



Urban Food Insecurity in Ethiopia: A Review of Poverty Dynamics and the Role of Social Safety Nets

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ABSTRACT

The UPSNP is an Ethiopian Government initiative aimed at urban poverty. The program provides short-term transfer support for urban households and offers services that improve community assets through the provision of labour-intensive public works. The paper presents empirical evidence and theoretical issues concerning the practices and challenges of safety net programs in the UPSNP of Jigjiga City, Somali Regional State. Rural safety net programs have been the focus of many studies but the absence of urban safety nets studies presents a gap. The assessment of literature identifies familiar patterns of recurring challenges, such as targeting errors, institutional weaknesses (including corruption), political interference, and limited resources. UPSNP shows it can help with food security, household asset protection and urban infrastructure upgrade despite these challenges. The primary purpose of this research is to fill the gap in research on UPSNP implementation by assessing UPSNP in urban areas. It is hoped that research findings can contribute to better understanding and better policy and program delivery.

Key Words: Poverty Dynamics; Public Works Programs; Safety Net Programs; Urban Food Insecurity

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban food insecurity has emerged as a critical development challenge in many low- and middle-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where rapid urbanization, persistent poverty, and weak institutional systems continue to strain urban livelihoods. In Ethiopia, urban food insecurity is a complex, multifaceted problem, deeply intertwined with poverty and exacerbated by rapid urbanization, systemic vulnerabilities, and limited access to essential resources (Tacoli, 2020).

As urban centers expand due to natural population growth and rural–urban migration, the demand for food increases significantly, placing immense pressure on existing food systems and urban infrastructure (Putra et al., 2020). This

growing demand, coupled with persistent poverty, hinders many urban households' ability to access sufficient, safe, and nutritious food (Aragie & Genanu, 2017). Despite notable national progress in poverty reduction, urban areas in Ethiopia continue to experience rising inequality, unemployment, and vulnerability to economic and climatic shocks, which directly affect household food security. Vulnerable populations, particularly female-headed households with high dependency ratios and restricted access to services, face heightened risks of food insecurity and undernutrition, highlighting the intersection between poverty, gender inequality, and limited food access (Fentaw et al., 2013). Furthermore, recurrent climatic shocks, such as droughts, and economic instability have intensified the urban food insecurity landscape over recent decades, compounding socioeconomic stressors and undermining household resilience (Lokosang et al., 2014). In light of these issues, there is a growing recognition of the importance of social protection systems, especially safety net programs, as policy tools for poverty reduction and food security enhancement. Ethiopia has put into practice interventions directed at safety nets on a large scale, primarily the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), which has been applied mostly in the rural areas. The growing recognition of urban poverty and food insecurity ushered in the Urban Productive Safety Net Program (UPSNP). This aims to address the unique vulnerabilities of urban populations through cash transfers, public works and livelihood sup-

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port. Although safety net programs are acknowledged for improving food security, protecting household assets, and fostering resilience, insufficient attention has been provided to such programs in urban areas. A limited understanding of urban safety nets has emerged from most current literature focusing on rural safety net programs. Recently, the study of Jigjiga in the Somali Regional State sheds light on urban safety nets in a fast-growing city. According to the experts in the reviewed articles, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the implementation practices, challenges and outcomes of urban safety net programs in Ethiopia. In addition, the institutional, administrative and socio-political factors determining the effectiveness of UPSNP at the local level have been under-analysed. The actual impact of targeting accuracy, governance, resource constraints, and community participation on program performance needs to be studied further empirically.

As a result, this study will try to develop an evaluation of the practices and challenges of the Urban Productive Safety Net Program (UPSNP) in Jigjiga City Administration. The objectives of the study are to: (i) assess the implementation practices of UPSNP; (ii) identify the challenges affecting its effectiveness; and (iii) examine the effect of UPSNP on the food security and livelihood of urban poor households. Drawing fundamentally from the pilot assessments but integrating the recommendations of other evidence reviews, the sessions produced 370 additional codes on safety net features. In the end, the results are expected to add value to more inclusive, efficient, and sustainable social protection strategies to help reduce urban poverty and food insecurity in Ethiopia.

2. Material And Methods

2.1. Conceptualizing Food Security, Poverty, and Livelihoods

Food security and poverty are closely interconnected and form the foundation for understanding urban vulnerability. Food security is defined as consistent physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for a healthy life (Food & (FAO), 2008). Among these, access, largely determined by income and market conditions, is the most critical dimension in urban contexts. Poverty, similarly, is a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond income deprivation to include limited access to education, health services, housing, and social protection (Sellheim, 2013). While traditional definitions distinguish between absolute and relative poverty (De Vita et al., 2012), more recent approaches emphasize vulnerability, exclusion, and lack of capabilities as central features of poverty (Vandenberg, 2006). The Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) provides a useful analytical lens by linking poverty to households' access to assets, human, financial, physical, social, and natural, and their ability to cope with shocks (for International Development (DFID), 2001; Scoones, 2015). This framework highlights that livelihood security is a precursor to food security, underscoring the need for interventions to address both income and structural constraints.

2.2. Urban Poverty and Food Insecurity in Ethiopia

Urban poorness is basically different from rural poorness in causes, etc. Rural households may rely on subsistence production for food, whereas urban households almost exclusively rely on markets for their food needs, making them highly vulnerable to income and price shocks (Ruel & Garrett, 2004). In Ethiopia, urban poverty and food insecurity are increasing due to rapid urbanization, unemployment, and rise in the cost of living matter, despite nationwide reduction of poverty (International Development Association, World Bank, 2015) () From 1995 – 2015, global poverty rates saw significant declines. However, very considerable disparities remain. Particularly, among... underemployed low-wage populations in urban areas. This implies that the overall decrease in poverty does not lead to better food security of all urban groups. (Ekpenyong, 2015) observed that Urban households spend a large share of their income on food and buy in small quantities at higher prices, which worsens food insecurity. In addition, vulnerability is compounded by structural challenges like weak social networks and housing, inadequate services (Banerji & Gentilini, 2013). An important debate in the literature is whether urban poverty is well captured by income-based measures or whether a more multidimensional measure is needed. Many scholars concur that non-monetary factors, like access services and social protection, are on par with monetary factors in combating urban food insecurity (Muzzini, 2008).

2.3. Social Safety Nets and Theoretical Perspectives

Policies on social safety nets have gained momentum to tackle poverty and hunger in developing countries. Also called non-contributory transfer programmes, they ensure minimum levels of consumption and protects vulnerable from shocks (Grosh et al., 2008). The role of safety nets in development has many theoretical foundations. The Basic Needs Approach focuses on provision of a selected number of essential goods and services in order to enhance welfare. (Tolossa, 2010) In contrast, the Rights-Based Approach views access to food as well as social protection as a fundamental human right, placing the onus on the state to ensure equitable access (Sepúlveda & Nyst, 2012). The Empowerment Approach emphasizes poverty reduction through participation, agency and institutional inclusion – basically that poor people should be able to take part, and that institutions integrate them (OECD, 2012; World Bank, 2002). To respond to crisis, effective safety nets should not only tackle immediate needs but also facilitate the transformational change of social structures.

2.4. Safety Net Programs in Ethiopia: From Rural to Urban Contexts

Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) is one of Africa's largest social protection programs launched in 2005. Rural households' food security, asset protection and resilience have improved as a result of the PSNP, according to existing literature (Sharp et al., 2006). Nonetheless, the researches point out the existence of issues, such as targeting errors, administrative ineffectiveness, and lesser re-

sources (Fekadu & Mberengwa, 2009; Ismael, 2012). Due to its rural focus, PSNP is not applicable in urban areas where food insecurity and poverty are different issues than in rural areas. Areas in the city depend on the market including the informal sector. Living expense is higher and an intervention is needed for a targeted approach. In response, the Ethiopian government launched the UPSNP in 2015, a program to help poor and vulnerable households in cities. Cash transfers, works and livelihood support for enhanced income and employment are part of the program. The policy papers suggest that UPSNP can enhance food security and urban infrastructure in the economy. However, empirical proof remains scanty. This indicates an overall gap in the literature on urban safety nets in developing nations.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Implementation Challenges of Safety Net Programs

An increasing amount of literature has flagged many challenges that diminish the efficacy of safety nets. Inclusion and exclusion errors leading to targeting inefficiencies (Ismael, 2012). Administrative and institutional weaknesses limited capacity and poor coordination. Interference and governance issues may hamper transparency (Smith & Subbarao, 2013). Limitations on financing, which affect program sustainability. Studies in Ethiopia substantiate these challenges. For instance, Menen (2019) identified delays in payment, poor coordination among institutions, and targeting errors in urban safety net programs. In the same manner, resource misuse issues and unawareness of beneficiaries by Abera (2016) was reported. Safety nets can have powerful outcomes, but whether that happens depends largely on the quality of implementation and the strength of institutions.

3.2. Synthesis and Research Gap

The studies reviewed show that food insecurity in urban Ethiopia is caused by the combined effects of income, market dependence, and structural issues. The effects of safety net programs have been well established in rural areas, but little is known about their impacts in urban areas. Much of the research to date focuses on PSNPs in rural areas with little coverage of urban programs like UPSNPs especially at city level. On top of these the effects of institutional, administrative and socio-political factors on program implementation and outcomes in the urban context are empirically undocumented. The UPSNP work in Jigjiga City Administration and its challenges is to fill these gaps. In this way, they sensitize academic literature and policymaking on enhancing urban safety nets in a world where people move more and more often to towns.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1. Conclusion

The Urban Productive Safety Net Program (UPSNP) has proven instrumental in mitigating urban poverty in Ethiopia through the provision of temporary income and backing the development of community assets. The public works portion aids in food security; protecting asset of household and cities through labor-intensive work.

The program has not been without its success, however, several challenges affect its effectiveness. These include targeting errors, leakages, and fraud; corruption; political interference; and resource constraints. An examination of theoretical and empirical literature substantiates that UPSNP is a relevant social protection mechanism in urban contexts. Additionally, Ethiopian experience highlights the strengths of the program as well as a number of practical implementation gaps with which it faces.

The UPSNP has significant potential to enhance the livelihoods of vulnerable urban populations; however, the long-term success of the UPSNP will depend on the resolution of existing implementation challenges and the strengthening of institutional effectiveness.

4.2. Recommendation

To increase the effectiveness of UPSNP, the targeting procedures need to be enhanced. Strengthening beneficiary selection procedures could be done through data-driven and transparent systems to minimize inclusion and exclusion errors. In addition, transparency and accountability can be enhanced through clear monitoring and evaluation frameworks to reduce corruption and political interference in programme implementation.

Another important principle is community participation. The local communities should be involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the program to ensure ownership and enhance effectiveness. Moreover, increased financial and logistical support is necessary to ensure adequate resource allocation for consistent delivery and sustainability of programme activities.

Ensuring fair results means it is just as important to integrate core program principles for example, fairness, inclusiveness, and gender equity, in all stages of implementation. Enhancing institutional capacity should also be a priority with training, governance by the plan, and coordination among implementers. In the final analysis, by making use of best practices from global safety net programs, the design, efficiency and impact of the program will be positively impacted.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflicts.

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