



# UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL PROTECTION INTERVENTIONS IN ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ESWATINI

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra22885>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra22885

## ABSTRACT

Food security is affected by social security programmes in numerous developing countries such as Eswatini. The findings revealed a strong role of social protection programmes like food assistance, cash transfers and agricultural support, especially in terms of community resilience and sustainable food systems as well as in promoting socioeconomic development in Eswatini. The study used mixed method approach employing quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews within its sample population of would-be beneficiaries, policy makers and stake holders. Proportions of the study's results revealed that most household sizes in Eswatini are between 3 and 6 individuals. Most of the participants had secondary level of education (40%) and 30% had attended tertiary level, meaning it is a quit educated sample. It is worth mentioning because it affects their knowledge and use of social security measures. Study results indicate social protection is highly effective at enhancing food security, reducing poverty and stimulating economic growth among households. Programs designers should consider an intentional focus on social protection interventions to the most vulnerable in any given community to yield immediate food security, reduced scarcity induced coping strategies and promote sustained agricultural pursuit and diversification. Thus, social protection programmes combined with sustainable agriculture guidelines have the potential to generate a combined influence in this case towards more resilient food systems and an inclusive socio-economic development. These findings provide crucial insights for policy maker and development practitioner aiming to design effective social security intervention that is in line with sustainable development goals in Eswatini.

**KEYWORDS:** Unlocking, Social Protection, Sustainable Food Systems, and Socio-Economic Development

## INTRODUCTION

In Eswatini, where agriculture is a basis of livelihood and resilience, social protection initiatives have illustrated a significant contribution in fostering sustainable food systems. Such interventions help in secure food by giving monetary security to farmers who invest in sustainable agricultural practices (Rivera, 2023). Despite these advantages, challenges persist from risks of climate change and market instability. According to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023) although social protection programmes are designed to build recipients' resilience, their role in responding to climate and economic shocks is less effective. Linking social protection and agriculture can play complementary roles for economic resilience and environmental sustainability (Hennessy 2023). Furthermore, an inter-sectoral approach across multiple government pillars, in line with "transformative action" towards sustainable food systems and socio-economic development, is foreseen. This study explores how targeted social protection responses can provide the enabling environment for a resilient and equitable food system in Eswatini.

Protection systems are central to preventing people who are vulnerable falling into poverty and exclusion. These programs cut across different types of policies from the more direct forms of assistance, like cash transfers, to health access and educational support to create a safety net which leads to more equitable opportunities for young people (UNICEF, n.d., World Bank, 2024). By mitigating the lifelong consequences of poverty, these programs



attempt to level the playing field so that all of our children are born into communities where they can avail themselves of the essential services that will enable them to lead healthy, productive and meaningful lives, regardless of how much money their parents earned. Disturbingly, almost three quarters of children worldwide are deprived of social protection in cash or kind, aggravating economic destitution and exclusion. Major organizations such as UNICEF and the World Bank promote comprehensive and universally accessible social protection systems that address child poverty on various fronts (UNICEF, n.d.). As previously mentioned, Eswatini's specific socioeconomic environment can allow for more comprehensive social protection systems to be incorporated, which in turn could positively affect food security and durable development.

Social protection programmes are contributors to sustainable food systems offering safety nets in food security and agricultural productivity. Trade adjustment policies, including cash transfer, social insurance, and food support mechanisms, are critical in providing vulnerable populations with buffers in times of crises, and in food supply chain stabilization (Ceres2030; WFP, 2021). Beyond the need for short-term relief, social protection also has the potential to contribute towards longer term economic resilience, by helping smallholders to remain on their farms, being a driver for the investment in livelihood diversification and supporting rural economic activity. The importance of social protection to reach “zero hunger” has now been confirmed by this research from the Ceres2030 project (led by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Cornell University and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), among others). Eswatini can additionally improve agricultural productivity and socioeconomic stability by building on current policies to incorporate food system resilience strategies.

The paper aims to reveal possibilities in social protection programs through an integrated multisectoral perspective. Academics, for example, Bendjebbar et al. (2019) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) call for integrated approaches to addressing food insecurity and vulnerability. Linking social protection to complementary sectors boosts the resilience of food systems, which is good for both rural households and the broader economy. The identification of entry points of pre-conditionality within the existing, social protection programme will be a basis for policy refinement, leading to a focusing of interventions with impact. In addition, providing the accurate information to the community by strategic training programmes make them able to involve sustainable livelihood. Multisectoral partnership generates synergies among implementing organizations, by encouraging accountability, transparency, and responsiveness, in order to promote equity in sustainable food systems.

Apart from public resources, this research shows the necessity for private sector involvement in social protection activities. Academics, including Castañeda et al. (2016) and World Bank (2018) underscore the role of social protection led programming as a driver of poverty reduction and human rights base and multisectoral development. Investments in human capital, strengthening of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and harmonization of social protection with sustainable development goals can optimize long-term socio-economic returns. When residents of rural areas are aware of factors contributing to poverty, they will be better prepared to participate in social security schemes. In moving towards food systems that are resilient, balancing environmental with social considerations in social protection paradigms is key. Through a strong equity-centred framework, this study hopes to imagine how social protection could fulfil its potential in moving sustainable food systems and inclusive, equitable growth.

The study seeks to provide evidence-based social protection responses in Eswatini that can contribute to the realization of more sustainable food systems and sustainable, inclusive socio-economic development in Eswatini. It involves social scientists, development experts and beneficiaries who then come up with optimal strategies. It aims more precisely to assess the extent to which social protection contributes to poverty reduction and resilience. Based on the World Bank's 2021 review of the Eswatini's major social assistance programs, it looks at how to reduce inequality, strengthen food security and promote long-term economic growth. Critical agendas include ensuring the food supply availability, coping with external shocks, raising the level of agricultural productivity and enhancing adaptive capacity. Social-protection measures are examined as a strategic entry point for comprehensive change that incorporates climate resilience and inclusive policies to target structural disparities. The project will use these mechanisms to improve the human capital, financial resources management and governance. Excitingly it also considers the issues of rural poverty, food insecurity and environmental degradation and considers the critical role of multi-stakeholder planning for sustainable development. The study aims to characterize the food systems of Eswatini in order to determine what are the challenges and opportunities that can lead towards greater sustainability. Explore how social protection programmes contribute to agriculture productivity, climate resilience and food security among the most vulnerable populations. It will also seek to assess the impact of current social protection initiatives in improving the livelihoods of vulnerable groups, notably smallholders, women and vulnerable communities. It will also consider how social protection systems



can help to promote development-led social protection systems to promote sustainable economic stability, poverty reduction and access to essential services for all. Emphasize policy options that help reconcile social security and national development objectives.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Eswatini has a number of mutually reinforcing challenges that drive poverty and food insecurity. Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, food insecurity and erratic weather have exacerbated hardships, particularly for groups already marginalised. The agricultural segment important for economic development, is now increasingly posing dangers due to climate change related natural calamities e.g. droughts and floods causing low productivity and occasional faux pas on food shortages (UNDP, 2019). Smallholder farmers, fundamental to food systems, need to be supported holistically for the resilience and livelihoods to persist. Structural inequalities also disadvantage women as well as other marginalised groups with disparities in access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (ILO, 2018). Despite implementation and integration challenges, there are social protection programs with potential to contribute to enhanced sustainability over time. This research aims to assess the social protection interventions used in reducing food insecurity, poverty and social inequality. Through the analysis of case studies and empirical data, the project will explore innovative responses on how social security can be linked up with climate adaptation policies, providing focused support to the most vulnerable. Such approaches will pay particular attention to inclusive policies addressing structural inequalities and provide a platform for transformative strategies for sustainable and more equitable socio-economic development in Eswatini. By focusing on evidence, the research project aspires to propose a useful set of recommendations that help strengthen the role of social protection in addressing immediate vulnerabilities and building for a more robust and sustainable future. Analysing intersections between social security and climate adaptation is critical for promoting policy innovation and contributing to a framework that will enable community empowerment while buttressing national development policies.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social protection is increasingly recognized as a key instrument to foster food security and socio-economic development. Social protection programmes that provide cash and food assistance can help reduce poverty and strengthen resilience among susceptible communities (UNICEF, 2021). In a country like Eswatini, heavily reliant on agriculture as a traditional livelihood, linking social protection and food systems can provide sustainable avenues for economic wellbeing. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023) sound social protection also manages the risk of climate change and market volatility, and thus contributes in sustained food security. But obstacles like insufficient financing and weak institutional structures keep these benefits from being realized. In this section, we examine the theoretical context and evidence around the use of social protection to promote sustainable food systems.

Cash transfers have an important impact on farm productivity since it promotes financial security of farmers. Rivera (2023) claims that cash transfer programmes allow smallholders to invest in sustainable agriculture, enhancing productivity and food security. Similarly, Hennessy (2023) stresses the importance of linking social protection with agricultural policies to encourage economic resilience and environmental sustainability. In Eswatini, where climate variability affects agricultural productivity, social protection programmes may act as a cushion against economic shocks. The World Bank (2024) argues that targeted subsidies and insurance programs helps farmers to cope with risk and makes food production more dependable. Nevertheless, policy gaps, policy implementation and coordination issues continue to be challenges, requiring a multisectoral approach if an impact is to be realized.

Social protection systems are effective tools in poverty reduction and equitable growth. Bendjebbar et al. (2019) suggest that social protection interventions (e.g., conditional cash transfers, employment) can contribute to financial protection of vulnerable families who may then seek necessary services. In Eswatini, where poverty levels remain high, scaling up social protection coverage can have a major impact on living conditions. Such an approach is promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), which highlights the need to integrate health and education services in social protection programmes to tackle multidimensional poverty. But lack of funds and bureaucratic inefficiencies are hindering effective action. Institution-building and development of public-private partnerships can increase the reach and effectiveness of such social protection programs.

An elementary goal of social protection programmes is to support food security. Food aid and meals systems specifically school lunches are essential in combating hunger and malnutrition (WFP, 2021). Eswatini is home to many food-insecure individuals and social protection is an important way to help these individuals. Ceres2030 (2021) notes that integrating social protection and agricultural development leads to improvement in food availability and access. Yet obstacles including poor infrastructure and the logistics of getting food to the people



in need make effective food distribution difficult. Policy reform and technological innovation to alleviate these constraints can enhance food security .

A multisectoral response is required to optimize social protection responses. Castaneda et al. (2016) also promote incorporation of social protection in health, education and economic policies to bring out comprehensive development. In countries like Eswatini where silos exist, better coordination of government departments and stakeholders could support greater efficiency of programmes. FAO (2023) underlines that cooperation between public and private sectors results in new synergies for development. Yet, institutional fragmentation along with bureaucratic obstacles frequently drive against progress. It is this paper argues by strengthening governance processes as well as by increasing democratic accountability and stakeholder involvement that the efficiency and sustainability of social protection systems can be improved.

Notwithstanding the potential of social protection interventions, there are many challenges to achieve their effectiveness. According to the UNICEF (n.d.), restrictive finances, ambiguous policies, and lack of public knowledge are the main challenges to implement. In Eswatini, tackling these challenges requires policy reform and expanding investment in social protection interventions. The World Bank (2018) underlines that the use of digital technologies can play a role in increasing service delivery quality and effectiveness of beneficiary targeting. Furthermore, community involvement and capacity building can enhance program sustainability. These challenges need to be faced if Eswatini is to realise the full potential of social protection to promote sustainable food systems and socioeconomic development.

Whilst Social Protection interventions are important in enhancing food security and socio-economic development in Eswatini. Through the inclusion of social protection into agricultural policies, by strengthening multi-sectoral coordination and with a response to the implementation issues, sustainable pathways to economic resilience generation can be produced. Literature reveals that the role of social protection on reducing poverty and hunger cannot be over-emphasized, hence the call for strategic policy reforms and increased investment in the financial system. Capacity building and partnership willing can make social protection works more effectively and sustainably. With Eswatini moving towards realizing its sustainable development goals (SDGs), social protection interventions can play an important role in contributing towards inclusive growth and resilience.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a descriptive research design using a mixed-methods approach to explore the role of social protection interventions in advancing sustainable food systems and socio-economic development in Eswatini. A descriptive design was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive examination of existing conditions, relationships, and trends without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2014). The mixed-methods approach integrated both quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring a holistic understanding of the research problem. Quantitative data provided measurable insights into the effectiveness of social protection programs, while qualitative data captured participants' experiences and perspectives (Bryman, 2015). This approach facilitated triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of findings. The study aimed to identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities within Eswatini's social protection framework, contributing to policy recommendations for sustainable development. The study employed purposive sampling to ensure that participants had direct experience with social protection interventions in Eswatini. The target population consisted of key stakeholders involved in the implementation, oversight, and direct benefits of social protection programs. Specifically, government officials responsible for policy formulation, social protection beneficiaries who directly received financial or material assistance, agricultural stakeholders engaged in food system sustainability, and policymakers working on socio-economic development strategies were included. This selection was made to provide comprehensive insights into the effectiveness and challenges of social protection interventions. A sample size of 80 was determined based on the scope of the study and the necessity for diverse perspectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants were recruited through government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community organizations, ensuring representation from various sectors. Recruitment strategies included official invitations, targeted outreach through community leaders, and collaboration with local organizations that engage with vulnerable populations. Purposive sampling was justified as it facilitated the selection of individuals with specialized knowledge and lived experiences, strengthening the qualitative depth of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample composition reflected a balanced representation of gender, age, and socio-economic backgrounds, enabling a nuanced understanding of the role of social protection interventions in advancing sustainable food systems and economic resilience.

Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires for quantitative data and semi-structured interviews for qualitative insights. The questionnaires were designed to capture demographic information, perceptions of social protection programs, and their impact on food security (De Vaus, 2013). The semi-structured



interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, challenges, and recommendations (Patton, 2015). Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted to facilitate collective insights and validate individual responses. The instruments were pre-tested with a small subset of participants to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability. Adjustments were made based on feedback to enhance the effectiveness of data collection tools.

To ensure reliability, the study employed standardized data collection procedures and trained research assistants to administer questionnaires and conduct interviews consistently (Cohen et al., 2018). Validity was enhanced through triangulation, comparing findings from multiple sources to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quantitative data underwent statistical validation, ensuring accuracy in measurement, while qualitative data was subjected to member checking, where participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy (Shenton, 2004). The study also employed peer debriefing, where external experts reviewed the methodology to identify potential biases and inconsistencies. These measures strengthened the trustworthiness of findings, ensuring that conclusions were based on robust evidence. Ethical approval was obtained from the National Research Council, ensuring compliance with research ethics guidelines (Resnik, 2020). Participants provided informed consent, detailing the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was maintained by assigning unique identifiers to responses, preventing personal identification (Israel & Hay, 2006). The study adhered to ethical principles of beneficence, ensuring that participants were not exposed to harm or undue stress. Additionally, data protection measures were implemented, including secure storage and restricted access to sensitive information. Ethical considerations were paramount in fostering trust and encouraging honest responses from participants.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period, utilizing both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Surveys were administered electronically and in-person, ensuring accessibility for participants with limited digital literacy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Interviews were conducted in local language, with trained translators ensuring accurate interpretation. Focus group discussions were held in community centres, allowing for collective dialogue and validation of individual responses. Field notes and audio recordings were used to capture qualitative data, ensuring comprehensive documentation. The mixed-methods approach facilitated a rich dataset, enabling cross-validation of findings and deeper insights into social protection interventions. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, to identify trends and relationships (Field, 2018). Inferential statistics, such as regression analysis, were employed to assess the impact of social protection programs on food security. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns and narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). NVivo software was used to code and categorize qualitative responses, ensuring systematic analysis. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the research problem, facilitating evidence-based recommendations for policy enhancement in Eswatini.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Demographic Information**

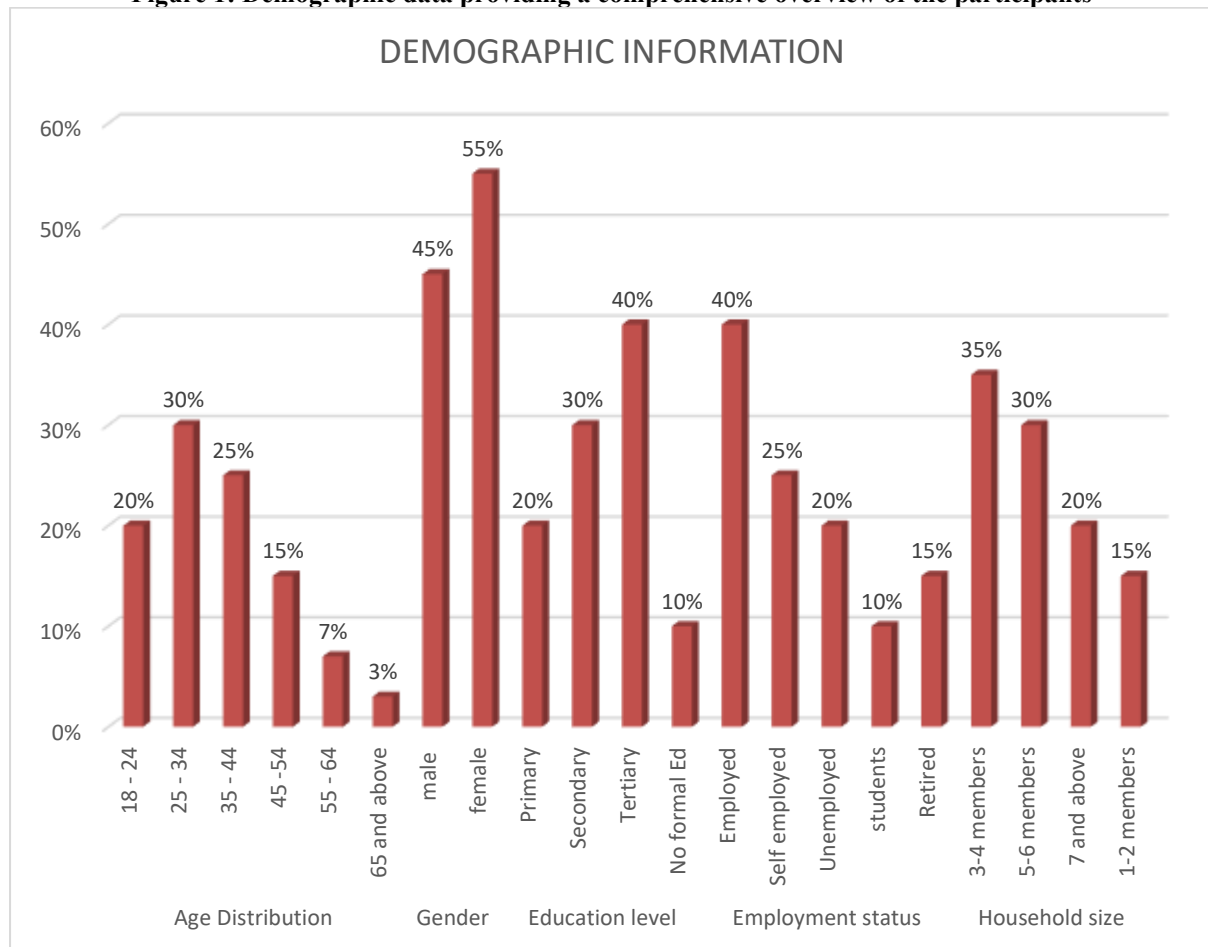
The study results point to certain demographic determinants of the success of social protection programmes in Eswatini. This dominance of younger people (18-34 years) indicates not only the need for social protection policies to be specifically targeted to this active and economically productive demographic, but also a demographic that is critical to community-based activities. This is consistent with the result from Ni and Chen (UNICEF Eswatini) who identify the need for selective social protection measures to assist the most vulnerable groups in order to attain equitable development. With more females than males and an almost equal gender ratio, we believe that the study does not suffer from selection bias towards a particular gender. But data from the World Food Programme (2020-2025) shows that women in Eswatini continue to suffer some of the highest socio-economic disparities, especially in the employment and resource access arenas. This indicates that strategies of social protection programs should account for gender-specificities to be able to counteract these inequalities.

The relatively high average educational level of respondents (secondary and higher) suggests that knowledge and participation in social protection may be higher. This is backed up by the Eswatini SDG Recovery and Acceleration Plan that identifies the significance of education in enhancing access to social protection services and sustainable food systems. But dissenting views indicate that education in itself does not necessarily translate into effective use of social protection interventions due to the significant obstacles of structural inequalities and poor policy implementation. For example, employment status (40% in paid employment, 25% self-employed) implies that many participants may have firsthand experience of social protection schemes. Poverty and hunger are inextricably linked to employment opportunities and economic stability, as outlined in a strategic review of aid policies by the World Food Programme. This highlights a necessity for social protection measures that combine job creation and economic preparedness measures. Size of household (3-6 members) represents the

common Eswatini family configuration, which is important for measuring the effect of social protection on food security and social-economic welfare. The UNICEF Eswatini report points out that the burden is heavier for bigger families, who need more social protection measures. Alternatively, it is argued that household size is not the only determinant of vulnerability, with income distribution and ability to access resources being more important.

The analysis adds to the expanding evidence base on impacts of social protection interventions through the empirical exploration of demographic differential outcomes. The results support the importance of policy that is targeted for age, education, gender, employment and household factors. The study also underscores the holes in current models and offers insights for policy re-adjustments and comprehensive implementation. For the wider sector, this study highlights the need for social protection, sustainable food systems and economic development to be integrated in policy. It is consistent with global work to increase resilience of the communities and reduce disparities through focused interventions. But a range of views suggest that merely social protection may not be enough; secondary methods economic empowerment, policy enforcement, and institutional coordination are also necessary for long-lasting effectiveness.

**Figure 1: Demographic data providing a comprehensive overview of the participants**



### Accessibility of Social Protection Interventions

This study has demonstrated that there is relatively high awareness (70%) of social protection programmes and information dissemination efforts would appear to have been effective. This is consistent with Ni and Chen’s study on the development of social protection in Eswatini, where the role of targeted communication strategies in extending program coverage is emphasized. Those who are still unaware of this technology, 30% of respondents, suggests there is more work to be done in reaching certain groups, especially in rural and underserved populations. The World Bank evaluation of Eswatini social assistance programmes shares these gaps and highlights the need for more socially inclusive and community-led awareness-raising. The mixed findings for accessibility (25% very accessible, 35% accessible, 25% somewhat accessible, 15% not accessible) demonstrate that there are differences in how program reach and impact are achieved. Some people find it easy to access social protection interventions, while others face large barriers such as bureaucratic transaction costs, geographical constraints, and eligibility restrictions. These results are in line with the World Bank analysis of household



welfare in Eswatini which emphasizes structural barriers preventing equal access to social assistance. The implications of such access challenges are that policymakers should reform program-delivery mechanisms in a manner to efficiently engage all eligible recipients. The dominance of food aid (50%) and cash transfers (40%) as the most accessed interventions reflects the urgent economic and food security requirements of the population. This is consistent with the World Food Programme’s strategic review of social protection, in which food security and cash are proposed as core components. However, the lower uptake of health insurance (10%), education support (20%) and agricultural support (30%) could imply program design failure or low public awareness. Clement Dlamini (2020) maintains social protection has to be more comprehensive and link health, education and agricultural support to build up long term socioeconomic resilience.

**Findings Analysis** The results of this study provide useful insights into the coverage and impact of SP interventions in Eswatini. The findings underscore the importance of intelligent marketing and policy changes to increase program access and utilization. Although awareness levels are relatively high, the accessibility is low, so more effective program design and implementation strategies are required. For the wider field, this research highlights the necessity of linking social protection with sustainable food systems and economic development. It complements international work to strengthen resilience and reduce disparities through focused action. But differences of opinion make it clear that social protection alone is not enough to address this need, strategies such as economic empowerment, policy enforcement, institutional coordination are needed to maximize the potential results.

**Table 1: Accessibility to social protection interventions in Eswatini**

Accessibility of Social Protection Interventions		
		Percentages
Awareness	High level of awareness	70%
	Unaware	30%
Accessibility Ratings	Very accessible	25%
	Accessible	35%
	Somewhat accessible	15%
	Not Accessible	25%
Types of Interventions Accessed	Cash transfers	40%
	Food Assistance	50%
	Health Insurance	10%
	Agricultural Support	30%
	Education Support	20%

**Utilization of Social Protection Interventions**

The results of this study show that utilization of social protection interventions varied widely with 30% of the respondents utilizing the services regularly, 40% occasionally, 20% rarely and 10% never. This indicates that, although many people use these interventions, a large proportion of the population hardly -if ever- uses them. Ni and Chen’s study on social protection development in Eswatini illustrates similar trends; it has also emphasized the fact that accessibility and awareness are determining factors against utilization (Ni and Chen 2018). This is supported by the World Bank’s review of the social intervention programmes in Eswatini which identified structural barriers (administrative bottlenecks and geographic constraints) that result in irregular use. Food (50%) and cash transfer (40%) are consistently the most commonly accessed interventions highlighting the centrality of food security to the community. This is in line with the World Food Programme strategic review, recognising food security and financial assistance as the core pillars of social protection. The shorter utilisation of HI (10%), education support (20%), and agricultural support (30%) however, may reflect some gaps in programme design or public awareness. Clement Dlamini (2020) makes the case that social protection has to be more interlinked, and that social protection should be combined with health and education, and agricultural support – something to sustain long-term 'socio-economic resilience". Overall levels of satisfaction with social protection services are quite strong, with 20% stating they are very satisfied and 40% satisfied. However 25% are neutral and 15% are dissatisfied – room for improvement in service provision then. The World Bank’s analysis of household welfare in Swaziland raises similar issues, finding that while social protection programmes are necessary there are also concerns that tensions between program inputs and implementation, poor targeting and low service delivery all drive low satisfaction levels. Some other views are beyond than service quality and include expectations and personal and socio-economic conditions (Gral et al., 2016).

The findings of this study provide important insights on the use and impact of social protection programmes in Eswatini. The findings re-emphasize the necessity of focused outreach and policy adaptation for enhanced program access and use. Even though food assistance and cash transfers are the interventions most accessed, the

lower uptake of health, education and agriculture support indicates opportunities for program design and awareness-building. At a broader level, for the social protection, sustainable food systems and economic development fields, this study emphasises the need to integrate social protection more centrally in sustainable transformations. It contributes to global initiatives to strengthen resilience and reduce disparities through focused interventions. However, differing views reveal that social protection is not enough, and additional measures, including economic empowerment, policy implementation and institutional coordination, are necessary to ensure sustainable change.

**Figure 2: Utilization of social protection interventions in Eswatini**



### Impact of Social Protection Interventions

Results of this study show that the social protection response has had a demonstrable impact on food security, livelihood status, and economic resilience in Eswatini. The situation with respect to food security has improved for most respondents, with 30 per cent who have experienced a considerable improvement, 40 per cent a moderate improvement and around 20 per cent a slight improvement. But the 10% who do not feel better are a reminder that there is variation in the effectiveness of interventions. This also echoes the research by Ni and Chen (UNICEF Eswatini) which highlights that social protection schemes translate to food security but nevertheless due to implementation and targeting gaps outcomes are mixed. Similarly, socio-economic conditions have also improved for many respondents as compared to their previous conditions, with 25% noting that their improved status is very high, 35% moderate and 15% slight. Yet 15% say there has been little or no improvement or circumstances have deteriorated indicating that although interventions bring relief, they may not be enough to alter underlying structural inequality. This position finds support in the World Bank research in household welfare in Eswatini, which emphasises that social assistance programs can be effective to alleviate poverty, but it must be more effectively linked to economic development approaches. Investment in income generation is another encouraging result. Sixty per cent say that social protection interventions have allowed them to invest in income-generating activities. This indicates that these programmes build economic resilience and autonomy. Clement Dlamini (2020) is of the opinion that social protection should provide more than just relief but rather enable people to establish sustainable livelihoods.



A further major impact is resilience to economic shocks, with 65% of respondents who agree or strongly agree that social protection has helped to “*make a household resilient to financial instability*”. But 35% disagree or strongly disagree, suggesting not every household has been prevented from falling through the cracks. An UNICEF Eswatini report raises the same concerns, noting that more adaptive and responsive social protection measures are needed. The obstacles to the access and utilization of social protection interventions are still significant, and lack of information (40%), long distances to coverage (30%), administrative rigmaroles (20%) and poor support (10%) are the main key barriers. The World Bank’s diagnosis of social assistance programs in Eswatini detects comparable hurdles to those of UNICEF, identifying as one of the major challenges, the lack of access, which impairs the capacity of the most vulnerable to fully harness the support.

The study results provide important lessons on the impact and limitations of social protection programmes in Eswatini. Although the impact and access to these programs appear to be disparate, a repositioning with policy changes may in the long term improve household food security, material quality of life, and economic resilience. The findings challenge the conventional wisdom that social protection interventions should be targeted, targeted and targeted and are only incidental to broader economic development strategies. For the wider community the research shows the centrality of social protection in achieving sustainable food systems and broader socio-economic development. It contributes to global initiatives of building resilience and reducing inequalities by targeted interventions. However, contrary views suggest that social protection should not be the only strategy; instead, a combination of approaches, including economic empowerment, policy enforcement, institutional mainstreaming are all necessary for its long-term sustainability.

**Table 2: Impact of social protection interventions in Eswatini**

Impact of Social Protection Interventions			
	Level of Improvement	Frequency	Percentages
Improvement in Food Security	Significant	60	30%
	Moderate	80	40%
	Slightly	40	20%
	No Improvement	20	10%
Impact on Socio-economic Status	Significant	50	25%
	Moderate	70	35%
	Slightly	50	25%
	No Improvement	30	15%
Resilience to socio-economic shocks	Strongly Agree or Agree	130	65%
	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	70	35%
Challenges Faced	Lack of information	80	40%
	Long distance to Service	60	30%
	Bureaucratic Procedures	40	20%
	Insufficient Support	20	10%

**CONCLUSION**

This research has demonstrated that social protection interventions play a crucial role in advancing sustainable food systems and socio-economic development in Eswatini. The triangulated data underscores the importance of social protection interventions in enhancing food security and socio-economic development in Eswatini. However, it also highlights significant challenges in accessibility and utilization that need to be addressed to maximize the impact of these interventions. Key findings indicate that measures such as cash transfers, food aid, and agricultural subsidies significantly enhance food security, reduce poverty, and promote economic stability. The study also reveals that these interventions encourage sustainable agricultural practices and economic diversification, thereby contributing to the resilience and sustainability of food systems. Further research and policy adjustments are recommended to improve the effectiveness and reach of social protection programs, based on integration of social protection and agricultural policies, targeted support for vulnerable populations, capacity building and training and robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks is essential to assess the effectiveness of social protection interventions and make necessary adjustments to improve their impact. Therefore, a roadmap for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers is needed design and implement effective social protection programs that support sustainable development goals in Eswatini.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To enhance the impact of social protection interventions in Eswatini, policymakers should integrate social protection with agricultural policies to promote sustainable practices. Targeted support for vulnerable populations,



including cash transfers and food aid, must be improved for better accessibility. Capacity-building initiatives should strengthen beneficiaries' skills and resilience, fostering economic stability. A robust monitoring and evaluation framework is essential to assess effectiveness and make necessary adjustments. Collaboration among stakeholders will ensure comprehensive, inclusive strategies that drive food security and socio-economic development.

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