

# Social Protection

## U.S. Government's Global Food Security Strategy Activity Design Guidance

*This is one of several Activity Design Guidance documents for implementing the U.S. Government's Global Food Security Strategy. The full set of documents is at [www.feedthefuture.gov](http://www.feedthefuture.gov) and [www.agrilinks.org](http://www.agrilinks.org).*

### Introduction

Social protection, as a policy and programming priority, has been elevated in the U.S. Government's Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS). Social protection is a key tool for building resilience to shocks and stresses across all strategic objectives, investing in inclusive development, and strengthening Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) coherence to ensure that Feed the Future programming engages and benefits poor and marginalized groups. In addition to reaching the most vulnerable groups, social protection programs can improve food security and nutrition, strengthen agricultural productivity and food systems, and contribute to natural resource management and climate adaptation.

The negative social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing frequency and intensity of climatic events, and the rising global food insecurity as a result of Russia's war on Ukraine brought to the forefront the importance of protecting people in times of shocks through large, established risk management tools, such as national social protection systems. Countries with established social protection systems were in a much better position to cope with the social and economic fallout of COVID-19, to respond faster, more effectively, and more efficiently than countries who had to introduce new schemes on an ad hoc, emergency basis. This increased attention and investment in social protection systems has continued in light of the global food security crisis, increased food prices, inflation, market instability, and growing poverty.

Social protection is a key policy instrument to manage social and economic risks, as well as strengthen countries' preparedness and response to multivariate shocks and stresses, maintaining food security, fostering adaptive and resilient livelihoods, and reducing the ultimate cost and impact of shocks and stresses. Social protection programs are strategic investments in future economic growth for a country. Investing in human and social capital increases the size of the labor pool and quality of the labor force, which increases gross domestic product over the long term. Social protection is an investment, not a handout. Strong social protection systems allow poor and marginalized populations to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and augment human and social capital that leads to economic growth and greater self-sufficiency.

The dual nature of social protection's ability to sustain vulnerable people during times of crisis as well as provide the means for all people to achieve basic human dignity, thrive, and prosper makes social protection a valuable tool for posts to promote inclusive, agriculture-led economic growth, improve nutrition, and promote gender equality, while also fostering linkages to health and education services.

## Terminology and Context

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) views social protection as a key component of a broader disaster risk management (DRM) approach where individuals, households, communities, and systems are able to identify their risk exposure and plan and prepare for how to manage those risks, thus lessening negative impacts and improving resilient outcomes. As depicted in Figure 1, USAID defines social protection as a set of policies and programs aimed at preventing, reducing, and eliminating economic and social vulnerabilities to poverty and deprivation from birth to old age. Figure 1 also demonstrates key objectives and desired outcomes of comprehensive social protection systems and the key components and examples of activities under those components.

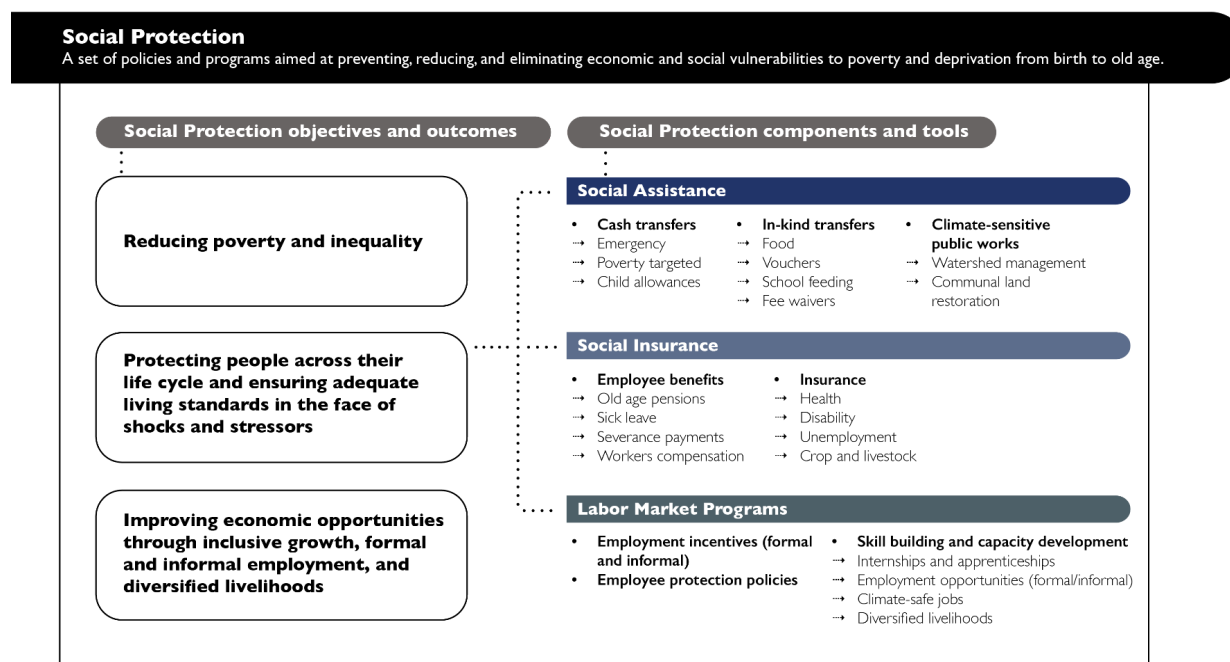


Figure 1. Social protection.

*Social protection is a means to sustainably reduce poverty and inequality and to increase the skills and capacities of the poor and marginalized, breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion.*

## Terminology

**Social assistance** is need-based, noncontributory assistance typically in the form of a cash transfer or an in-kind contribution (fee waiver, subsidy, or voucher). Social assistance can be permanent (e.g., elderly or disabled) or temporary in response to a shock (idiosyncratic or covariate).

**Safety nets** are one form of social assistance. They can be formal, government-led, and publicly financed, or informal, non government financed programs, such as mutual help and kin networks (friends, family, and neighbors). Informal safety nets—whether individual, household, or community level—build relationships and manage social or economic issues among participants.

**Social insurance** is defined as a set of government-provided programs meant to shield people from financial struggles that may occur due to unforeseen or unavoidable situations, such as loss of employment, physical disability, or reduced earnings due to retirement. Social insurance requires setting up a common fund from which all forms of benefits, monetary or otherwise, are paid. This common fund is contributed to by all employers, workers, and the state. After COVID-19, many governments established solidarity funds for informal workers, as they did not have access to formal protection previously.

**Labor market interventions/programs** are formal interventions such as government regulations, policies, and laws which regulate employment to protect workers and improve labor market efficiency. Some examples include trade policy, price controls, minimum wage, and occupational safety laws. Informal (nongovernment) interventions can include employment and job services, livelihood diversification, skill training, and reskilling and up-skilling for new climate-safe jobs, for example. Labor regulations can provide incentives for employers to create jobs and opportunities for marginalized populations, such as informal workers. Financial incentives (e.g., subsidies for employers, grants, and credits) to implement productivity-enhancing actions (e.g., training and technological and organizational innovation), entrepreneurship advisory services, internships, and apprenticeships are offered to vulnerable populations.

**Shock-responsive social protection** is the adaptation of routine social protection programs and systems to cope with changes in context and demand following large-scale shocks. In other words, it is the ability of the routine social protection system to maintain its core functionality in the face of shocks.

**Adaptive social protection** is an integrated, multisectoral approach to foster inclusive growth and reduce negative impacts of global challenges (e.g., poverty, food insecurity, and climate change), as well as their increased interaction with covariate shocks (e.g., natural hazards, such as floods, hurricanes, or earthquakes), conflict and fragility, forced displacement, price hikes, and even predictable lean season shocks. Adaptive social protection involves creating a package of services tailored specifically to reach the ultra poor and marginalized groups who are more vulnerable to shocks and stresses, and would otherwise likely not be able to access these. This package of services typically combines social assistance measures, such as cash transfers, with other complementary measures, such as:

- Financial inclusion measures, such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA), Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), and access to financial services.
- Market inclusion measures, such as strengthening input supply chains to reach the ultra poor and removing barriers to entry for the ultra poor, business plan development linked to soft loans for seed capital or one-time asset transfers; and internships, apprenticeships, and job placement.
- Social inclusion coaching, mentoring, and counseling to strengthen agency, self-efficacy, and social resilience.
- Adaptive measures can also include DRM and risk management. (Please refer to the GFSS Activity Design Guidance for Strengthened Resilience Among People and Systems for a definition of DRM and additional links to online resources and programming practices.)

## Designing Activities

### Assess the Functionality and Maturity of the Existing Social Protection System

Understanding the functionality and maturity of the social protection system will help determine how to best engage with it. Figure 2 demonstrates the core components of a social protection system.

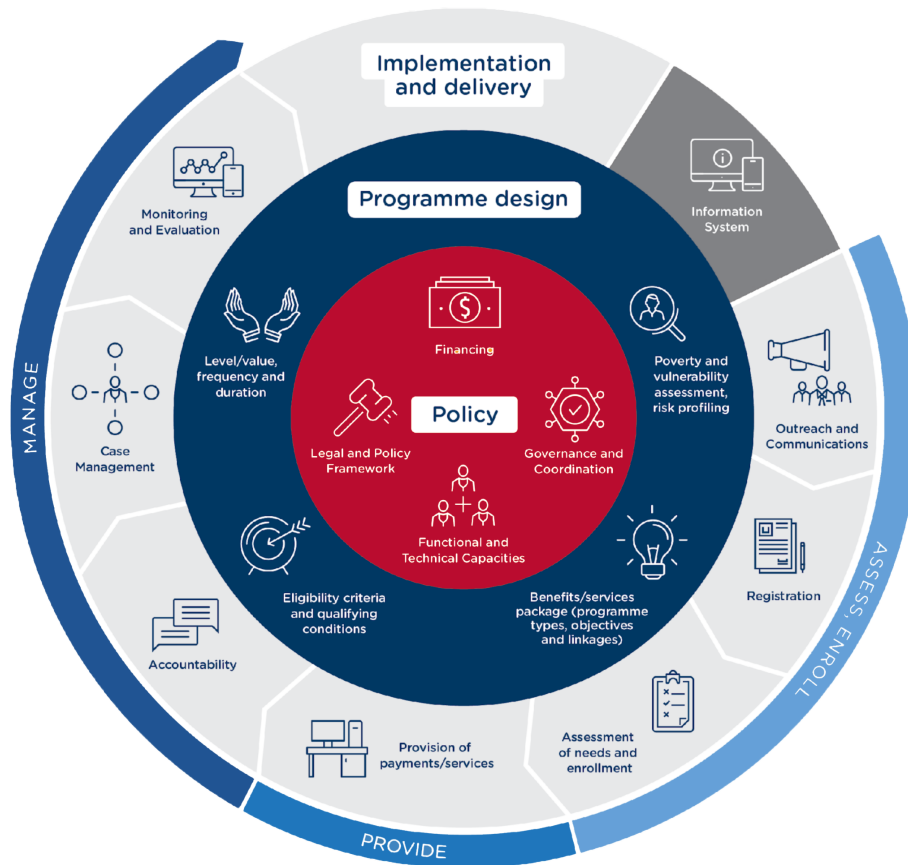


Figure 2. The core components of a social protection system.

## 1. System Functionality: What does USAID need to know about the three core components?

- **Policy:**

- Is there a legal and regulatory framework for social protection?
- Is there financing (domestic or international)?
- Is there coordination between the relevant line ministries? For example, the ministry of finance, the ministry of social welfare/social services, ministry of labor, and the ministry of agriculture?
- Do the responsible ministries have the necessary staff with the requisite skills and capacities to manage their social protection programs?
- Is there a universal social registry or unique national registry?

- **Program Design:**

- What risks/exposures does the post care about? What development objectives are in the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS)? Are these risks covered by the social protection programs (program comprehensiveness)? For example:
  - Are there social assistance programs, such as safety nets? Who do they cover for what risk? (Cash transfers—temporary/permanent? Poverty targeted? Child allowances? Old age support? Climate-smart public works?)
  - What type of social insurance scheme exists for target groups the post is interested in? Are there programs for informal workers? Refugees? Migrants? Domestic workers?
  - Are labor market interventions improving economic opportunities for inclusive growth? Are there employer and employee incentives that benefit the ultra poor?

- Do the ultra poor have access to markets? Livelihood opportunities? Skill building? Internships? Apprenticeships?
  - Who is eligible for social protection (program coverage)? Poor? Marginalized? Are women, girls, and youth deliberately targeted? Are migrants, refugees, informal workers, domestic workers, and care workers included?
  - How adequately are risks covered? What is the level of protection? Are there humanitarian assistance programs? Are they coordinated?
- **Implementation and Delivery:**
  - How do people learn about the programs and services? How effective are program communication and outreach?
  - Is there a national social registry? If yes, what is the status of coverage, e.g., is it designed to reach only the ultra poor or larger universal coverage? Is it built to link with the national identification systems?
  - Is it easy to register? Are digital options available?
  - Is the information management system operational/adequate? Is it designed to communicate effectively with other databases? Is it integrated with other government agencies and systems?
  - Who is responsible and what is the process for assessing the needs and eligibility criteria?
  - How effective and efficient is the payment system? Is it digital? Are there multiple providers?

**2. System Maturity: Is the system nascent, fragmented, integrated, shock-responsive, or adaptive?**

Table 1 displays a social protection system’s level of maturity. It provides characteristics of the level of maturity and ways for USAID to support the system.

*Table 1: System Maturity.*

System Maturity	System Characteristics	Possible USAID Interventions
Nascent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Legal/regulatory framework established.</li> <li>● Core system architecture/delivery mechanisms being developed.</li> <li>● Low coverage: number of people and risks covered.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Help build an MIS system.</li> <li>● Help develop a national social/single registry.</li> <li>● Help develop a national plan for a comprehensive risk management system.</li> <li>● Help establish critical coordination between line ministries and between Humanitarian assistance (HA) and Development assistance (DA) actors while the system is being built.</li> </ul>
Fragmented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Programs are ad hoc; developed in response to crisis rather than part of a comprehensive risk management plan or vision.</li> <li>● Insufficient coverage, including number of people and program adequacy.</li> <li>● Siloed programs run by various ministries.</li> <li>● Lack of coordination across ministries, within ministries, MIS, and databases.</li> <li>● Lack of unified targeting system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Help integrate MIS systems,</li> <li>● Help develop or expand national social registry,</li> <li>● Help develop/strengthen a national plan for a comprehensive risk management system.</li> <li>● Help establish critical coordination between line ministries and between HA and DA actors while the system is being built.</li> </ul>

Integrated/Mature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehensive system covering risks holistically/developed from national risk management plan/vision.</li> <li>Coordination mechanisms, platforms, and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) in place.</li> <li>Financing secure: planned for in annual budgeting process (different from sustainable which is nationally financed; this could be a loan, grant, etc., just planned for and reliable).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support digitalization of the system.</li> <li>Support interoperable databases.</li> <li>Facilitate HA/DA coordination. HA should not come in and set up parallel systems when a mature system exists.</li> </ul>
Shock-Responsive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The routine social protection system is able to maintain its core functionality in the face of shocks.</li> <li>The system is risk-informed.</li> <li>There is contingency financing for vertical and horizontal expansions of the routine systems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support reliable climate data availability.</li> <li>Support poverty and vulnerability assessments.</li> <li>Support risk exposure mapping.</li> <li>Support with vertical and horizontal expansion through the system when a crisis hits.</li> </ul>
Adaptive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic inclusion/graduation programs are layered onto routine social protection programs to build the resilience of poor and vulnerable households to the impacts of large, covariate shocks, such as natural disasters, economic crises, pandemics, conflict, and forced displacement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide technical assistance, as needed.</li> <li>Pilot economic inclusion models, if needed.</li> <li>Fund the system.</li> </ul>

**Identify Opportunities, Gaps, and Leverage Points for U.S. Government Support**

Opportunities, gaps and leverage points exist within the national social protection system and programs. To identify how GFSS programming can strengthen and scale these, see the suggestions below:

- Review the [social protection profile](#) of your country (14 resilience focus countries and Northern Triangle).
- Reach out to the international organizations that are typically leading social protection support—World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), World Food Program (WFP), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), or cash working groups in-country—and ask them what opportunities and gaps they see.
- Reach out to other donor agencies and ask what their funding priorities are for social protection and where they see gaps and opportunities.
- Reach out to the relevant ministries in charge of social protection programs and ask them what support they need. Keep in mind that social protection is multisectoral by nature, so there will be several ministries involved. This may vary, but will generally include an “anchor ministry” that is in charge of coordinating the program. For example, in Malawi, the Ministry of Finance is the financial anchor, while the technical leadership and overall coordination lies with the Ministries of Gender and Social Welfare and Economic Planning and Development. The program also engages ministries in charge of DRM, agriculture, environment, and decentralization.
- Review the relevant national strategies or policies, starting with a social protection policy. Social protection may also be embedded in other policies and programs, such as agriculture, nutrition, social welfare, and gender policies.



- Identify whether or not the policies are operational. Do they have associated programs, funding, etc.?

## Programming Options

What are the programming options and funding channels available to support the national social protection system? For example, is it feasible to put funds into a multidonor trust fund directly benefiting the government system? Does that meet the post's transparency and accountability needs? If not, can the post provide wrap-around services, such as economic inclusion programs that are layered onto government social protection programs? What other options exist that can support the government's journey toward adaptive social protection?

### 1. Direct Systems Support

Where national social protection systems exist, USAID should invest in supporting these systems on their journey from nascent to adaptive. Investing in social protection structures, revenue generation, and delivery systems upfront promotes resilience and saves money during shocks by facilitating more cost-effective responses. Support is most often needed in the implementation and delivery of social protection programs.

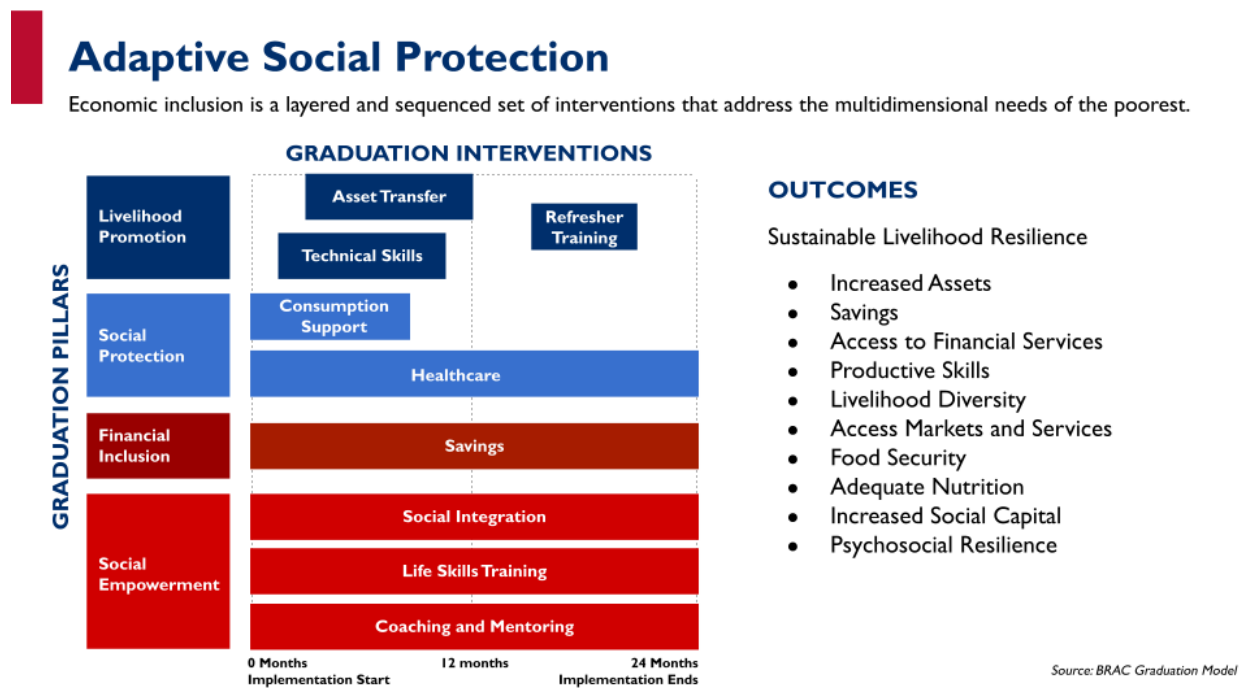
- **Improve coverage, adequacy, comprehensiveness, and program quality.** Potential leverage points include:
  - Expand program coverage to reach excluded, vulnerable populations.
  - Help governments to evaluate the adequacy of current benefits.
  - Help governments to analyze the comprehensiveness of the risks covered.
  - Strengthen the scale, efficacy, and inclusivity of integrated social registries.
  - Strengthen efficient, effective, inclusive, and accountable digital payment systems to beneficiaries.
  - Strengthen Grievance Redress Systems to build beneficiary and system accountability.
- **Strengthen the technical quality and coverage of adaptive measures,** including access to productive assets, improved climate-smart agricultural technologies, livelihoods training, access to finance, or other measures. Potential leverage points include:
  - Strengthen service provision through the private sector, such as input suppliers, farmer cooperatives, food system and market actors, jobs training institutions, or others.
  - Increase access to financial services by beneficiaries, especially women and girls.
  - Strengthen partnerships and alliances to foster innovation, opportunities, and growth.
  - Work with social protection partners and technical working groups to develop integrated graduation approaches.
  - Strengthen digital systems, such as developing integrated, multisectoral MIS systems to foster data analytics and streamlining disparate systems.
- **Foster linkages between GFSS programming and national social protection systems:**
  - Dedicate human resources to foster coordination and linkages with national social protection systems, structures, and programs and increase coordinated investments.
  - Use or strengthen established social registries that survey up to 100 percent of the population to improve the targeting of GFSS programs, and tailor the service package to foster inclusion.
  - Strengthen HDP coherence and foster sequencing, layering, and integration with social protections, core programs, and other support packages.

- Strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) and data analytics to document successful pathways out of poverty.

## 2. Wrap-Around Services

- Assess options for sequencing, layering, and integration in the Feed the Future zone of influence (ZOI) and at national levels that benefit the ZOI and contribute to expanding and strengthening the social protection system.
- Identify inclusion gaps and challenges to be jointly addressed to ensure that Feed the Future programs reach the most vulnerable. Draw on analyses, such as political economy, gender, digital inclusion, risk and resilience analysis, and climate risk.
- Generate evidence to inform the social protection system, for example, pilot approaches, such as strengthening a youth component or integrating nutrition into the national social protection program.
- Layer economic inclusion programs onto national social protection programs. This layering on national programs can strengthen resilience at scale and lead to transformative outcomes for vulnerable populations. See Figure 3 for the economic inclusion model.

Figure 3. Adaptive social protection.



## 3. Foundation Building

Where government programs do not exist, work with the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) to meet emergency needs and help build a future social protection system. For example, create an MIS system and a targeting database that can be given to the government to expand and scale.

### Key Lessons Learned

The magnitude of the social protection responses to the COVID-19 crisis was of historical proportions and demonstrated the potential of social protection to respond to mass covariate shocks. These investments are a post-COVID-19 imperative for addressing the growing global inequality exacerbated by



conflict, climate, and COVID-19. Social protection's risk management function helps people meet their essential needs and manage risks, which can prevent or lessen the negative impact of shocks and help build resilience. By building resilience, we reduce the scale of humanitarian needs. Social protection has proven it can provide the transformational changes needed to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. While the majority of USAID's investments in social protection remain outside national systems, they are buffering the impacts of the current macroeconomic shocks.

## Programming in Practice

**Bangladesh:** The country has a diverse, but poorly coordinated, set of social protection programs, including food distributions and support for workers in the garment, agriculture, and other sectors. Nearly 30 percent of the population receives support from at least one program. BRAC and USAID/BHA are implementing large-scale, ultra-poor graduation programs, in parallel if not coordinated with existing safety nets. In line with the description above, both programs are building financial literacy and access, facilitating discussions around harmful social norms, linking participants to skills training and markets, and have disaster risk reduction and natural resources management components.

**Ethiopia:** A graduation model has been built onto the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), which is managed by the Government of Ethiopia and funded by the World Bank and others. The PSNP provides food/cash transfers to chronically food-insecure households and supports nutrition training, agricultural extension, and subsidized access to financial services. USAID funds complementary livelihood interventions, building the agency of men, women, and youth and linking them with markets and services. USAID also supports a community health insurance scheme that mitigates the cost of disease. When the package is made fully available, the majority of households graduate from the safety net and, as an indicator of resilience, a majority of graduates remain so for at least three years.

**Haiti:** Kori Lavi, a USAID/BHA-funded safety net program, combined livelihood support with transfers of locally produced foods to food-insecure households. Through improved access to financial and food markets, participants were able to make progress toward self-sufficiency. The program successfully layered humanitarian support for participant communities affected by drought or hurricanes and helped build a registry that the government and others use for coordinated targeting.

**Malawi:** USAID is supporting the government of Malawi's Social Support for Resilient Livelihoods approach that provides social cash transfers and implements climate-smart, enhanced public works programming, which provides scalable safety nets and resilient livelihoods for the most vulnerable and improves natural resources management.

**Niger:** A USAID-funded portfolio of activities provides participating communities, including displaced persons, with safety net support, as well as improved access to water and other natural resources, effective early warning for emergency response, business development opportunities and market linkages, and strengthened community and national health systems. These efforts include women and youth in empowering ways so that they contribute to and benefit from program interventions. Social protection programs exist in the country but are relatively small and not well-coordinated.

**Tajikistan:** The Food Security Safety Net Activity with WFP ensures strengthened food security for the most vulnerable populations in Tajikistan by establishing a shock-responsive social safety net that links to early warning and early action mechanisms through the: (1) provision of unconditional transfers to the most vulnerable, (2) building resilience and livelihoods to mitigate future shocks, and (3) generating systematic evidence through food security surveillance to support rapid response.

**Tunisia:** USAID is funding UNICEF to provide direct support to vulnerable Tunisian families as they contend with rolling food shortages, fuel and food price hikes, and rising economic uncertainty. These funds will help create a social safety net to mitigate rising food insecurity and support Tunisians as they forge a path forward to a more secure future.

## Additional Resources and Tools

- [Socialprotection.org](https://socialprotection.org). A knowledge sharing platform on social protection.
- [Weekly Social Protection Links](#): A newsletter on the latest research and practices.
- ILO. n.d. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/social-security/lang--en/index.htm>. A Social Protection Platform.
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- UNICEF. 2021. [Social Protection and Gender Equality Outcomes Across the Life-Course: A Synthesis of Recent Findings](#). UNICEF.
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- Hidrobo, M., N. Kumar, T. Palermo, A. Peterman, and S. Roy. 2020. "Why Gender-Sensitive Social Protection is Critical to the COVID-19 Response in Low- and Middle-Income Countries." [CGIAR: Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets](#) (blog). April 30, 2020.

**For further assistance related to these Activity Design Guidance documents, please contact [ffguidance@usaid.gov](mailto:ffguidance@usaid.gov).**