

Social protection's role in enhancing food security and nutrition for greater resilience in Africa

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Context

Africa's poverty and inequality are endemic, high and growing. Sadly, all national constitutions of countries of the continent talk about the central role of the social contract being to ensure, support and provide the opportunities for the attainment of the welfare and wellbeing of all citizens. Evidence of the failure and hollowness of these promises are noticeable on the faces of most people who live on less than 2 USD/day. Most of them, the majority residing in rural and urban slums, can hardly afford the food/calories needed to ensure and sustain good health. This partly explains the continent's high infant, maternal and adult death rates and life expectancy¹. The crisis also morrows or accounts for the low productivity.

No doubt, there is a business sense for a well-fed and nourished population. A nation that aspires to greatness must be able to guarantee food and nutrition for its people. It is more critical that children are well-nourished and fed from conception, birth, adolescence, and young age. Nutrition sciences make the benefits of nutrition for children and society bear.

However, a simple analysis shows an endemic and perverse food and nutrition crisis in Africa. The poor and unemployed are worse off, including households with women as heads and breadwinners. The real challenge is that the existing social protection coverage and provisions available are thin (17% of the total population compared to the global average of 47%)² difficult to access, and the provisions grossly inadequate.

Some of the reasons that explain the crisis of social protection in Africa are – high unemployment and under-employment; low and stagnant wages; high informality with precarious working and earning conditions; high and persistent cuts in public spending, and other socio-economic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the war in Ukraine leading to the spike in the prices of food and fuel and stagflation.

Thoughts of how to advance social protection

¹ For those born in 2021, the average life expectancy at birth across Africa was 63 years for males and 66 years for females. The average life expectancy globally was 71 years for males and 75 years for females in mid-2021 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/274511/life-expectancy-in-africa/#:~:text=For%20those%20born%20in%202021,for%20females%20in%20mid%2D2021.>)

² https://www.ilo.org/global/docs/WCMS_827624/lang-en/index.htm#:~:text=Despite%20the%20importance%20given%20to,the%20global%20average%20of%2047%25.

As organised labour on the continent, the ITUC-Africa is convinced that the best way to ensure adequate social protection is to create decent jobs. Jobs are at the heart of human dignity. Job creation offers the opportunity to expand the tax base. An expanded tax base increases opportunities for formal tax collection channels, which will improve social protection financing options.

Regular payment of living wages can also assist in social protection. African governments must commit to developing and adopting a national minimum wage across the economies on the continent. As a wage anchor, minimum wage adoption and application will help reduce the incidence of slave and starvation wages payment experienced by most workers without trade union representation and voice. Government regulation should ensure that Wage administration is taken out of competition.

Practical and progressive industrial relations practices that allow for freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining will also contribute to social protection provisions. Organized workforce can use their trade union platforms to negotiate and mobilize to ensure that collective bargaining outcomes are genuinely and effectively applied and enforced.

Given that food and nutrition are the central points of the discourse, it will be critical for Africa to design, deploy and monitor imaginative schemes to formalize the ubiquitous informal economy. Social protection provisions seldom cover women and young people who are the major players in the informal economy. The majority of them are left to scrounge for cover on their own. Pieces of evidence abound of self-help social protection efforts by informal economy operators. They will need genuine and relentless assistance to ensure the effectiveness and reliability of these schemes.

There is also the need to focus on social protection provisions that target children. Food feeding programmes will support children's food and nutrition needs, contribute to their physiological development and tame school absenteeism, school drop-out turnover, and child labour incidences. The recent Durban Call to Action on the Elimination of Child Labour³ was eloquent and comprehensive enough on how social protection cocktails that include education, school feeding, and right learning environment can contribute to the elimination, over time, of child labour.

Africa is witnessing a spike in the prices of food and fuel partly on account of the war in Ukraine. Farmers are finding it more complex and more expensive to get their produce to the markets for sale. Another factor responsible for the soaring food prices can be seen in our low supply/production capacity compared to our people's demand/consumption needs. Africa must place priority on feeding itself. The continent's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Programme⁴

³ <https://www.5thchildlabourconf.org/en/news/what-durban-call-action#:~:text=The%20Durban%20Call%20to%20Action%20is%20a%20document%20that%20emphasizes,Labour%20on%2020%20May%202022.>

⁴ file:///C:/Users/joel.odigie/Downloads/CAADP_Maputo%202003.pdf

must be genuinely implemented to ensure food sufficiency and security. Africa must steady its advocacy on climate change containment.

We will also suggest that Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) arrangements can be engineered to support indigent households and communities. Beneficiaries should also include young and unemployed persons and women. The conditions for access must add value to the goal of eliminating poverty and inequality and ensuring inclusion.

Financing as a challenge

Observations from the poor implementation of ILO Recommendation 202 (Social Protection Floors) in Africa suggest that several African governments complained of their inability to finance them. Sadly, Africa continues to bleed from the effects of Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs). The 2020 Economic Development Report for Africa by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) indicates that the continent loses about \$88.6 billion annually to IFF activities. This loss is about 3.7% of the size of the continent's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)⁵. We must curb this and channel the resource to financing social protection provisions.

We must also fight public sector corruption and asset looting by elected and appointed public officers and officials. As organised labour, we recognise the role of social dialogue in the fight against corruption at all levels.

Conclusion

In conclusion, organised labour is convinced that re-opening and freeing the shrinking civil liberty and democratic spaces will buoy accountability. In essence, as more persons are allowed and encouraged to participate in governance processes freely, duty and mandate bearers will be regularly scrutinized and challenged to be responsive and responsible.

⁵ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2021/tackling-illicit-financial-flows-matter-survival-africas-development>