

Thematic note

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For almost 50 years, Iram has supported the development of countries of the South, focussing its attention on the rural sector through a variety of activities such as participating directly in development actions, conducting studies and organising training actions to name but a few. Anxious to ensure that it offers quality expertise, Iram has endeavoured to learn from the services it has provided over the past five decades, combining “action” and “reflection” in a number of different formats including the organisation of study days, the publication of works and articles and the drafting of capitalisation documents. The “Thematic notes” are just one manifestation of this fundamental aspect of our activity. Published twice a year, they aim to provide an analysis of one of the Iram’s focus themes, combining the lessons drawn from our experience and more theoretical considerations promoted in different circles (research, donors, operators’ networks and OSI among others).

Marie-Jo Demante • Director of Iram

Edito

Social safety net mechanisms in West Africa: supporting the emergence of national prevention measures

When children become malnourished, they risk suffering permanent impacts on growth and development. Malnutrition is a particularly serious problem in the Sahel region. Of the estimated 74 million people living in its 6 main countries from Senegal to Chad (not counting Northern Nigeria, which is home to a malnourished population of similar size), some 5 million children under the age of 5 are chronically malnourished, accounting for over a third of the 13.7 million under 5s living in the Sahel. Another 830,000 children in this age group, most of them between 6 and 36 months old, are expected to become Severely Acutely Malnourished (SAM), the most serious manifestation of malnutrition, in 2013. Any child not treated for SAM has only a 50% chance of survival.

These children and their mothers risk suffering adverse and often permanent consequences for their lives and prospects while also being more vulnerable to socio-economic and food-security shocks, especially when their living conditions are already harsh. Considering both aspects simultaneously, a very high correlation (studies show rates of 60% and even as high as 80%) can be observed between the risk of becoming malnourished and being raised in a very poor family. Vulnerability analyses are mostly undertaken in a population from a food-security perspective (considering risk aspects linked to food price shocks, climatic shocks etc.). However, risk analyses disaggregated by categories of individual - in the stages of conception, birth and initial vital growth - are far less common. Given the very strong link between malnutrition and socio-economic factors for the effective prevention of under-nutrition, these two approaches to risk are complementary and of vital importance.

Preventing malnutrition is one means of reducing future risks and levels of food security crises in the Sahel, so intricately linked to the very high current levels of malnutrition. Preventive social protection measures such as safety nets will need to target the poorest households and persons as a priority. At the same time, every individual in the risk category (the under 5s and pregnant and breastfeeding women) will require actual – affordable without financial, geographic or other such barriers – access to a minimum acceptable package of nutrition, health and associated care and services too.

Pro-active social protection measures targeting the ultra-poor are therefore an essential component of the larger offensive to reduce the risk of crises. These may take the form of cash transfers (which also have a positive impact on the stimulation of local markets and dietary diversity) and associated interventions (micronutrient and fortified food distributions would seem promising) to address the complexity of nutrition security. This is a relatively new field of work in a region where public resources are limited and in great demand. Nevertheless, as reiterated in this thematic note, a great deal can be learned from other experiences. Applied research grounded in regional realities is required to make preventive social protection an effective instrument to improve child nutrition in the Sahel.

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● Social safety net mechanisms in West Africa: supporting the emergence of national prevention measures

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Food and nutrition security in West Africa: risk management at the heart of matters

Despite the increased availability of food within the sub-region and increasing food markets efficiency, West Africa is still characterised by chronically high levels of food and nutritional insecurity. However, recurrent global and regional crises have pushed politicians to pay more attention to this situation. These large-scale crises have highlighted the importance of the notions of “stability”, “risk management capacity” and “resilience” among factors contributing to food security. This action focussing on stability objectives (in particular illustrated by commitments of the G20 or the launch of the AGIR initiative in the Sahel) is most welcome, especially if it keeps sight of the fact that, while less visible, risks experienced at local level (diseases, job losses, accidents...) affect vulnerable populations as much as large scale risks.

A now broadly accepted analysis is that an improvement in food and nutritional security requires, among other things, the consolidation of risk management mechanisms. As proposed in the below table, these can be described both by their **nature** which is (1) *endogenous*, referring to mechanisms developed by households and social systems themselves, (2) *public*, when the state or local authorities manage those systems, or (3) *private*, in particular when they rely on market mechanisms, and by their **objectives**, sometimes multiple, with regard to risks and their impacts, including (1) *corrective* measures for immediate impacts, (2) *mitigation* of future impacts in the event of a tangible risk and (3) *preventive* measures aimed in particular at consolidating endogenous risk management mechanisms.

The expression “safety net” is sometimes used to designate all these mechanisms, in particular to underline the importance of endogenous and private risk management measures. Here, we will use this term to refer to public or other such programmes which share the common goal of facilitating access to specific resources, either through transfer mechanisms or through subsidies, for more or less specifically targeted populations and over varying time periods. Beyond risk management objectives, the incentives provided by these social safety net programmes can also contribute to *promoting* certain economic activities or consolidating factors of social *transformation*.

While safety net instruments in West Africa are primarily of type 1, largely focussing on crisis correction and mitigation objectives, we argue that type 2 instruments (or “preventive social safety nets”) offer a response strategy better adapted to the structural nature of food and nutritional insecurity within the region as well as the local nature of many of the contributory risks.

Types of safety net instrument		
Type of vulnerability	Type of measure	Main objectives
Shock which has led to a temporary reduction in income and in the consumption of essential goods	Type 1 – Temporary transfers of resources or ad hoc subsidies to populations affected by a crisis.	Correction Mitigation
Chronically low levels of income and of the consumption of essential goods and services	Type 2 – Predictable and multi-annual transfers or permanent advantages to populations targeted according to vulnerability criteria.	Mitigation Prevention Transformation
Chronic incapacity to invest (factors of production, training, etc.)	Type 3 – Donation or subsidy programmes promoting access to specific factors of production.	Prevention Promotion

Source: inspired by Devereux and Macausan, 2006.

The implementation of such measures is nevertheless subject to certain constraints. Based on the experiences of four countries, we present here a number of orientations to create the necessary conditions for their development as a prerequisite to the emergence of social protection systems in the region.

Social safety nets in the Sahel: an approach based largely on reactive measures

Agricultural and food security policies in the Sahel generally call on the three-fold strategy of (1) promotion of agricultural production, (2) strengthening market efficiency and (3) food crisis management mechanisms.

In response to the different crises which have affected the Sahel in recent years, the third strategic element has been deployed extensively in several countries, highlighting a certain number of weaknesses while stimulating major innovations. The case of Niger, hit by three major food crises over a period of seven years, illustrates that significant progress can be achieved. Following major dysfunctions in 2005, The National Food Crisis Management Mechanism proved much more effective in both 2009/10 and 2011/12. The crises were identified earlier, funds were mobilised more quickly, operations – in particular in the field of nutrition – were more widespread and certain innovations were implemented to support pastoral populations. Despite this progress, the crisis management mechanisms nevertheless revealed certain limitations. In 2010, a political impasse had first to be overcome before the mechanism could be activated, thereby demonstrating its vulnerability to political pressure.

Also in 2010, while numerous human lives were saved, several studies suggest that emergency aid was far from effective in curbing the erosion of livelihoods caused by the crisis and which exacerbated the vulnerability of households. The study of food crises reiterates the two following observations: (1) the problem of child malnutrition in the region is largely structural, with crisis management mechanisms alone unable to provide a suitable response and (2) it is difficult to protect livelihoods with reactive measures. In particular, the case illustrates that while it is beneficial to improve the performance of “reactive” measures (type 1), it is also important – and perhaps primordial – to focus on the implementation of “preventive” measures (type 2) and to limit the use of reactive measures to large scale crises. With this diagnosis in mind, a pilot preventive programme, supported by the World Bank, has recently been launched in the country.

Preventive social safety nets targeting the most vulnerable populations: what objectives for their deployment in the region?

The principle of preventive safety nets is simple: rather than correcting the effects of crises on affected populations, it may be more effective and less costly to support the most vulnerable populations outside crisis periods with a view to securing or, better, consolidating their endogenous risk management mechanisms, thereby mitigating the effects of any shocks with which they might experience. This idea is not new. It is similar to the social assistance mechanisms implemented in numerous high- or middle-income countries destined for populations targeted in accordance with specific objectives (promotion of access to healthcare, education, minimum income etc.).

However, the use of preventive safety nets in West Africa remains limited. Two criticisms are often voiced: (1) the very principle of social assistance is criticised for its potentially negative effects on investment, productivity and thus poverty reduction and (2) the cost of such safety nets is deemed unbearable in light of financial resources available in low-income countries.

Beyond the moral argument advocating the introduction of policies aimed at combatting most severe forms of exclusion, the school of thought defending the idea of “poverty traps” has developed sound economic arguments questioning the first of the two above criticisms. Indeed, adoption of risk-minimisation strategies by the most vulnerable populations may have negative impacts on both investment and productivity. Furthermore, inefficiency of risk management mechanisms sometimes confines the most vulnerable populations into “poverty traps” from which they have little hope of extricating themselves with the means at their disposal.

The human costs generated by food and nutritional insecurity are quite considerable (increased morbidity and mortality, impact on development, lower productivity in adulthood), and, in the short term, reactive safety net mechanisms activated during tangible crises also prove more costly than preventive safety nets. Yet, cost optimisation and efficient implementation are major challenges in the design and management of preventive safety net programmes.

These programmes remain complex to design and implement.

A review of social safety net programmes developed in four countries (India: *National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme*, Brazil: *Bolsa Família*, Ethiopia: *Productive Safety Net Program* and Ghana: *Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty*) has helped to identify three key objectives in making these programmes operational in Sahelian countries.

Objective 1: Secure funding and institutionalise the instruments adopted

To be efficient, the preventive safety net programmes must, over time, reach all the target populations without their funding levels being regularly questioned. While the application of a binding legal framework (right to food) may prove useful if its implementation is monitored by an independent civil society, the primary goal is to call on a “social contract” based on the following elements:

- Conditional and efficient targeting process to enhance the legitimacy of the programmes;
- national management to ensure durability;
- active communication (in particular concerning eligibility criteria) and effective mechanisms for handling complaints;
- Significant share of funding from national resources.

Objective 2: Identification of synergies, harmonisation, and consolidation.

As they aim to protect the livelihoods of households which are vulnerable to food insecurity, the social safety net programmes offer potential synergies with other objectives such as:

- calling on administrative capacities of preventive safety net programmes to strengthen crisis management mechanisms and vice-versa;
- use transferred resources to encourage access to basic services, in particular relating to nutrition, healthcare and education.
- promotion of food markets and controlling the risk of inflation (monetary aid versus aid in kind);
- coordination with agriculture productivity enhancement policies: use transferred resources as incentives for investment in sustainable farming systems and to create outlets for local value chains;
- coordination with natural resource management policies: use resources made available by the programme (e.g. work time) to invest in sustainable assets offering public benefits.

Conditions varies from one region to another and objectives shall not the same for all populations within a given territory. But safety nets offer plenty of possibilities for local adaptation. This flexibility is largely exploited, in particular by emergency and post-emergency programmes often designed and deployed on an infra-national scale by international institutions and NGOs. One objective for the development of national programmes is to establish a coherent framework which allows the different approaches to be harmonised while retaining a level of flexibility and the potential for adaptation to the local situation.

In particular, it requires establishing clear and strong leadership within the national administrations conducive to inter-sector dialogue and coordination.

Objective 3: Ensure efficient implementation

Generally simple in design, large-scale multi-annual social safety nets programs are nevertheless cumbersome and risky to implement. They require efficient management procedures, high-performance information and logistics systems, and transparent control mechanisms. Several imperatives are related to implementation risk mitigation:

- construction of national databases listing all eligible households;
- involvement of civil society and specialised institutions in the implementation and monitoring processes;
- introduction of rigorous auditing, control and impact-evaluation mechanisms;
- capacity building for state and non-state actors in relation to their respective fields of competence.

Proposals for promoting the emergence of national social protection policies in the ECOWAS zone

Child malnutrition, a good entry point

Focus pilot national social safety nets on child malnutrition reduction objectives would be useful to encourage the emergence of a consensus on the need to further develop national preventive social safety net programmes. A key challenge for the region, reducing child malnutrition is now clearly identified as a common priority, encouraging stakeholders to join forces. Safety net programmes, targeting populations at risk (children under the age of 5, pregnant women and mothers breastfeeding children) combined with measures aimed at improving the availability and access to perinatal healthcare services could make an effective contribution to reducing malnutrition.

Construction of a regional network for sharing experience

Do exist in the region (Ghana, Senegal), while others are in preparatory while others are planning (Burkina-Faso). To maximise the dissemination of experiences acquired while encouraging harmonisation of policies and practices at regional level, it would be useful to create a regional exchange forum bringing together countries and partners involved in the design, implementation, funding and evaluation of national preventive safety net programmes. Such a forum could also help to guide designing regional incentive mechanisms.

Introduction of a regional training programme for national senior government staff

A regional training programme for executives would facilitate the emergence of national programmes and encourage harmonisation across the ECOWAS region. One of the specific objectives of this training programme would be to enhance the capacity of administrations responsible for food security policies to mobilise national and international funding for the implementation of preventive safety net programmes.

Introduction of a regional fund for co-financing national programmes

The design and management of the preventive safety net programmes fall under national prerogatives. Yet, the regional level is ideal for systems encouraging innovation, learning, impact evaluation and sharing experiences. It is also the relevant level to introduce quality standards. All of these comparative advantages justify the creation of a regional fund to co-finance national preventive safety net programmes. Yet, a flexible implementation would be essential to ensure local adaptation of such programmes.

Further reading

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