OVERVIEW

Realizing the Full Potential of Social Safety Nets in Africa

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A copublication of the Agence Française de Développement and the World Bank
This booklet contains the overview, as well as a list of contents, from Realizing the Full Potential of Social Safety Nets in Africa doi: 10.1596/978-1-4648-1164-7. A PDF of the final, full-length book, once published, will be available at https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/ and print copies can be ordered at http://Amazon.com. Please use the final version of the book for citation, reproduction, and adaptation purposes.

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Judith Sandford is a Social Protection and Food Security Specialist with 20 years of experience, currently working as an independent consultant. She has supported the design and implementation of government-led interventions and programs of nongovernmental organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Her experience includes long-term support for the Productive Safety Net Program in Ethiopia (PSNP) and the National Safety Net Program (NSNP) in Kenya.
**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASPIRE</td>
<td>Atlas of Social Protection Indicators of Resilience and Equity (database)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>gross domestic product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSNP</td>
<td>Hunger Safety Net Program (Kenya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEAP</td>
<td>Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty Program (Ghana)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MASAF PWP</td>
<td>Malawi Social Action Fund Public Works Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>nongovernmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVC Program</td>
<td>Orphans and Vulnerable Children Program (Kenya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIU</td>
<td>project implementation unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNBSF</td>
<td>Programme National de Bourses de Sécurité Familiale (National Program of Family Security Transfers) (Senegal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSNP</td>
<td>Productive Safety Net Program (Ethiopia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSSN</td>
<td>Productive Social Safety Net (Tanzania)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCTP</td>
<td>Social Cash Transfer Program (Malawi)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children's Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>VUP</td>
<td>Vision 2020 Umurenge Program (Rwanda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WDI</td>
<td>World Development Indicators (World Bank)</td>
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All dollar amounts are U.S. dollars, unless otherwise noted.
Realizing the Full Potential of Social Safety Nets in Africa

Despite economic growth and improvements in many dimensions of welfare, poverty remains a pervasive and complex phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa (Africa hereafter). Approximately two people in five live in poverty, and, because of shocks, many others are vulnerable to falling into poverty. Part of the agenda to tackle poverty in Africa in recent years has been the launch of social safety net programs. Largely absent from the continent until the early 2000s, social safety nets are now included in development strategies in most countries in Africa. The number of social safety net programs has expanded greatly. In several countries, the expansion has arisen concomitantly with significant investment in core instruments of national social safety net systems—such as targeting systems, social registries, and payment mechanisms—that have progressively strengthened the systems and raised their efficiency.

The shift in social policy toward social safety nets reflects a progressive evolution in the understanding of the role that social safety nets can play in the fight against poverty and vulnerability. Evidence shows that these programs can contribute significantly and efficiently to reducing poverty, building resilience, and boosting opportunities among the poorest.

For the full potential of social safety nets to be realized in addressing equity, resilience, and the opportunities available to poor and vulnerable populations in Africa, programs need to be brought to scale and sustained. This involves solving a series of technical issues to identify the parameters, tools, and processes that can deliver maximum benefit to the poor and the vulnerable. However, at least as important, this report argues, is the series of decisive shifts that must occur in three critical areas—political, institutional, and fiscal—as follows:

• First, the political processes that shape the extent and nature of social policy need to be recognized and engaged. This can be done by stimulating the political appetite for social safety nets, choosing politically appropriate
parameters, and harnessing the political impacts of social safety nets to promote sustainability.

- Second, social safety net programs must be anchored in strong institutional arrangements to support their expansion, especially because programs are now more frequently implemented through national channels. Expansion requires anchoring in laws and policies, mechanisms for coordination and oversight, and arrangements for program management and delivery.

- Third, in most countries, the level and predictability of the resources devoted to the sector must be expanded so social safety nets can reach the desirable scale. This can be achieved through greater efficiency, more resources, newer sources of financing, and a greater ability to respond effectively to shocks.

This report first presents a snapshot of social safety nets in Africa and the mounting evidence for the effectiveness of these programs in promoting the well-being and productive inclusion of the poorest and most vulnerable. It then focuses on the three areas highlighted above: the political, institutional, and fiscal aspects. It does not systematically discuss technical aspects involved in designing social safety nets (see Grosh et al. 2008 for a thorough treatment). Rather, the report highlights the implications that political, institutional, and fiscal aspects have for program choice and design. It argues that these considerations are crucial to ensuring success in raising social safety nets to scale in Africa and maintaining adequate support. Ignoring these areas could lead to technically sound, but practically impossible, choices and designs.

Reaching the Poor and Vulnerable in Africa through Social Safety Nets (Chapter 1)

Despite Improvements, Poverty and Vulnerability to Shocks Are Widespread

Poverty rates have been falling in Africa. The share of the poor—people living on less than $1.90 a day—declined from 57 percent in 1990 to 41 percent in 2013. However, the decline was not sufficiently rapid to allow Africa to reach the Millennium Development Goal of cutting the poverty rate in half by 2015. Moreover, the number of the poor rose from about 280 million people in 1990 to 390 million people in 2013 because of high population growth. Poverty will remain a challenge in Africa even if macroeconomic growth exceeds expectations. Under a range of economic growth assumptions, global poverty will become increasingly concentrated in Africa and in conflict-affected states (Chandy, Ledlie, and Penciakova 2013; Ravallion 2013; World Bank 2015).
Poverty is not captured solely by monetary measures. Progress has also been made in Africa in nonmonetary well-being. But the rate of progress is leveling off in some places, and there has been an uptick in violent events. The region shows the worst outcomes relative to other regions on most human development indicators. One primary-school-age child in five is not in school, and children in poor households are the least likely to be in school. More than a third of young children are malnourished (appendix table C.1).

Poverty is not a static condition. Among Africa’s poor, a small positive shock to incomes could lift many out of poverty, but a small negative shock could drive as many of the vulnerable into poverty. In Africa, two poor households in five are among the transient poor; that is, they are moving into or out of poverty as income fluctuates and they become exposed to shocks (figure O.1).

**Figure O.1 Poverty Is Both Chronic and Transient**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Chronically poor</th>
<th>Downwardly mobile</th>
<th>Upwardly mobile</th>
<th>Never poor</th>
<th>Total population (millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congo, Dem. Rep.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>77.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madagascar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24.2</td>
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<td>Malawi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
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<td>Rwanda</td>
<td></td>
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<td>11.6</td>
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<td>Burkina Faso</td>
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<td>18.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
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<td>16.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Togo</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6.5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
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<td>39.0</td>
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<td>Uganda</td>
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Source: Dang and Dabalen 2017.
Note: Poverty statistics refer to the latest household survey year for each country. The “chronically poor” category includes households that were poor in both periods of the analysis; “downwardly mobile” refers to households that fell into poverty in the second period; “upwardly mobile” includes those who were poor in the first period but not poor in the second period; and “never poor” includes households that were nonpoor in both periods.
Many households in Africa are vulnerable to shocks such as illnesses, weather shocks, and conflict. The nature of shocks is evolving and presenting new challenges. As of mid-2016, Africa accounted for 30 percent of the displaced population worldwide, which represents about 20 million people. Of the top 20 countries in the world in terms of hosting displaced populations, eight are in Africa. Climate change is another obstacle to eradicating poverty in Africa (appendix tables A.1 and C.1). Households in drylands are more likely to be poor than households in other areas (Cervigni and Morris 2016; Hallegatte et al. 2016).

Social Safety Nets Have Been Expanding Rapidly in Africa
Most African countries have recently established social safety net programs as part of a broader strategy to assist the poor and protect the vulnerable (appendix table D.1). In this report, social safety nets—also sometimes called social assistance programs—are defined as noncontributory benefits, provided either in cash or in kind, which are intended to support the poor or the vulnerable. They are a component of the larger social protection system that also includes contributory social insurance, such as pensions and health insurance, as well as labor market policies and programs, and some of the processes analyzed in this report focus more broadly on social protection systems. Programs such as universal child grants or social pensions are included, as they are noncontributory and focus on groups perceived as vulnerable. The definition in this report also includes measures that facilitate access to basic services, such as health care, education, and housing, through targeted fee waivers, scholarships, and lump sum grants to promote productive inclusion. Consumer price subsidies, including energy and food subsidies, are not considered social safety net initiatives in this report. The objectives of social safety nets differ and may range from reducing monetary poverty, food insecurity, and vulnerabilities (such as old age, disability, exposure to natural disasters, and conflict situations) to improving access to basic services among the poor, and to promoting productive inclusion for the poorest.

The average number of new social safety net programs launched in Africa each year rose from 7 in 2001–09 to 14 in 2010–15 (figure O.2). Every African country has at least one social safety net program. The average number of programs per country is 15, ranging from 2 in the Republic of Congo and Gabon to 56 in Burkina Faso and 54 in Chad (appendix tables E.1 and E.2). This trend has also been a global one. By 2015, every country in the world was implementing at least one social safety net program.

There are success stories of rapid expansion in the region that are unique in the developing world (such as in Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, and Tanzania; see figure O.3). However, these remain exceptions in the region, and most programs are implemented on a much smaller scale.
**Figure O.2** More Social Safety Net Programs Have Been Launched in Recent Years


*Note:* This figure considers regular programs (not emergency support programs) that are still being implemented and for which information on the year of the launch is available.
As programs are created and grow, many countries are also investing in systems to raise efficiency and reduce program duplication. Delivery platforms—such as social registries, interoperable management information systems, and shared payment systems—allow administrative cost savings and facilitate planning and coordination. Social registries are currently being used in 26 countries and are being developed in an additional 16 countries (appendix table D.2). These social registries are systems that identify poor and vulnerable households in a country or region and collect information on socioeconomic situations, thereby providing governments and partners with a central mechanism to identify potential program beneficiaries (Karippacheril, Leite, and Lindert 2017). The stage of development differs, and coverage ranges from 0.1 and 0.3 percent of the population in Zambia and Mozambique; and to 89 and 52 percent of the population in Rwanda and Lesotho, respectively.

The expanding adoption of social safety nets is paralleled by the growing number of national strategies and policies. By 2017, 32 African countries had established national social protection strategies or policies, which include social safety nets as a core pillar, and draft strategies are in the approval process in another 7 countries (appendix table D.1).

Note: 4Ps = Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program; BISP = Benazir Income Support Program; LEAP = Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty; OVC = Orphans and Vulnerable Children; PKH = Program Keluarga Harapan; PNBSF = Programme National de Bourses de Sécurité Familiale; PSSN = Productive Social Safety Net Program.
The Design of Social Safety Nets Varies across Africa

Figure O.4 highlights the variety in design across the region, as well as patterns observed among groups of countries depending on geographic location, income, fragility, and drought exposure. Cash transfer programs are implemented in almost all countries (46), as well as public works programs (33) and school feeding programs (28) (appendix table E.1). Overall, cash transfers account for 41 percent of total spending, and this share is growing. Social pensions are more prevalent in upper-middle- and high-income countries and in Southern Africa. Public works programs exist in almost all low-income countries and fragile states, especially in West Africa, but are largely absent in middle- and high-income countries. In Central Africa and fragile states, social safety nets are widely used as responses to shocks, and emergency and food-based programs are the most common types of programs.

Social Safety Nets Are Evolving

As programs have grown in number and size, program design features have also evolved. First, there has been a shift toward more use of cash in social safety nets. Second, social safety nets are playing an expanding role in country responses to climate change and human-made shocks. Third, an increasing number of programs are focusing on fostering the productive capacity and resilience of beneficiary households. Similarly, there has been a greater concentration on promoting human capital development, often associated with conditional programs. Because of urbanization and the rising number of the urban poor, recent years have witnessed an increase in social safety nets in urban areas. Finally, countries have gradually been emphasizing the establishment of tools and systems to boost program efficiency and coordination.

Social Safety Nets Are Reaching Some, but Many of the Poor Are Not Covered

The programs with the greatest coverage of age-relevant populations are school feeding and fee waiver programs. With a few exceptions, richer countries tend to run larger programs. The majority of social safety nets in Africa are directly or indirectly targeted to children because they assist households with children. Of all programs, 29 percent directly target children through nutrition interventions, benefits aimed at orphans and other vulnerable children, school feeding programs, the provision of school supplies, and education benefits or fee waivers (appendix table E.3). As a result, the average coverage of children is 15 percent in Africa (appendix table E.2). (Coverages rates of the elderly are around 100 percent in countries with universal old-age social pensions, such as Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, and Swaziland; appendix table F.1.)
Figure O.4 The Composition of Social Safety Net Portfolios Is Diverse


Note: The figure presents the distribution of all resources deployed by all countries in each group across different program categories. See appendix table G.6.
Though the number of social safety net programs has risen, coverage is often limited. On average, coverage is 10 percent of the African population (appendix tables F.1 and F.2). Poverty rates are higher than coverage rates in most countries (figure O.5). So, even if all existing social safety nets were perfectly targeted to the poor, not all poor households would be reached at the current scale of programs (in addition, benefits are typically low compared to needs). Meanwhile, some programs do not exclusively target the poor, but have broader objectives, such as universal old-age social pensions, school lunch programs for all primary-school students, scholarships for all students in tertiary education, or the targeting of specific categories in the population deemed vulnerable without necessarily taking population welfare characteristics into account.

Notwithstanding the issue of program objectives, the benefit incidence of selected programs that target on the basis of welfare or vulnerability are generally pro-poor, and the performance of programs in Africa is in line with international experience. For instance, more than 60 percent of the households benefiting from the South Africa Child Support Grants program belong to the poorest two quintiles of the national consumption distribution, and over 60 percent of the beneficiaries of the Malawi Social Action Fund are counted among the poor (chapter 1). However, a certain share of resources goes to richer households. Some limitations in targeting are technical: it is difficult and costly to assess the welfare status of households effectively and dynamically. However, the decision to target particular groups is also a political one. Indeed, selecting eligible groups is sometimes driven by the need to generate support among the population and decision makers for social safety net programs (chapter 3).

Low coverage rates are exacerbated by the fact that many programs are small or temporary initiatives implemented in isolation, in narrow geographical areas, or among discrete population groups. Program duplication also occurs, often within a weak institutional environment. This is the situation in Uganda and Zimbabwe, for instance, which implement 39 and 29 social safety net programs, respectively (appendix table E.1). Insufficient coordination among the development partners that often fund such programs exacerbates fragmentation and inefficiencies. Efforts to consolidate and rationalize programs are on the policy agendas of many countries, including the need to focus on a strong institutional framework for social safety nets (chapter 4).

Benefit amounts in social safety net programs are low relative to needs in low-income countries in the region. The highest benefits are usually offered through old-age social pensions or public works, followed by cash transfer programs. Average cash transfers correspond to 10 percent of the national poverty line in low-income countries, versus 57 percent for public works (see chapter 1, table 1.3 and appendix table I.1, for data and assumptions). Greater efficiency in implementation would help support a rise in the value of benefits, but elevating
Figure O.5 Social Safety Net Coverage Is Not Proportionate to the Extent of Poverty


Note: See methodology in appendices B.2 and B.3. Social safety net coverage rates are approximated by summing the number of direct and indirect beneficiaries of cash transfers, food-based transfers, and public works programs only. The beneficiaries of the other six program types (social pensions, school feeding, emergency programs, health care and education fee waivers, and other programs) are not included because their beneficiaries are more likely to overlap with those in other programs, which would result in overestimated coverage rates. For more details see appendix tables C.1 and F.1.
these programs to scale would also require a focus on sustainable financing for social safety nets (chapter 5).

**Some Countries Spend Heavily, but Programs Must Be Brought to Scale and Sustained**

While African countries spend an average 1.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on social safety nets (equivalent to 4.8 percent of total government expenditures), government commitment varies greatly across countries at similar income levels. The average spending in the developing world is comparable, at 1.6 percent of GDP, but the fiscal needs in Africa are greater given the depth of poverty.

Notwithstanding the need to raise domestic resources and grow the economy, government spending on other initiatives that have objectives similar to social safety nets can be large. Spending on energy subsidies, for example, is considerable in some countries. In Central Africa, it is more than three times the spending on social safety nets (chapter 1, figure 1.12 and appendix table G.1). Because these subsidies benefit all consumers and because richer households consume larger quantities of energy, such subsidies are regressive. This points to the political considerations that underpin government spending choices (chapter 3) and to the potential efficiency gains from reallocation.

In many countries, the current stock of social safety net programs lacks fiscal sustainability. Development partners fund more than half the social safety net financing in the majority of African countries. There are large variations, though, and the governments of Angola, Botswana, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritania, Mauritius, Senegal, Seychelles, and Sudan finance over 60 percent of their social safety net spending. Humanitarian aid represents the main source of funding in emergency situations, and the role of development partners is critical in many low-income and fragile contexts.

**Social Safety Nets Promote Poverty Reduction, Increase Resilience, and Expand Opportunities (Chapter 2)**

In parallel with the expansion of social safety net projects in the region, there has also been growing evidence on the impacts of social safety nets on equity (such as through poverty reduction and food security), resilience, and opportunities among the poor and vulnerable. The depth of recent evidence serves as a case for investment in social safety nets, for the effective design of programs, and for bringing programs to scale. A meta-analysis has been undertaken to pool evidence systematically across available studies and to facilitate a robust and consistent comparison of the impacts on key outcomes.