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Strengthening the linkages between agriculture and social protection. Designing coherent approaches for improving food security and nutrition in vulnerable households

About this discussion

This document summarizes the online consultation *Strengthening the linkages between agriculture and social protection: designing coherent approaches for improving food security and nutrition in vulnerable households*, which was held on the FAO Forum on Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia (FSN Forum in ECA) from 6 November to 17 December 2018.

The six weeks of consultation saw the participation of experts from nine countries: Armenia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation and Tajikistan.

The consultation was initiated by the FAO project “*Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia*”, funded by the Russian Federation and led by the FAO Agricultural Development Economics Division. The consultation was facilitated by:

- ▶ **Jamília Ismailova** – Head of the Department of State Benefits, Ministry of Labor and Social Development of the Kyrgyz Republic
- ▶ **Natalia Winder Rossi** – Senior Social Protection Officer, FAO, Italy
- ▶ **Hrayr Aslanyan** – Public Health Specialist / Senior Researcher, Department of General Hygiene and Occupational Health, Armenia
- ▶ **Melissa Vargas** – Food and Nutrition Education Consultant, FAO, Italy

Introduction

Countries increasingly recognize that social protection measures are needed to provide relief to people living in poverty, and to prevent others from falling into it when a crisis strikes. However, evidence has shown that social protection programs can sustainably move people out of poverty only when integrated into broader livelihood promotion and rural development strategies. Specifically, promoting coherence between social protection, food security and nutrition, and agricultural interventions would maximize and sustain impacts of social protection over time.

This online consultation was organized to further explore this nexus and to learn from experiences in developing and

implementing social protection schemes that are coherent with agricultural policies in Europe and Central Asia. During the discussion, participants highlighted issues related to the region's agricultural and rural context that should be addressed in designing social protection programmes.

In addition, they provided examples and suggestions regarding rural development and social protection programmes with links to the agricultural sector. Furthermore, participants shared experiences with implementing the "Cash Plus" approach, which promotes coherence between social protection, food security and nutrition and agriculture interventions. They paid specific attention to its component of nutrition education.

Implementing social protection in rural areas: issues for consideration

Considering the broader context in which social protection programmes are implemented, participants referred to common characteristics of the agricultural and rural environment that would deserve particular attention in developing these programmes, including:

- ▶ **Inadequate physical and social infrastructure.** Rural people lack adequate access to transport, water, sanitation, energy, communication facilities, and shops; also healthcare, education and cultural facilities are often difficult to reach ([Guljahan Kurbanova](#)). Limited access to (well- functioning) markets is problematic for those engaged in agriculture ([Susanna Karapetyan](#)).
- ▶ **Isolation and territorial distance.** Large distances between rural settlements and district centers make the provision of social assistance difficult. A lack of regular and timely information can cause feelings of isolation and stress, also among social workers themselves, potentially limiting their effectiveness.
- ▶ **Limited institutional capacity.** Social services are mainly located in small towns and regional centers; in rural areas, specialized social institutions and workers are generally lacking. The absence of organizations such as labor unions further limit the provision of social support. In addition, rural areas face the problem that the scope and functions of social protection are often not well understood. In order to adequately prepare staff for social protection work in rural areas, special education programs should be developed.



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- ▶ **Community-based and traditional approach.** While rural people are used to an open and community-based approach based on mutual cooperation, they are still guided by traditions. Being far from innovations and information, it can be difficult for them to adapt to new living conditions with, for instance, the use of digital technology.
- ▶ **Ageing of the rural population.** Young people leave rural areas while a large number of elderly, women and children remain. These three groups deserve particular attention regarding the provision of adequate health, education, and social assistance; especially women's work burden need to be taken into account ([Guljahan Kurbanova](#)).

Linking agriculture and social protection for food security: examples and suggestions

One of the participants shared the case of the Republic of Belarus, which has seen a substantial decrease in the share of rural poor over the last decades (from 50.8 percent in 2000 to 9.8 percent in 2017), and which has implemented coherent approaches to promote food security and nutrition. Currently, the state program "Development of the Agrarian Business in the Republic of Belarus for 2016–2020" is being implemented with the aim to increase competitiveness in the global market and to ensure an adequate supply of quality food that meets domestic nutritional needs. Furthermore, different forms of social insurance and targeted social assistance exist ([Olga Pashkevich](#)).

In the Russian Federation many different forms of social assistance exist. Among the programs which direct links to agriculture is an initiative in the Lipetsk region, where

household plots of elderly people are cultivated by social workers with the aim to promote effective land use and provide the owners of the plots with additional financial resources. Another example is the "Small Compound Programme" which has been implemented in the Krasnoyarsk region and provides poor households with cattle and poultry ([Guljahan Kurbanova](#)).

Participants also shared specific issues to be considered in effectively connecting social protection to agriculture. In Bangladesh, for instance, linking the two sectors has not led to sustained results due to natural disasters that destroyed the improvements achieved. Hence, adequate disaster management is necessary for long-term results ([Moshfaqur Rahman](#)). Furthermore, participants shared suggestions on the approach to be taken with regard to

interventions in agriculture. For instance, permaculture was mentioned as an approach that offers a way forward towards more sustainable food production and societies ([Rob](#)

[Blakemore](#)). Applying fortification technologies in local food production systems could help in addressing micronutrient deficiencies ([Firuza Khojaeva](#)).

Experiences with piloting Cash Plus

A concrete tool that can strengthen the link between social protection and agriculture is "Cash Plus", which aims to improve the livelihoods and productive potential of vulnerable households by providing a flexible combination of cash transfers and productive activities, resources and assets, and technical training and extension services ([Karina Levina](#)). In the context of the FAO project "Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia", this approach has been piloted in Armenia as well as Kyrgyzstan, and discussion participants shared their experiences with the implementation in both countries. They paid specific attention the pilot's component of nutrition education in which project beneficiaries, social workers, doctors and teachers participated.

Regarding the implementation of the pilot in Armenia, a participant pointed out that its general effectiveness could be enhanced by coupling it with efforts to ease access to credit

and markets and with investments in human capital ([Susanna Karapetyan](#)). As regards the pilot's interactive training on nutrition, which addressed the basics of healthy nutrition, micronutrients, food safety and food security challenges, pre- and post-training testing showed that after the training, participants were more attentive to the selection of food products and their eating habits.

However, to achieve radical changes the course would need to be extended ([Qnarik Yedigaryab](#)) and additional trainings are needed to have more knowledgeable "mid-level trainers", who would guide their communities about the prevention of food-borne diseases. Lastly, concerning the provision of adequate information, a concrete suggestion was to translate available information material on food safety – e.g. on "the five keys to safer food" – into Armenian and distribute it to the training participants and their communities ([Hrayr Aslanyan](#)).



The pilot in Kyrgyzstan included nutrition training as well, which was based on the food grown by the beneficiaries under three productive packages, including in greenhouses that were provided to them by the project. While participants discovered new products and ways of preparing and preserving food, they also learned that some of the "new" and healthier products cost less than the products traditionally used by them. They also found that sustainable homestead production of nutrition-sensitive crops, including during low agricultural season, and home-made preserved vegetables increase the duration of access to vegetables.

The training has helped many participants to introduce changes in their dietary patterns; for instance, they have started to include different food groups in one meal. Fundamental for the training's success was the fact that it was very interactive, and that more than half of it consisted of practice. As a precondition for sustainability, a supportive environment, including the involvement of local media and leadership of local authorities and organizations, was mentioned. To further improve the project's effectiveness and sustainability, the following aspects should be considered:

1. social workers, doctors, and teachers were trained as nutrition trainers for villages, but are overloaded with work;
2. participants expressed the wish to introduce training for school cooks, and
3. receiving benefits should be made conditional upon participation in the training (Gulmira Kozhobergenova).



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Bringing social protection and agriculture together for better nutrition: the role of food and nutrition education

While schemes enhancing coherence between social protection and agriculture have much potential to support people's pathways out of poverty, nutrition improvement is often not achieved or prioritized. In fact, increasing income and/or food availability will not automatically translate into improved nutritional outcomes. One strategy to support better results is integration of food and nutrition education, which has been proven effective particularly when combined with cash transfers. Specifically, integrating food and nutrition education into schemes such as Cash Plus can:

1) direct the use of household resources for improved diets; 2) ensure adequate handling and consumption of food; 3) promote adequate intra-household distribution of food; 4) develop capacities for better budgeting, recognition and prioritization of nutritious foods; 5) help build resilience; and 6) foster community prioritization of and joint responsibility for nutrition. Ideally, nutrition education would be institutionalized through existing community, health or agriculture services and designed to support other development objectives (Melissa Vargas Araya).

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