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Social assistance programmes in South Asia: An evaluation of socio-economic impacts

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Since 2018, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) has partnered with the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and its respective Country Offices to develop a series of comparative papers on social protection in the region. An overview study focusing on flagship non-contributory social protection programmes was developed, along with papers focused on social expenditure, legal frameworks, and gender- and child-sensitive features and designs, and a review of impact evaluation studies of the socio-economic outcomes of social protection programmes. This last paper is the focus of this One Pager.

The study assembles a sample of 63 rigorous impact evaluation studies—using quasi-experimental estimation strategies—for 17 different flagship social assistance programmes identified in the overview study. Countries covered include Afghanistan (Citizen's Charter/NSP), Bangladesh (PESP, SESP/FSSSP, MAPLM, EGPP), India (JSY, MDM, MGNREGA, NSAP/OAP, TPDS), Nepal (Child Grant, *Aama* Programme, Old Age Allowance, Scholarships), Pakistan (BISP, WeT) and Sri Lanka (*Samurdhi* and *Thriposha*). The programmes cover many interventions, including public works programmes (PWPs), conditional and unconditional cash transfers, scholarships for students, in-kind transfers (mainly food) and school feeding programmes.

An important range of socio-economic outcomes are assessed at the beneficiary and/or household level. A total of 126 disaggregated outcomes (proxies) identified in the literature were divided into 31 indicators, then grouped into 5 categories: poverty and finances, labour market, education, health and gender. By focusing on a wide range of outcomes, the review assesses more than just main programme objectives, but also records potential indirect (spillover) impacts either within households or at the meso level, which can be either desirable (e.g. improved educational outcomes for the siblings of beneficiaries) or undesirable (e.g. reduced school attendance among teenagers due to intra-household reallocations of time). Results are presented at different levels of aggregation: study-specific findings, evidence aggregated at the programme level, and country and regional results.

The literature surveyed is broad, fragmented and overrepresented by a few key programmes. However, the review offers important conclusions and implications for policy, such as the following.

- Large-scale interventions can greatly increase the demand for complementary social services, especially when interventions include either hard or soft conditionalities (MAPLM, JSY).
- Cash transfers that are regular and predictable enable beneficiaries to better allocate their time and resources (BISP, Child Grant).
- When successfully implemented, school feeding programmes show strong positive impacts on food adequacy. They also have the potential to improve educational performance, particularly among children exposed for longer periods.
- Scholarships (or free education) should be promoted throughout the education cycle, especially for children from poorer and more vulnerable backgrounds, who may face greater barriers to attainment and pressure to engage in child labour (SESP/FSSSP).
- PWPs that provide equal pay and complementary services for women and mothers can significantly reduce gender pay gaps (MGNREGA).
- Large-scale PWPs can have significant impacts on labour market dynamics at the local level. Results from the MGNREGA indicate that private agricultural wages increased in programme districts, providing support not only to the direct beneficiaries but also to the wider community.
- PWPs can act as safety nets, smoothing out seasonal and shock-related income fluctuations. This insurance effect is an important characteristic of PWPs, especially in rural areas (EGPP, MGNREGA).
- PWPs can potentially contribute to negative spillover effects on education and child labour, especially among older children and adolescents. Policymakers should carefully assess these potential impacts when designing PWPs. A higher quality of programme implementation can contribute to limit potential negative spillovers (EGPP, MGNREGA).
- Relaxing conditionalities and offering Cash Plus interventions and/or complementary social services, such as childcare, can help make programmes more gender- and child-sensitive (*Aama* Programme, JSY, MAPLM and *Thriposha*).

While better and more systematised information on social assistance is needed, this report offers a comprehensive overview of the evidence from the impact evaluation literature on flagship programmes in the region, which can be used by policymakers, practitioners and researchers alike. Summary tables in the annexes present study- and programme-aggregated findings across studies, which assess results found across outcome categories and countries, and provide an overview of evidence gaps. The study can inform policymakers about evidence of practices in comparable contexts—in accordance with life-cycle and rights-based approaches to social protection—to help generate even more effective, efficient and inclusive policies for the future.

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