

Ep. 19 – Mind the Nutrition Gap

Jo Sharpe: Hello, and welcome to the Social Protection Podcast. I'm your host, Joe Sharpe. In today's episode, Mind the Nutrition Gap. Under the right circumstances, social protection programs have been shown to increase food security and nutrition for poor and vulnerable families.

But the adequacy or the size of the transfer really matters, and on average, the value of social protection benefits only covers between five and 10% of the cost of buying enough nutritious food for a whole family. In today's episode, we'll look at ways to bridge that gap.

And with many food prices at record highs for over two years now, we'll talk about the challenge of closing that nutrition gap at a time where food is getting more and more expensive for so many.

Our guests on this episode today are Dr. Saskia Depee, who is Chief of Analytics and Science in the Nutrition Division of the World Food Program, WFP; Jessica Owens, who is the Regional Advisor on Social Policy for UNICEF in the South Asia region. And Marco Knowles, who is Senior Social Protection Officer at FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization. Welcome everybody and thank you for joining me on the Social Protection Podcast today.

Saskia Depee: Good day. And thank you very much for the invite. Look forward to a good conversation.

Marco Knowles: Thank you, Jo. It's a real pleasure to be here and to be here with Saskia and Jessica.

Jessica Owens: Thank you so much for inviting me to participate and looking forward to the conversation.

Jo Sharpe: Saskia, let's start with you. Can you give us a bit of a rundown of how do people's nutritional needs change over the course of their lives and what does that mean for how we think about what kinds of food people need to access?

Saskia Depee: Yeah. So as people, grow, or develop from, birth to adulthood and the nutritional needs change and they basically change to enable the body to grow and to develop so bones, muscles, and so forth, they're build off of specific, components that need to come from our food.

And then as girls become adolescent girls, menstruation starts, their needs start to vary from those of boys. And then, in adulthood, pregnancy, breastfeeding, but then also old age. It varies what our bodies needs and also what our bodies can absorb from the food that we eat.

Chronically ill people, they also have another less of an ability to absorb and so forth. So, from a nutritional needs perspective, we look at the nutrient density needs. So, in a set amount of food, how much of specific nutrients, iron, calcium, zinc, for example, do you need?

So, the nutritious diet covers the energy needs, the protein needs, the fat, and it covers, vitamin and mineral, needs. It has staple foods providing about 50% of energy, and then it has some vegetables, some fruit. It has some animal source food and lentils and so forth.

And we don't include any sort of what are considered unhealthy foods because they're mainly a source of energy and other source of nutrients. So, that just drives up further your costs of them meeting your nutritional needs. So, let's say in a household there are three X and there are five people.

It's not about splitting that act equally across everybody. It's about, oh, maybe the adolescent girl should get an entire act herself. The adolescent men can do with a half one. So, it's about how do you apportion the foods so that you meet the nutrient needs of different individuals, not by quantity, quantity in relation energy needs, but really, relative to nutritional requirements.

Jo Sharpe: You touched briefly there on, on energy needs as well, and I wonder if you could just briefly explain the difference between that traditional view of energy needs or calories that are needed for sort of food security and to assuage hunger compared with what you are sort of talking about, which is, more than that, it's, additionally the nutrients you need for optimum development. Can you just characterize those differences for me?

Saskia Depee: Yeah, so, when we say food security, we actually say food that enables us to function, to be healthy, to be active, to prevent illness. But then our indicators, there's indicators of food security that just measure kind of quantity of the food supply, whether that quantity is sufficient to meet everybody's energy needs.

And at that point we then lose, the emphasis on the quality and the quality is what we need for, health, growth, *et cetera*. So, they actually should stay together, but our metrics have kind of pulled them apart. If you separate the indicators, then you may lose sight of actually nutrition, where a focus on also the dietary quality and its diversity is really important.

Jo Sharpe: Jessica, coming to you, what evidence is there that social protection programs can promote better nutrition and food security?

Jessica Owens: It's a good question. And I think it depends. So, first, we know that there is evidence to show that social protection programs, including cash transfer programs, can support access to food and also has a positive impact on dietary diversity. So, that's the good side of it. So, we know, we've seen it across the globe. We've seen it from the transfer project work that has been in Sub-Saharan Africa, we see it also in South Asia, in Asia and the Pacific, in Latin America.

What we do know also that it's not always the case. We see that sometimes it'll depend on the transfer size. Often this makes a big difference on whether we see an impact or not in terms of access to food and access to more diverse foods. The second part of it is when we look further to the underlying determinants and immediate determinants of nutrition, we also see that there are mixed results. We see positive results, for example, on access to health, greater health-seeking behavior, greater expenditure on health services, especially for children.

We see more mixed results, for example, for women on antenatal care or postnatal care, and often depending not only on the demand, so, the type of incentive that is provided, the messaging that goes with the cash transfer or the different social protection programs, but also it depends on the supply of services.

It really depends on how we design the programs that go with the cash. And then finally we also see, in terms of other determinants, such as for wash, something that for, South Asia where I work in is very important, that unfortunately we see very limited impacts on wash, often because it is just not linked to social protection programs.

So, the limited impact is because of the limited linkages with the wash services or even behavior change on wash and hygiene services. And finally, just to say that we are seeing more and more positive, though mixed results on stunting and wasting. So, there is a need to understand better those pathways and to design the programs to support those pathways that would support better results.

Jo Sharpe: We'll come to some discussion of those design questions in a minute. But one of the things that you've touched on there is that the size of the transfer matters, how much people are receiving. And, both the FAO and WFP have been looking in depth at this question, which is how much do people really need in order to ensure nutritious diets. So, let me come to Marco next. Marco, FAO has been looking at the adequacy of transfers, especially in rural areas. What can you tell us about what you've been finding?

Marco Knowles: So, firstly answering, you know, why are we focusing on rural areas? And that's because 80% of the extreme poor in the world live in rural areas. So, there's a concentration of extreme poverty in rural areas. And then when focusing on rural areas, in low-income countries, 86% of the poorest households or the poorest 20% of households have no access to social protection. That's in low-income countries and in low, middle-income countries, it's 54% of the poorest households that have no access to social protection.

So, there are important gaps. There's a lot to be done in increasing coverage. Now, moving on to adequacy globally, it's been estimated that the average cost of a healthy diet in 2020 was 3.50 dollars per person per day. That's in 2020. That's before the increases in food prices. Now, let's compare this to what is the value of transfers in rural areas.

What we're seeing by analyzing data collected by the World Bank is that in rural areas, in low-income countries, the per capita transfer is 0.30 dollars per person per day. And in low, middle-income countries, it's 0.70 dollars per person per day. So, we're seeing that they're

both gaps in coverage. And gaps in adequacy. That's why it's crucial to expand access to adequate social protection.

Jo Sharpe: Saskia, building on that analysis, WFP has also recently published analysis on the minimum cost of nutritious diets in a number of countries. How much are you seeing that it costs for families to meet their nutrition needs? And, how close are cash transfers coming to covering those costs in their countries where you've been working?

Saskia Depee: Yeah, so following on what Marco said on the, three and a half dollars per person, per day to afford a healthy diet, we also know from the self-report that 3.1 billion people could not afford that.

So, we've conducted what we call "fill the nutrient gap analysis" in over 40 countries since 2016. We look at what is the lowest possible cost of a diet that meets nutritional needs, and how does that compare to food expenditure, and then we look at the gap between the lowest possible cost and the actual expenditure. We also, in many countries find that the transfer of the social protection program is equivalent to around five to 10% of that lowest possible cost. And then people have expenditure already on top of which comes then, that assistance. But it still leaves the considerable gap.

- Now, some people say, well, does that mean we should close an entire gap? How, how could we possibly do that? Because that's so big. Our main message is you should look at that affordability gap. So, looking at the cost, the affordability gap at the national level enables you to then assess what is that transfer worth. And also, what is the food environment like? Can you get those eggs or can you get fresh vegetables or can you get fortified rice, for example? So, it informs a further understanding and therefore a more precise design of the assistance package.

Jo Sharpe: So, Jessica, given these challenges, how do we need to be thinking about designing regular social protection programs? So, that they encourage and enable families to access more nutritious foods?

Jessica Owens: In a perfect world, we would be increasing the transfer size and I think there is room still to be able to increase the size and use the cost of diets that the WFP is developing to be able to determine a better estimate of what is actually needed and what is that gap.

What I wanted to also share is that, we also need to take into account that many of these social protection beneficiaries, or participants live under the poverty line. Many times, have also many other needs, especially with their livelihood needs, that they need to spend funds for that, education, transportation, health, so it is trying to understand the needs of a household and of the different members of the household.

We know that more integrated comprehensive services that link to the social protection systems are also important. Social protection programs, cash transfer programs with social behavior change, on both stunting, wasting on prevalence of diarrhea. Because we know that sometimes the transfer size is quite limited, having access to other livelihood programs, and I

think this FAO has a lot of experience, is also very important to provide a wider access of services.

And then we know that at very many stages as Saskia pointed out, we have different nutritional needs, but there are certain moments that are quite key. And this is, for example, the first 1000 days or, for adolescent girls, very important. So, trying to see how do we meet as we are looking at priorities within the government and trying to expand social protection, to be able to cover those key areas with maybe start with the first 1000 days and then keep on expanding and trying to cover further. So, it's a different strategy at different moments with different programs.

Jo Sharpe: I find it really interesting in the discussion about nutrition, that, you know, the particular needs, for example, of adolescent girls comes up so strongly because that's not a group in and of itself that is otherwise, I think, routinely targeted by social protection programs.

And that point you made Jessica, about the need for social and behavior change, education sort of approaches is really important because that's probably not necessarily intuitive. You know, and, and how to kind of introduce those sorts of concepts about who gets the egg.

Saskia Depee: Maybe I can pick it up from there. On the *Ehsaas Nashonuma* program in Pakistan, so, we conducted the field donation gap exercise there, and we did see a large affordability gap. And then the Prime-Minister was really tasking social protection with also preventing stunting. So, I said, "knowing this is the affordability gap, how can we ensure adequate nutrition when we are facing such a challenge?" So, that's when they then design the program, which is, additional cash transfers?

Are they receiving this support? They get an additional transfer when they go to the health center to pick up the regular health nutrition services. But it's augmented with specialized nutritious food for women, pregnant or early breastfeeding, or then the child six to 23 months to specifically close that affordability gap in that target group.

We also see, in some countries, where a food transfer is part of the package, that they're fortifying the food. So, for example, in the large program in India, TPDS, they have now introduced rice fortification specifically for that program. So, there's also a way that the transfer becomes more nutritious, and, therefore you're having a greater impact on that nutrient intake gap, which is the consequence of that, affordability gap.

Jo Sharpe: So, Marco, building on this discussion, sometimes we're sort of assuming that affordable, nutritious food is available in markets for families to buy. That's not always the case. And of course, we've already talked about the role of special nutritious foods or fortified foods and in-kind transfers to try and fill that gap. What are some of the supply side ways to think about improving market availability of nutritious food?

Marco Knowles: So, I think what Jessica and Saskia explained really points to the complexity of addressing nutrition. It's not any kind of design of a social protection program that is going

to have the desired nutritional impact. And that also includes markets. So, over the years there's been, I'm looking historically, there've been huge efforts at increasing the availability of foods, and that has been largely through production subsidies.

In some cases, subsidies also on the consumption side. But evidence, large body of evidence, including evidence generated by UNICEF, by FAO, the World Bank, demonstrates that subsidies are less effective than cash transfers. That's partly because of the market distortions that these subsidies cause. And, and also because they're aggressive, if you can produce or consume more, you benefit more from these subsidies. So, a richer person benefits more from these subsidies than a poorer person. So, this is this important issue of regressiveness, which is actually, it's the opposite case with more targeted social protection interventions.

So, over the years, there've been massive amounts of money going into programs to subsidize the production of food. And that's been mainly staples. And so wonderful, it increased the availability of more affordable staples, maize, rice, wheat, which I think was responding also to the urgency at the times of ensuring that people had access to sufficient calories.

But this has come at a huge cost, both in terms both environmental costs because of the excessive use of fertilizers, also the reduction of biodiversity. And it also has come at the cost of diet. So, the quality of diets. There's been an imbalance consumption of staples to fill one's stomach compared to the more diversified diets. Now there is a discussion in terms of repurposing some of these support programs so that they stimulate the production of more nutritious foods. And that they do so in a more sustainable way that's environmentally sustainable, socially sustainable, and economically sustainable.

It's also important to take into consideration that it's not in terms of, you must be thinking only in terms of the production. There's also the post-production. There's a processing of food. So, for instance, introducing legislation to ensure that food and drinks are processed in ways that raise little healthy. Similarly, in terms of the marketing, ensuring that labeling, informs consumers about what is the quality of the food that they're consuming.

We have a very interesting example of Kenya, which is bringing these different dimensions together. There is a school feeding program in Kenya, which provides children at school as part of their meals with green leafy vegetables. This has stimulated the local production of green leafy vegetables, which is a traditional crop, that used to be produced in Kenya, but the production was declining over the years. So, we are seeing that on the one hand through, a social protection program, that's a school feeding program, we're improving access to high quality food and also increasing the availability of these green leafy vegetables and increasing people's incomes.

Jo Sharpe: As we talk about the cost of nutritious food and the availability of nutritious food, we have to of course acknowledge that global prices of many foods, including many of those staples, have reached historic heights this year. Marco, can you briefly explain why food prices are so high? And What this means for food insecurity across the globe and in particular countries?

Marco Knowles: So, I think what I would like to point out is that food prices have been high for more than two years. So, there's been a lot of tension at the increasing food prices following the war in Ukraine. But, actually, prices have reached the highest point in 10 years, since August 2021. And that's very important to be aware of because this means that consumers, and in particular poor consumers have been facing these high food prices and the difficulties in accessing food for two years.

And one other point which is also extremely important, is that these high food prices are having impact in terms of future development prospects, both at the level of the individuals, the human development, but also in terms of the economic development. They're also important gendered impacts of these higher food prices. Already, before the increase in food prices, in every region in the world, there were more food and secure women than men. Now, with the way things work in households where women tend to be the first to cut back on their consumption, so to protect the consumption of other households' members, it's very likely that these high food prices are having even worse impacts on women than on men.

Now, in terms of the reasons for which food prices have been increasing over the past two years or more, the five main factors that we have identified at FAO, firstly, immediately after the first lockdowns were lifted as a consequence of Covid, there was an increase in demand, but the supply chains were blocked. I remember these images of seeing these huge cargo containers all concentrated on one side of the world, and not available on the other side of the world.

Then there was an increase in the prices of energy and fertilizers, which led to increased costs of production. High ocean freight costs linked to the increase in the price of energy, which fueled these big ships, and also the logistical constraints that I mentioned first; fourthly, there were adverse weather events, which led to production shortfalls in some of the major food-producing regions. So, for instance, in South America and the US, there was a shortfall in the production of Maize in Canada. There were shortfalls in the production of wheat. And this is probably associated also with these weather shocks are most likely associated to climate change.

And then since the war in Ukraine, there've been also trade restrictions, which caused a further surge in food prices. Now, in terms of the impacts on food insecurity, FAO has estimated that in 2022, there will be between 7.6 million and 13.1 million additional food insecure people as a consequence of this increase in food prices.

Jo Sharpe: Thank you. It is extraordinary to see how these crises are compounding one another in this way. Jessica, how are you seeing countries, governments, humanitarian actors, trying to improve the supply of nutritious foods, or otherwise apply social protection approaches to address this emerging crisis around the cost of food?

Jessica Owens: One of the key concerns is that many of these different social protection programs, especially the cash transfer programs, are not being adjusted for inflation. The minimum would be the adjustment for inflation that would be needed in many of these programs. And knowing that many of these programs were not adequate even at the start when they were designed because they were much lower than what they should have been.

So, what we saw in Covid-19 was that more programs were trying to adjust for inflation after years of not having any adjustments, but even now, we see that still this is a slow process that is taking place. We have seen prior to or during Covid-19 and in, at the end of Covid-19 certain countries trying to move towards a greater coverage of certain vulnerable groups. So, what we see is that even where we talk about, we always see the target group of the first 1000 days, we know still that that target group of the first 1000 days is still not being covered. That is so important.

Jo Sharpe: Saskia, would you like to add comments on, you know, this challenge of, closing the nutrition gap, at a time where food is just getting more and more expensive for so many?

Saskia Depee: So, we did research in Bangladesh in the 90s, actually from between 92 and 2000 nutrition surveillance, which included, assessing nutritional status, looking at rice prices. And actually when we did it in historic analysis, we saw that at times that the rise price increased, malnutrition in children measured as underweight also increased. And when rice prices came down, then also malnutrition came down.

And actually, rice consumption did not change. So, that clearly showed that when the prices went up to maintain the same level of rice intake, there was less money to spend on other foods, and therefore dietary quality reduced and a consequence of that, child malnutrition increased. So, these changes of food prices, even if it's just a staple prices will affect yes, food security and also, nutrition through that dietary quality. And the increase of the food prices, of course, came sort of on top of an income loss, because of Covid, and especially, lower-income countries and lower-income households, with non-secure income, they really lost income. So, that affordability is affected both by the prices and by the income.

And in terms of examples of how countries are reacting to the current, global food crisis, I see, more awareness and effort to monitor prices and monitor cost of a nutritious diet. So, not only monitoring what happens to staple foods and oil, let's say, but also to prices of more nutritious foods and therefore that cost of a nutritious diet or a healthy diet, and the affordability of that.

Jo Sharpe: And finally, Marco, I guess just your comments on what governments and international organizations are doing with social protection and through other interventions to address the high cost of food and to try and maintain food security while addressing these nutrition challenges.

Marco Knowles: What I'm very preoccupied with, is comparing that to the response, to Covid-19. So, the response to Covid-19, over two years, there were 4,000 responses across 222 countries. Yeah, Massive. Now, in the case of responding to inflation, it's two years of bust and we're seeing only 69 countries have responded, and there are only 148 responses.

So, really, it's the response is dampen, very much dampen. And then it seems we haven't built on the lessons learned during Covid-19. One of the lessons was, it's fundamental to respond swiftly and it's taking so long to respond. Another lesson was that it's important to ensure that the transfer values are adequate. And what we're seeing is the transfer values are still very low.

Another lesson with Covid-19 was that the responses were too short. 75% of the responses to Covid-19, had a maximum duration of six months, which is too short compared to the amount of time that the shock lasted. And once again, here we are seeing that 50% of their responses so far have been one-off payments, whereas food prices are lasting.

And we know from evidence generated in the past that small regular transfers are better suited in enabling households to meet their consumption needs compared to one off payments which are more suitable for triggering investments. So, looking at some of the data developed by the World Bank, where they're monitoring the responses to the inflation, we see that in April 2022, 79% of the responses were in the form of subsidies and only 16% in the form of social assistance.

Now, there's been a rebalancing of that where 36% of the responses are in the form of subsidies and 24 in the form of social assistance. So, there's been a rebalancing. In terms of the why this, I can think of two things come to my mind. One, there is a huge, important political economy aspect, around subsidies and then in particular around food. You have to guarantee that food is available.

The quickest way of doing it, especially when you don't have a well-developed social protection system, is through subsidy programs. We've seen in the past with the previous high food prices in 2007, 2008, that there were riots, governments were toppled because of the increase in food prices. So, there's a political concern, a concern around social unrest.

Jo Sharpe: Right, really the first priority of a government, or the first priority in any families is to be able to eat. It's literally the most fundamental thing. And I can see why, it is just a really difficult policy area to change or tinker with.

Saskia Depee: And I think implementation wise, it's easier to implement a price adjustment of a certain category of food than to identify and target social protection scheme. Even if it were reaching, let's say 40% of the population, you still need to identify and target. So, yeah, it's difficult to touch the food because it affects everybody, but then also how do you work it so that you can specifically reach those that, should be reached. So, basically we need the systems in place so that we can scale-up and scale-down when the needs go up. So, in terms of preparedness, we must have debt ready so that we can resort less to those blanket subsidy programs.

Marco Knowles: I'd like to echo what Saskia just said. I don't think it's a time to be making these major reforms during this context of emergency, cutting back subsidy program can be very problematic. It requires time to make a transition towards more effective programs. And that requires making investments over a prolonged period of time in developing the social protection systems that have gradually universal coverage and that coverage be adequate.

Jo Sharpe: Thank you. I really appreciate that last part of this discussion around the topic of subsidies because I think, as Marco says, they are widely, you know, understood to be regressive, certainly compared to social protection measures, but there are reasons that they persist, really fundamental reasons. And with that, let me thank you all for making the time to talk with me on the Social Protection Podcast today.

Saskia Depee: Thank you so much for the conversation.

Marco Knowles: Thank you very much. I've enjoyed it.

Jessica Owens: Thank you so much. Thank you.

Jo Sharpe: We're doing something a little different for quick wins this episode. The socialprotection.org team recently attended the UN Global South-South Development Expo in Bangkok, Thailand. As it happens, I'm based in Bangkok. Most of our team is based in Brazil, so it was actually the first time we've met in person. And it was a great opportunity to speak face-to-face with our guest for quick wins today.

Today, I'm taking the opportunity to speak with Martha Santos, who is Program Manager for South-South and Triangular Cooperation for UNICEF. Martha, can you tell me a little bit about this expo and what have the highlights been for you so far?

Martha Santos: The expo is an annual event that the UN Office for South-South Cooperation and UN agencies and governments are organizing every year. This expo is particularly special because, after COVID-19, the annual event has been postponed. And then finally, after two years, we are holding again the same, global event where we have different partners, both from the South and from the North.

The South-South Expo is also, an interesting opportunity for the Global South countries to sort of take the lead in terms of discussing problems that affect them collectively and individually, but also how they can learn from the experiences of other countries who are going through the same thing as they are. So, you see a lot of solidarity, there's a strong message that we have to really come together, work together to solve global problems, because that is the only way that we will be able to do so.

Jo Sharpe: You've been watching the seminars so far, and there's been a lot of really robust discussion. What have been the highlights? What are some of the things that you've heard delegates talking about through the sessions over the last couple of days?

Martha Santos: So, they're very much, looking at how, the Global South countries can really advance and, normally, with these discussions, you would hear about trade, agricultural development, infrastructure, which is actually fair because a country cannot develop without those. But yesterday, I actually heard somebody from India who was talking about social protection and the importance of social protection systems for countries in the Global South to be able to continue to make the progress, I suppose, because the human resources are as important to them as other resources that you would think of.

So, I think that is something that is quite, not probably new, but to hear it in the same forum where they were talking about trade, infrastructure, and then you hear social protection. So, I feel that they are really also, maybe having the opportunity now to talk about the soft issues

and I think this came about because of Covid, when they realized that when you have a crisis like that, your social protection systems and how robust your social protection system would allow you to go through these kinds of crisis. Not maybe unscathed, but definitely not completely devastated.

Jo Sharpe: Martha, you were involved in organizing a panel that's on later today on the role of South-South and Triangular Cooperation in strengthening social protection for children, featuring speakers from Brazil, Thailand, and South Africa. Why did you bring those three countries together, and what do you hope they'll be able to achieve through their discussion today?

Martha Santos: Yeah, that's a great question. How did we choose these countries? I think you could say that they actually chose themselves. Because the Brazil experience is something that the world knows about that by implementing a comprehensive social protection program, a government could actually lift millions of people out of poverty in one generation. That I think that was the catchphrase from that experience and I think that's a kind of a model that other governments realized it can be done.

The one in Thailand is actually something that is very interesting, that they're able to implement within a very, very comprehensive self-sufficiency economy that Thailand is actually championing and actually trying to share with other countries for the lessons that they have gained from that in terms of sustainable development.

And I think the model of South Africa is actually a very interesting model, and effective. And so while these are the examples that then from different parts of the world, obviously would have different cultural, backgrounds and, you know, in terms of how people see social protection and what are the expectations that they have from the governments in terms of the services that they could expect, especially for the most vulnerable. So, I think that is another hallmark of South-South cooperation is the idea of mutual learning.

Jo Sharpe: Thank you so much for making the time to speak with me briefly today Martha and good luck with the panel this afternoon.

Martha Santos: Thank you. And, I hope that I was able to share some of my excitement and my faith in global cooperation, isn't it? Thank you.

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