

# Ending Child Poverty and Securing Child Rights: The Role of Social Protection

## *Plan UK Briefing Note*

The evidence is mounting that the very poorest and vulnerable have not benefited from development initiatives, as the slow progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) demonstrates:

- The number of people living on less than \$1 a day in Africa is projected to *rise* from 314 million to 366 million by 2015.
- One in five children die before their fifth birthday, and while overall infant mortality is falling overall, the gap between rich and poor countries is widening.
- There are approximately 43 million orphans worldwide and this figure is set to rise as the number of deaths from AIDS is projected to increase significantly over the next 10 years.

Social protection or social welfare measures are known to have been critical in advancing the wellbeing and security of the poor in other parts of the world by protecting them against vulnerability and deprivation. Children are particularly vulnerable to poverty as they are still developing and are dependant on adults for their survival. Poverty is more than material and income deprivation; it also encompasses social deprivation. The poorest experience a lack of voice, are often socially excluded and are vulnerable to a variety of risks. The establishment of social protection packages (including social safety nets, appropriate legislative measures and livelihood promotion) in developing countries can be an important contribution to realising the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable.

### **What is Social Protection?**

Social protection is a set of measures that ensure "a basic floor of subsistence below which no one falls". It is both an *approach* and a *set of policies* focusing on reducing risk and the vulnerability of the poorest and can be defined as:

*a range of protective, preventative and promotional public actions, carried out by the state or privately which seek to guarantee relief from destitution, avert deprivation and enhance real incomes and capabilities for households and individuals.*

Social protection is founded on the premise that all of society's citizens have a responsibility for protecting the vulnerable and alleviating poverty, and that the state plays the mediating role in redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. Social protection sets a minimum standard of social and economic security that protects citizens against vulnerability and deprivation. When properly implemented, social protection measures enhance the quality of life of individuals and societies by developing and unleashing human potential, increasing stability, advancing social justice and equity and promoting economic dynamism.

Development agencies are reconsidering a range of public policies and societal processes from the perspective of rights, risk and vulnerability, and refer to social protection as providing 'ropes' or 'trampolines' which enable individuals and households to raise themselves out of poverty.

There is growing interest in social protection measures such as cash transfers by development agencies. Even modest cash transfers provide households with regular and predictable income, which can be relied upon and, if delivered over the long term, can reduce vulnerability to shocks and allow households to accumulate assets, which they can invest in improving their own livelihoods. Main examples of cash transfers are:

- **Family benefits and child allowances.** These cash transfers, whether universal or targeted at the poorest families, are the most direct way of supporting the survival and development of the child. In industrialised countries, universal child benefit is widely accepted as a right. South

Africa introduced its Child Support Grant in 1998 and early studies suggest that these benefits are well targeted at the poorest families.

- **Social pensions.** In many developing countries, elderly relatives play a critical role in the care and development of children. There is growing evidence that the provision of pensions has striking benefits for children. In both South Africa and Brazil, the provision of pensions has seen increased school attendance, especially for girls.

Historically in-kind transfers have been a more popular form of transfer of goods to the poor, largely because of concerns that they may misuse cash transfers on unessential items. However this type of transfer has great implications for empowerment and decision-making. Main examples of in-kind transfers are:

- **Nutritional supplementation programmes.** Nutritional supplements supplied to pregnant mothers, infants and young children are a direct transfer aimed at improving the child's ability to survive and grow up healthy.
- **Food aid.** Food aid remains a popular social protection instrument but nonetheless controversial. In times of emergency, particularly in times of famine, food aid is critical in ensuring the survival of the child. Yet evidence is weak that food aid actually improves the nutritional status of children in the longer term.
- **Fee waivers and exemptions.** User fees in health care and education services, once widely advocated by bilateral agencies, are now widely acknowledged as preventing the poorest families from accessing services. Waivers and exemptions to user fees, when properly targeted and implemented, can help ensure access for the poorest and most vulnerable to basic services.

Research conducted by **Plan** on the impact of healthcare user fees in 5 rural communities in **Senegal, Burkina Faso and Ghana** found a strong correlation between economic status and the utilisation of obstetric services. Women with lower incomes delivered at home while women from households with higher incomes used hospitals or health centres. A similar pattern was found for curative care, with a clear trend of the better off frequenting secondary health care facilities (hospitals and private physicians), while the poorest tended to be treated by village health posts, traditional healers, neighbours and street drug sellers. This research demonstrates that user fees for healthcare can affect the ability of the poor to access adequate healthcare facilities.

Used together these social protection measures can help provide a more comprehensive sustainable mechanism for the protection of the poor and the vulnerable. In addition the establishment of a social contract between the citizen and the state can help promote good governance and effective poverty reduction.

The social protection instruments outlined above can go along way to securing the right of the child to survival and development. They also need to be underpinned by and work with other measures that explicitly focus on the right of the child to protection. Birth registration, for example, although not a social protection measure in itself, can play an important role in the establishment of social protection mechanisms by granting citizenship.

**Plan**, in all countries where it works, promotes human rights and child rights in particular. It raises awareness and provides training to children and communities on child rights as well as lobbying governments for the enactment of child rights legislation and its enforcement. Plan has been working closely with the government of **Togo** on the establishment and implementation of child-trafficking legislation. In **Uganda**, Plan has been influential in securing legal reform to prevent dispossession and land grabbing from widows and orphaned children.

### **Social protection and child rights**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) enshrines the right of every child to life, identity, survival, protection and development. It recognises the family as the fundamental group in society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of children. It also recognises the important role of the state in providing the necessary protection and assistance to the family so that it can fully assume its responsibilities.

The incidence of poverty is higher among children than it is among the population as a whole and children are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of poverty. Children can in fact be the biggest indirect beneficiaries of social protection systems. There is growing evidence that the provision of pensions has striking benefits for children. While pensions may not appear to have an obvious impact on child survival and development, in many developing countries elderly relatives play a critical role in the care and development of children. In both South Africa and Brazil, the provision of pensions has seen better nutrition and increased school attendance, especially for girls. In South Africa, 30% of the value of the pension is spent on grandchildren.

## **Challenges**

The Commission for Africa identified social protection as a priority, especially targeting orphans and vulnerable children. It proposes immediate funding of social protection packages of \$2 billion per year rising to \$5-6 billion by 2015. However there are considerable challenges ahead:

- Social protection systems require political will on the part of governments and donors. There are likely to be trade offs between what is most effective, and what is affordable and politically acceptable.
- In the poorest countries, support will need to be given to build institutions to deliver social protection. Social welfare ministries typically lack capacity and are under-funded when compared to health and education ministries. Pilot programmes show that partnerships between governments, civil society and international agencies can work.
- Although there are strong arguments in favour of universal benefits, it is likely that social protection measures will be targeted at the poorest initially. The identification of the poorest and most vulnerable households must be done carefully. Community identification may be effective but there is always the possibility that it will merely reflect and reinforce patterns of exclusion and marginalisation. The poorest may not be perceived to be the most deserving by communities.
- Some of the poorest and most vulnerable people live in fragile and failing states. Where the state cannot or is unwilling to deliver social protection then alternatives will have to be explored, such as channelling resources through civil society organisations.
- Poor governance is a challenge faced by some developing countries, and it is essential that corruption is checked if social protection is to be effective, winning the support of the middle classes and the international donor community.
- Donors must also be willing to commit to long-term and predictable financing to support social protection mechanisms.

## **Plan in the UK**

The UK Government was central to facilitating commitments made at the G8 Summit in 2005 together with the recommendations of the Commission for Africa for increased funding for social protection measures for the most vulnerable children and increased aid for development.

Plan UK urges the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) to:

- make its contribution to these commitments clear by outlining how it can contribute to and influence the efforts of developing country governments to deliver comprehensive, incremental and interconnecting social protection systems; and
- use its influence to ensure that social protection is included in PRSPs and other national plans.

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