Seminar on social protection as a catalyst for food security and the right to adequate food: summary

Introduction

Very recently, in October 2012, the Committee on World Food Security discussed Social Protection for Food Security, informed by a High Level Panel of Experts report. It agreed on a list of recommendations including to further explore “a way forward on integrating food security and nutrition issues in social protection floors, in consultation with Rome-based Agencies and relevant organizations and entities, such as the High-Level Task Force on Food Security (HLTF), the International Labor Organization (ILO), the World Bank”.

On 18th March’13, a seminar was organized in Geneva by IUF, Oxfam and FIAN International to develop an understanding on specific issues related to integrating food security and nutrition issues in the national social protection floors, within the human rights framework. This seminar brought together participants from different UN agencies, governments, research institutions, NGOs and other civil society organizations dealing with social protection and food security issues.

This note summarizes the enriching discussions from the seminar. The note is divided into 3 sections namely (i) Setting the scene: Social Protection back on the international agenda; (ii) Social Protection Floors as a catalyst for food security and the Right to adequate food; and (iii) Making it a reality; Follow up and next steps

1. Setting the scene: Social Protection back on the international agenda

Social protection is receiving increased political attention as a tool to address poverty, inequality and vulnerability to hunger and shocks. In June 2012, the 185 member states of the ILO adopted unanimously the Social Protection Floors (SPFs) Recommendation 202; all governments (except Panama), all workers and all employers endorsed SPFs. In October 2012, Social Protection for Food security was an agenda item for the 39th session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

The critical importance of income security in the fulfillment of human rights was highlighted, as well as being an essential component for an equitable, democratic and peaceful development of society. States have the overall and primary responsibility to ensure social protection floors guaranteeing access to essential health care and minimum income security for all while progressively ensuring higher levels of protection. Making this aspiration a reality requires the broad participation of all stakeholders, increased government accountability, setting targets and timeframes and mobilizing the national and international resources needed.
The recent context however clearly indicated that the financial crisis affected vulnerable groups and increased inequality. Fiscal austerity in many countries has reduced the salaries and the jobs in the public sector, which provide essential services in 98 countries. Cuts in social protection programs have reduced the coverage in 80 countries. The reforms on labor flexibilization have been carried out in 32 countries which resulted in revising the minimum wage, limiting wage adjustments and undermining the rights of workers to bargain collectively. In 2013, budget cuts have been observed in 119 countries and this is likely to increase to 132 countries in 2015.

The purpose of social protection is not merely to eradicate poverty. It is equally important for social protection to ensure that people do not fall into poverty and are protected against risk and adversity. Social protection aims at social transformation by enabling poor and vulnerable people to participate fully in economic and social life through basic income and to access social services.

The recent crises have resulted in states cutting back on social spending, even though the lesson from previous crises is the need for a stronger and smarter (not weaker) state. Social protection is an essential strategy for socio-economic recovery and the foundation of the state.

Many people were left behind even before crisis. Large numbers of hungry were and still are food producers. Waged agricultural workers are (still) removed from social protection coverage. The compliance of States with Human rights obligations towards this group and that of other poor is further eroded in periods when the need to protect them is even more crucial.

Social protection floors are relevant to the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, have a universal coverage and entail (inter)national obligations linked to the Right to Adequate Food and Right to Social Security. This should also be translated in the work of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (CESCR), and other international institutions like the UN Committee on the Eradication of all forms of discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Social Protection Floors are universally feasible and affordable and governments should elaborate clear indicators, benchmarks, with specific attention to marginalized and vulnerable groups.

There is national capacity to fund social and economic development and social protection floors in virtually all countries. There is fiscal space for an equitable recovery even in the poorest countries. The resources are available, but there is a need for global consensus and national political will. However, return to "normal" (pre-crisis) is not a solution as many were denied decent living before the crisis. Therefore, there are many options supported by UN policy statements: re-allocating public expenditures, increasing tax revenues (corporate taxes, including financial sector, property taxes, incomes taxes, etc), lobbying for increased transfers and aid, fighting illicit financial flows (tax evasion and trade mispricing), tapping into fiscal and foreign exchange reserves, adopting a more accommodative macroeconomic framework (e.g. tolerance to some inflation, fiscal deficit), restructuring debt. International agencies could provide the support needed to develop the required fiscal measures for funding social expenditures.

Moreover, the proposal for a Global Fund for Social Protection (GFSP) made by the UN Special Rapporteurs on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights and the one on the Right to Food would allow poorer countries to overcome their specific constraints to fund social protection. These States often have not adopted social protection schemes because a) the development models supported by major international institutions have pushed States to lower government spending; b) where poverty and need is widespread, meeting the basic costs of social protection systems today is a major challenge; and c) in many developing countries a large portion of the population is susceptible to the same risks of unpredicted covariant shocks, e.g. natural disasters, epidemic diseases or extreme food price increases, leading to simultaneous surges in demand for social protection and decreases in State export and taxation revenues. The GFSP would have two key functions: a) its FACILITY branch would close the funding shortfall for putting in place a social protection floor in LDCs; b) its REINSURANCE branch would help underwrite these schemes against the risks of excess demand triggered by major shocks.

Among the major obstacles to make social protection and food security universal are:
Institutional constraints:

• Weak capacity of local and national administrations to develop and deliver comprehensive, context-sensitive, flexible social protection systems and food security strategies guided by human rights norms and standards;
• Weak capacity to implement and monitor these systems;
• Poor accountability measures in countries

Macro-economic constraints:

• Lack of flexible financial instruments to address increased vulnerability in time of crisis;
• Challenge to index SPF programs against food price changes;
• Insufficient public budgets in the short-term and fiscal unsustainability in the medium and long term in some countries.

Political constraints:

• Lack of political will to address growth of inequalities within countries, to reallocate financial means for social protection floors and food security; in many countries informal support systems are outstretched to fill the lack of public policies.

2. Social Protection Floors as a catalyst for food security and the right to adequate food.

The key elements of ILO Recommendation no. 202 are the 4 guarantees of universal access to a set of goods and services constituting essential health care, basic income security for children, basic income security for persons in active age unable to earn sufficient income, basic income security for persons in old age. The universality of access is a major policy shift and is not limited to employment relation only. Income transfer has a direct relation with food security and the right to adequate food.

However as often stated, the guarantee of basic income security is insufficient to address food insecurity and malnutrition and ensure the right to adequate food. Food security exists when all people, at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Income transfer can only increase economic access to food and that too in contexts where food is available at reasonable prices. The physical and social access to food, and the capacity to transform food into good nutrition and health are determined by factors such as distance and functionality of markets, social relations (particularly gender), physical ability to access markets and access to health services etc.

Social Protection Floors can be a catalyst to achieving food security and right to adequate food if they designed and adapted to address food security issues and complemented by policies addressing causes of food insecurity : employment opportunities with decent income and wages, price stabilizing policies addressing market failures and price volatility, adequate food, adequate maternal and child care, health and nutrition policies, promoting and protecting women’s rights, addressing gender inequalities. Some of the key design features that must to be considered while designing the social protection floors in countries are:

• Setting the value of transfer to enable individuals/households to buy a nutritionally adequate diet i.e. adequate quantity and quality
• Flexibility of transfer or a combination of cash and in-kind transfer to cope with seasonal variations in prices and availability of food
• Coordination between mechanisms set up to ensure a universal access to services, particularly health services and income transfers. This is important because utilization of food and nutrition depend on health of individuals and vice versa.
• Policy measures to support transformational change in social and economic relations
Gender inequality is strongly linked to food insecurity and empowerment of women can make a significant contribution to food and nutrition security for all members of the household. The analysis of political economy is essential to understand poverty, vulnerability, power, inequity and food insecurity. Social protection can support the transformation of gender inequalities, but this can only be achieved within a broader social policy environment. Transformative potential of social protection must move beyond a focus on income to arenas of empowerment and equity to address women’s strategic interests.

Social Protection can effectively address food insecurity through simple gender-sensitive design features such as – making women’s empowerment explicit in programme aims; tackling both economic and social risks in the programme; creating opportunities to build on and coordinate with existing programmes and services; maximising community-programme interface on the potential of behavioural change communication efforts; and investing in gender-sensitive M&E.

Social protection can overcome competing interests from people affected by crisis, for example, high food prices, affect the food security of urban poor and other net food consumers, whereas, it presents an opportunity to increase incomes to poor small net food sellers. Social protection can help to overcome this poverty dilemma and can help to change it in a virtuous process where strong rural development also reinforces better income and development opportunities for urban poor.

An enabling political environment should include measures to address current obstacles, incentivize social protection policies and stimulate national consultation through effective social dialogue and social participation. Accountability of states ought to be based on human rights obligations, standards and norms and on nationally defined monitoring mechanisms. There should be an exchange of information experience and expertise among member states and with ILO and other UN and international agencies working on social protection and food security. The national consultations should develop and assess policies towards progressive implementation.

3. Making it a reality; Follow Up and Next Steps

Policy steps at national level:

Member States should design and put in place, or strengthen comprehensive, nationally owned, context-sensitive social protection policies that integrate food security and nutrition in Social Protection Floors. Frame strategies within a broader set of economic and social policies that promote human rights compliant development and address inequality;

There should be an inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination/cooperation at national level, including agriculture, social security and health ministries, to ensure that social protection is integrated with broader food security and nutrition programming, within human rights accountability framework;

The member States, international organisations and other stakeholders should ensure that social protection systems embrace a "twin-track" strategy to maximize impact on resilience and food security and nutrition. Further exploration of a way forward on integrating food security and nutrition issues in social protection floors, in consultation with Rome-based Agencies, the Office of the High Commissioner on human Rights and relevant organizations and entities, such as the High-Level Task Force on Food Security (HLTF), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank;

Policy steps at international level:

Next steps for the CFS: monitoring implementation of recommendations adopted by the CFS, updating Global Strategic Framework (GSF) with commitments on Social Protection as a catalyst for food security and the right to adequate food. CFS 41 (2014): implementation of the Voluntary guidelines on the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of the national food security;

Discussion on post-2015 global development goals. High-level event under the UK’s G8 presidency on food and nutrition security (8 June 2013). Three priorities, moving from defining objectives to means towards: 1.
Self-standing objective of reduction of inequalities; 2. Universal social protection floors and decent work; 3. adequate ‘double-level’ accountability for progress towards global development goals.

**Building experience and knowledge:**

Identify countries where there is an interest and potential to cooperate and promote social protection as a catalyst for food security and the right to adequate food;

Social protection policies should be gender-sensitive, promote and protect women’s human rights and should lead to women’s empowerment; to increasing women’s decision-making and bargaining power. Gender sensitive social protection is the only way to achieve food security and nutrition outcomes.

By 2019 the ILO Recommendation 202 has to be reviewed. Ensuring a genuine process based on human rights principles of meaningful consultation and participation of beneficiaries through effective social dialogue and social participation and clear accountability mechanisms.

**Ensuring Funding capacity:**

There is national capacity to fund social and economic development and social protection floors. There is fiscal space for an equitable recovery. IMF to report how government can provide fiscal space for social expenditures;

These should be complemented and supported by the implementation of the proposal for a Global Fund for Social Protection, including both the facility branch to support low income countries to fund their social protection floors and the reinsurance branch to help them to address increased needs in times of crises. The social protection systems cannot be donor driven.