school
	Students	●	
Social pensions (noncontributory)	Old-age social pensions	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
	Widow allowances	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
	Disability benefits	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
	War veteran benefits	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
	Survivorship benefits	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
Food and in-kind transfers	Food stamps, rations, vouchers	●	Provide stamps/vouchers specifically for healthy foods such as fruits or vegetables, whole grains, dairy products, eggs
	Nutrition programs (therapeutic, supplementary feeding)	●	Enhance nutritional quality of supplements; screening to identify those who would benefit most
	School supplies (free textbooks, uniforms)	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
	In-kind/nonfood emergency support	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
	Other in-kind transfers	●	Limited scope for increasing nutrition sensitivity
School feeding	School feeding programs	●	Add BCC to educate students about healthy eating and lifestyle and discourage unhealthy food consumption outside of school; enhance school meal quality.
Public works, workfare, and direct job creation	Cash-for-work	●	Provide BCC on investing in nutritious foods and healthy diets
	Food-for-work, including food-for-training, food-for-assets	●	Provide nutrient rich foods; prioritize nutritionally-vulnerable households

Note: The ratings are the authors' subjective assessments.

SUMMARY OF EXISTING SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMS

We used information from socialprotection.org, supplemented with web searches and discussions with in-country partners, to identify the number of SPPs that currently exist in each country (**Table 2**). To limit the scope of this note, we only included programs under the initiative of the national governments. Most of the programs included are large-scale programs covering most of the respective country.

Bangladesh had the most SPPs (27) and Pakistan had the least (6). **Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6** provide additional details on program scale, entitlements, and eligibility requirements in each country.



Photo credit: Shawn Sebastian

Table 2. Social protection program subcategories and number of programs per subcategory in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan

Program category	Program subcategory	BD	IN	NP	PK
Unconditional cash transfers	Poverty-targeted cash transfers, last-resort programs	3	×	1	1
	Family, children, orphan allowance, including orphans and vulnerable children benefits	×	×	×	×
	Noncontributory funeral grants, burial allowances	×	×	×	×
	Emergency cash support, including support to refugees and returning migrants	×	×	×	1
	Public charity, including zakat	×	×	×	×
Conditional cash transfers	Women/pregnant women	2	2	2	2
	Students	5	×	1	×
Social pensions (noncontributory)	Old-age social pensions	1	1	1	×
	Widow allowance	1	1	1	×
	Disability benefits	1	1	1	×
	War veteran benefits	2	×	×	×
	Survivorship benefits	×	×	×	×
Food and in-kind transfers	Food stamps, rations, vouchers	6	1	×	1
	Nutrition programs (therapeutic, supplementary feeding)	×	1	1	1
	School supplies (free textbooks, uniforms)	×	×	1	×
	In-kind/nonfood emergency support	1	×	×	×
	Other in-kind transfers	×	×	×	×
School feeding	School feeding programs	1	1	1	×
Public works, workfare, and direct job creation	Cash-for-work	2	1	1	×
	Food-for-work, including food-for-training, food-for-assets	2	×	×	×
Total		27	9	11	6

BD=Bangladesh, IN=India, NP=Nepal, PK=Pakistan

×=Program does not exist

Social protection programs in Bangladesh



Table 3. Social protection programs in Bangladesh

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
Unconditional cash transfers	Targeted ultra-poor program	National	Half a day's worth of casual labor	Ultra-poor households	No
Poverty-targeted cash transfers	Stipend for improving the livelihood of transgender, Bede, and disadvantaged communities	National	BDT 700 taka per month at elementary level, BDT 800 per month up to secondary level, BDT 1,000 per month at upper secondary level, and BDT 1200 per month at higher level Skilled training allowance of BDT 10,000 BDT 600 per month hijra BDT 500 per month for Bede	Hijra, Bede, and disadvantage communities Hijra aged 50 or older Bede aged 50 or older	
	Special assistance for development of people in chars, haors, and backward areas	Region specific	Cash transfer	<i>Details not available</i>	No
Emergency cash support to refugees and returning migrants	x				
Conditional cash transfers					
Women/Pregnant women	Mother and Child benefit program	64 districts	BDT 800 per month until child is 3 yrs.	Pregnant and lactating women	Yes (targets 1,000 days)
	Assistance for working lactating mothers	National	BDT 800 per month	Working lactating women	Yes (targets 1,000 days)
Students	Primary Education Stipend prog.	National	BDT 50-300 per month	All primary school children enrolled in participating primary schools	No
	Stipends for secondary, higher secondary, and madrasah education level students	487 districts	BDT 1,300-1,800 per month	School enrolled youth (40% female and 10% male)	No

BDT=Bangladesh taka

x=Program does not exist

Social protection programs in Bangladesh



Table 3. Social protection programs in Bangladesh (continued)

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
Social pensions	Stipends for undergraduate and postgraduate level students	National	BDT 8000 per student enrolled in science and BDT 6000 per student enrolled in commerce	Conditional upon school grades	No
	Stipends for students of technical education institutions	National	BDT 6000	<i>Details not available</i>	
	Stipends for Physically Challenged Students	National	Primary Level BDT 300 taka monthly, High School Level (vi-x) BDT 450 taka monthly, College Level (xi-xii) BDT 600 taka monthly and University Level (Graduation and above) BDT 1000 taka monthly.	Candidate must be 5 year of age above, must be the handicapped, must be a Student with Disabilities attending any of the educational Institutions, must have an attendance rate of 50%, must attend the annual examination and must bear a registration certificate issued by the District Social Services Office.	No
	Old-age social pensions	National	BDT 500 per month	Men above 65 and women above 62 years	No
	Widow allowance	National	BDT 500 per month	Widows and husband-deserted women	No
Disability benefits	Allowance for financially insolvent persons with disabilities	National	BDT 700 per month	Person living with a hearing, visual, speech, intellectual, and/or physical impairment	No
War veteran benefits	Honorarium for freedom fighter heroes	National	BDT 20,000 per month	War veteran	No
	Honorarium and medical allowances for injured freedom fighter heroes	National	<i>Details not available</i>	Injured freedom fighters and families of martyred and sick freedom fighters	No

BDT=Bangladesh taka

✖=Program does not exist

Social protection programs in Bangladesh



Table 3. Social protection programs in Bangladesh (continued)

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
Food and in-kind transfers	Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)/	National	30 kg of rice per month per household	Poor households	No
	Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)	National	10-30 kg of rice/wheat per month per household	Poor households	No
	Khaddya Bandhob Karmosuchi (KBK)	National	30 kg of subsidized rice per month per family	Poor households	No
	Open Market Sales (OMS)	National	5 kg of subsidized rice per day per family	Poor households	No
	Food Assistance in Ctg-HTA	Chittagong hill tracts	<i>Details not available</i>	<i>Details not available</i>	No
	Ration for Shaheed (Martyred) Family and Honorable Injured Freedom Fighters	National	Rice-30 kg Oil-6 liters Lentils-4 kg (per household per month)	Wounded freedom fighters and families of the martyrs of liberation war	No
	Nutrition programs (therapeutic, supplementary feeding)	x			
School supplies (free textbooks, uniforms) In-kind/nonfood emergency support		x			
	PM's rehabilitation assistance to the people of river erosion affected areas	National	BDT 50,000 lump sum	Flood affected families	No
Other in-kind transfers		x			
School feeding	School feeding program	Three districts under Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char	One 75-gram packet of fortified biscuits	All students enrolled in a primary schools under Rohingya refugees' camps.	Yes (food)
	Primary school feeding project phase-1	150 poverty prone sub-districts	Biscuits +egg/banana/milk+ hot meals	All students enrolled in a primary schools	Yes (food)
Public works, workfare, and direct job creation Cash-for-work	Employment generation program for the poorest	National	80 days of guaranteed employment per year	Poor and vulnerable families	No

BDT=Bangladesh taka

x=Program does not exist

Social protection programs in Bangladesh



Table 3. Social protection programs in Bangladesh (continued)

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
Food-for-work	Work For Money (WFM)	National (Rural)	8 kg rice for 7 hours of work or cash equivalent	People who own at most 50 acres of land and those affected by river erosion or natural disasters	No
	Test relief	National	8 kg of rice per 7 hours of work	Poor and vulnerable families	No
	Food For Work (FFW)	National	12 kg of rice / 18 kg of wheat (depending on locality) for every 7 hours of work.	Unemployed, poor, and food insecure people, landless due to natural disaster; and ownership of less than 0.5 acre of land.	No

BDT=Bangladesh taka

✗=Program does not exist



Social protection programs in India



Table 4. Social protection programs in India

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
Unconditional cash transfers					
Poverty-targeted cash transfers	x				
Emergency cash support to refugees and returning migrants	x				
Conditional cash transfers					
Women/pregnant women	Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)	National	INR 1,000-1400 per birth	All women who gives birth in a public health facility	Yes (targets 1,000 days)
	Pradhan Mantri Matritva Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)	National	INR 5,000 (in 3 installments) for first child and INR 5,000 for 2 nd child if 2 nd child is a girl	Pregnant women (1 st and 2 nd pregnancy)	Yes (targets 1,000 days)
Students	x				
Social pensions					
Old-age social pensions	Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme	National	INR 200-500 per month	Above 60 years member of a BPL households	No
Widow allowances	Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme	National	INR 300-500 per month	Above 40 years widow member of a BPL households	No
Disability benefits	Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme	National	INR 300-500 per month	Above 18 years disabled member of a BPL households	No
War veteran benefits	x				
Food and in-kind transfers					
Food stamps, rations, vouchers	Public Distribution System	National	Subsidized rice and wheat	All households but BPL are entitled more	Maybe (fortified staples)
Nutrition programs (therapeutic, supplementary feeding)	ICDS Food Supplements	National	Food supplement of 600 calories of energy and 18-20 grams of protein per day	All pregnant/lactating women and children below 5 years	Yes (targets 1,000 days+food)
School supplies (free textbooks, uniforms)	x				
In-kind/nonfood emergency support	x				
Other in-kind transfers	x				

BPL=below poverty line; INR=Indian rupees

x=Program does not exist

Social protection programs in India



Table 4. Social protection programs in India (continued)

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
School feeding	Mid-Day meal	National	School meal consisting of 450-700 calories in total	All students enrolled in public school	Maybe (depending on type of food given)
Public works, workfare, and direct job creation					
Cash-for-work	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act	National	100 days of guaranteed employment per year	Poor and vulnerable families	No
Food-for-work	×				

BPL=below poverty line; INR=Indian rupees

×=Program does not exist



Photo credit: Shawn Sebastian

Social protection programs in Nepal



Table 5. Social protection programs in Nepal

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
Unconditional cash transfers					
Poverty-targeted cash transfers	Endangered indigenous peoples allowance or endangered ethnicity grant	National	NPR 3,990 per month	Endangered ethnic groups	No
Emergency cash support to refugees and returning migrants	x				
Conditional cash transfers					
Women/pregnant women	Aama program	National	NPR 1,000-3,000 for delivery and NPR 400 for completing 4 antenatal care visits	All pregnant women and women giving birth in a public health facility	Yes (targets 1000-days)
	Child grant program	25 districts	NPR 532 per month	All children less than 5 years	Yes (targets 1000-days)
Students	Stipend program	National	NPR 350-24,000 per year	Dalits, girls, people with disabilities, endangered ethnic groups, conflict and martyr's child	No
Social pensions					
Old-age social pensions	Old Age allowance (OAA) or senior citizen's allowance	National	NPR 2,660-4,000 per month	People older than 70 years; but above 60 for Dalits and people from Karnali province	No
Widow allowances	Single women's or widow allowance	National	NPR 2,660 per month	Widows of all ages and single women aged 60 or older	No
Disability benefits	Disability grant	National	NPR 2,128-3,990 per month	People living with disabilities over the age of 16	No
War veteran benefits	x				
Food and in-kind transfers					
Food stamps, rations, vouchers	x				
Nutrition programs (therapeutic, supplementary feeding)	Mother child health and nutrition program	Karnali province	3 kg rice per month	Pregnant/lactating women and children (6-59 months)	Yes (targets 1,000 days+food)

NPR=Nepali rupees

x=Program does not exist

Social protection programs in Nepal



Table 5. Social protection programs in Nepal (continued)

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
School supplies (free textbooks, uniforms)	Scholarship program	National	Fee waiver	Dalits, girls, people with disabilities, endangered ethnic groups, conflict and martyr's child	No
In-kind/nonfood emergency support	×				
Other in-kind transfers	×				
School feeding	National school meals program and food for education	40 districts	School meal consisting of 470 calories	All primary students enrolled in a public school	Yes (food)
Public works, workfare, and direct job creation	Prime minister employment program	National	100 days of guaranteed employment per year	Individuals with less than 100 days of employment per year	No
Cash-for-work					
Food-for-work	×				

NPR=Nepali rupees

×=Program does not exist



Social protection programs in Pakistan



Table 6. Social protection programs in Pakistan

SPP subcategory	Name	Program scale	Entitled benefits	Eligibility	Nutrition sensitive feature?
Unconditional cash transfers					
Poverty-targeted cash transfers	Ehsaas' kafaalat program	National	PKR 2,000 per month	Poor households	No
Emergency cash support to refugees and returning migrants	Temporarily displaced persons emergency recovery project	Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA)	PKR 4,000 per month for four months per family	People living in FATA; All households from the same areas, with old	No
Conditional cash transfers					
Women/Pregnant women	Women empowerment center	National	Daily stipend of PKR 30	Widows with dependent children; Orphans; Destitute; Poor Female; Children aged 0-2 years	Yes (Women empowerment)
	Child wellness grant	Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA)	PKR 7,500 in three equal installments		Yes (targets 1,000 days)
Students	x				
Social pensions					
Old-age social pensions	x				
Widow allowance	x				
Disability benefits	x				
War veteran benefits	x				
Food and in-kind transfers					
Food stamps, rations, vouchers	Ehsaas langars Scheme	National	Two times food daily	Poor	No
Nutrition programs (therapeutic, supplementary feeding)	Benazir nashonoma	National	Quarterly PKR 1,500 for pregnant and lactating women and boy child, and PKR 2,000 for girl child	Pregnant/lactating women and children	Yes(targets 1,000 days + nutrition education)
School supplies (free textbooks, uniforms)	x				
In-kind/nonfood emergency support	x				
Other in-kind transfers	x				
School feeding	x				
Public works, workfare, and direct job creation					
Cash-for-work	x				
Food-for-work	x				

PKR=Pakistani rupees

x=Program does not exist

SUMMARY & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Social protection programs (SPPs) are a key policy instrument in South Asia. Most SPPs in South Asia target poverty and food insecurity, but relatively few were originally designed to improve nutrition.
- There are gaps in SPPs for all four countries (i.e., not all types of SPPs exist in a country) covered in this research note. Programs not considered may or may not fill these gaps.
- Providing (bio)fortified versions of these foods or adding foods with high nutritional value would make SPPs more nutrition-sensitive and could address the challenge of affordability of healthy diets in South Asia.
- There is a missed opportunity for existing SPPs to impact nutrition. Opportunities for making SPPs more nutrition-sensitive include:
 - Targeting nutritionally vulnerable individuals (women, young children, school children).
 - Targeting the program to poor, food insecure, and nutritionally vulnerable households.
 - Including nutrition behavior change communication.
 - Linking beneficiaries to health services (or establishing health conditionality in SPPs).
 - Including interventions to empower women.
 - Providing or ensuring access to foods (or food vouchers) with a high nutritional value.
 - Including other measures to promote healthy diets and improve nutrition outcomes.
- Conditional cash transfers for women, food stamps/rations/vouchers (focused on nutritious foods), and healthy and nutritious school feeding programs have 'high' potential for being made more nutrition-sensitive through the addition of one or more features mentioned above.



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ABOUT TAFSSA

TAFSSA (*Transforming Agrifood Systems in South Asia*) is a CGIAR Regional Integrated Initiative to support actions that improve equitable access to sustainable healthy diets, improve farmers' livelihoods and resilience, and conserve land, air, and water resources in South Asia.

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