**Forum:** Economic and Social Council

**Issue:** Measures to strengthen social safety nets and promote social protection for vulnerable populations, including the elderly and those living in poverty in developing nations

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**Introduction**

Although the world is now marked by unprecedented global development, many nations still grapple with multifaceted issues spanning from endemic poverty to elderly vulnerabilities. The cyclical nature of poverty perpetuates as families struggle to escape from regional limitations such as unpredictable weather patterns, inadequate access to education, and limited economic opportunities. With traditional family structures changing, younger generations often migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities, leaving older adults without adequate caregiving support. The lack of accessible healthcare facilities exacerbates their vulnerability, making it challenging for them to address age-related health issues.

Governments, international organizations, NGOs, and various stakeholders join forces to craft and implement measures that uplift and safeguard such vulnerable segments of society. However, the confluence of divergent interests and elevated stakes injects complexity into these efforts. Critics of social safety net programs argue that they are myopic solutions that only consume public resources. Proponents, on the other hand, claim that well-designed measures can immediately impact poverty and inequality and ultimately promote economic growth. Indeed, growing evidence shows that these programs help families plan for and invest in the future rather than employing negative coping strategies like taking children out of school or selling assets.

The social safety net (SSN) is a comprehensive term for assistance to improve the lives of these vulnerable and impoverished populations, which can be either untargeted or targeted. Examples of untargeted social safety nets include food prices or energy subsidies provided to the general population or fee-free education or health care to all households; on the other hand, targeted programs include food vouchers for low-income households, child allowances, and noncontributory pension programs for older adults.

In the dynamic landscape of developing nations, bolstering social safety nets and fortifying protection mechanisms remain a fundamental challenge and a moral imperative. This inquiry delves into strategies and collaborative endeavors essential to enhancing social safety nets and global ethics.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Social safety nets**

Social safety nets (SSN), or socioeconomic safety nets, are welfare services that provide economic and social security to vulnerable and improvised communities. Social safety nets can be targeted or untargeted, meaning that such programs can benefit populations or certain selective communities. Such social safety nets can take the form of welfare programs, unemployment benefits, healthcare provisions, food assistance, housing support, education aid, etc.

**Social protection**

Social protection refers to a collective of policies, programs, systems, and initiatives implemented by governments or organizations to prevent, reduce, and mitigate the damage inflicted on vulnerable populations by social or economic challenges.

**Welfare**

Welfare refers to the state-provided assistance programs that offer financial and social support to individuals and communities in need. Many governmental welfare programs are initiated through eligibility structures and criteria to assist citizens facing significant hardships and reinvigorate such individuals and communities.

**Impoverished populations**

Impoverished populations refer to individuals and communities that struggle with poverty or experience extreme deprivation of basic necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare, education, and other essential resources and accessibilities.

**Developing countries/Less economically developed countries (LEDCs)**

Developing countries, also formally known as Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs), refer to nations with relatively lower levels of industrialization, lower standards of living, and lower Human Development Index (HDI). Countries are classified as either ‘developed’ or ‘developing through criteria of economic indicators, social factors, poverty, literacy, education levels, etc.

**Poverty levels**

Poverty levels refer to the prevalence of poverty in a country. Poverty levels refer to the extent to which individuals, households, or populations experience insufficient income, resources, or basic needs for decent living conditions. The poverty threshold is the minimum level of income appropriate for an economy; the criteria of such threshold also varies due to factors such as the cost of basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare.

**Background**

 In countries that can foresee the adverse effects of the implemented reform measures, governments will take this impact into account and create a sustainable framework to mitigate such repercussions. These adverse impacts cannot be entirely eradicated despite the relevant combination of policies and systems; as a result, “social safety nets are means of easing this tension.” The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has sought to incorporate such social safety net frameworks into various programs, and this approach was endorsed by the IMF’s Executive Board in 1993.

**Development of social safety nets**

Social safety nets and social protection have existed since Ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire; however, the most prominent example of the modern context of social safety nets is in Latin America during the 1980s. The Latin American debt crisis resulted in the region’s population experiencing a drastic drop in income, economic stagnation, significant unemployment, and extreme inflation. The World Bank and the IMF took the initiative to mitigate the financial crisis by proposing structural reforms and stabilization mechanisms. Through these programs, various countries in Latin America were able to cushion the damage and the corresponding adverse effects of the stabilization reforms made in the country. Among these countries, Bolivia became the first country within the region to implement the Emergency Social Fund (ESF) directed to providing emergency relief and assistance by generating temporary income and employment opportunities. The World Bank continued to address several financial and social crises in the next few years: the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the East Asia financial crisis in the 1990s, the Mexican crisis, also known as the Tequila Crisis, and South Africa’s democratic transition in 1994. During this period, the World Bank and IMF recognized the importance and significance of SSNs in addressing major repercussions and adverse effects the structural adjustment programs of major economic and social changes have on vulnerable and impoverished populations. In Europe, after experiencing the immediate effects of WWII, the European societies grasped the idea of [“social protection and restoration of economic and living conditions destroyed by the conflict.”](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war_welfare_policies) Social safety nets began to be defined as policies aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of the war for the people, for example, sickness funds, health services, old-age insurance, etc. Indeed, social safety nets began to enter the public policy of the United States in the 1980s. With the New Deal, on August 14, 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act of 1935. This act “guaranteed pensions to millions of Americans, [“set up a system of unemployment insurance, and stipulated that the federal government would help care for dependent children and the disabled.”](https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/new-deal) The Reagan administration sought to implement a social safety net comprised of “a set of programs, benefits, and supports designed to ensure that people do not lack the necessities of life-shelter, food, physical safety, health, and essential financial resources.” Most existing social security programs and legislations were results of the Social Security Act, such as the Social Security and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which restricted such welfare services strictly to disabled people and the elderly population to operate a social insurance rather than a social safety net. This meant that most ‘social safety nets’ in America excluded families with young children, and individuals or families with low income and impoverished conditions. Hence, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 replaced the AFDC with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, which provided states with more freedom and flexibility in designing their distinctive programs. At the same time, amid the Bolsa Familia program, to further address the importance of social protection and welfare in development.

Two decades ago, SSNs were merely a method of mitigating the adverse effects the stabilization of economic and social issues have on low-income communities. Today, SSNs operate to reduce inequality and poverty and assist individuals and families to improve their accessibility to resources and livelihood conditions. Nevertheless the development in the purpose of SSNs, most safety net services have been left unchanged in “design and delivery since the 1950s.”

**Volatile social safety nets**

 The economic crisis brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic revealed the detrimental gaps in the current existing social safety nets in various countries. The pervasiveness of economic insecurity and instability brought about a surge in the need for social protection. Today, [“only a third of the world’s 1.2 billion poorest people are currently covered by social safety nets,”](https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielrunde/2016/08/29/social-safety-nets-and-developing-countries-a-chance-to-get-it-right/) and are provided with the necessary resources. As the global economy progresses, the rapidly aging population, skyrocketing housing costs, and major changes in labor markets are pressuring more people into precarious situations. However, over the past few decades, most social safety nets have substantially weakened: this process has accelerated due to the economic decline of the pandemic.

 ***Developed v.s. developing countries***

Most developed nations already have the appropriate and necessary established programs for implementing social protection for vulnerable populations; in addition, developing countries are seeking to expand their social safety net programs. Developing nations have more difficulty in creating social protection most prominently due to constrained budgets and limited funds for social welfare programs. As developing nations would have their priorities on resolving high poverty rates and competing priorities to reinvigorate the economy, it would be difficult to allocate adequate resources for social safety nets. Furthermore, developing nations would lack the administrative infrastructure, institutional framework, skilled personnel, political stability, and adequate data and information to implement the appropriate social safety nets. Developed nations can invest more money and resources in establishing social protection programs for the necessary people; however, their effectiveness and equality might need to be more adequate and sustainable. Developed nations tend to have a greater and rapidly aging population and constantly evolving workforce dynamics due to technological advancements; as a result, increased demand for social welfare services can strain government budgets, which may escalate concerns regarding the sustainability of the social safety net programs. Moreover, volatile social safety protection has been shown to simply exacerbate the regional and racial inequality in various communities. Many state and local governments that fail to protect middle-income and low-income residents have proved to deepen the already severe economic downturns between different racial and regional communities.

***Covid-19 pandemic impact on social safety nets***

The Covid-19 pandemic has left many countries with spiking unemployment rates with “disproportionate impacts on low-income families.” Despite the government’s efforts to reinvigorate and restore the economy, many vulnerable populations are still struggling with food insecurity rates, a surge in unemployment and poverty, severed access to safety net programs and other necessities, and the exacerbation of the gaps in existing safety nets. Some experts such as Christopher Howard from the College of William and Mary claim that these necessary social safety nets were already broken before the pandemic; therefore, the pandemic underscored the gaps and the need for reevaluation of previous measures and frameworks. Despite that remittances and social safety nets remained resilient during and post-pandemic, governments should prioritize addressing such deficiencies in these programs to support the most vulnerable.

**Criticisms of social safety nets**

Some experts criticize social safety net systems because they might encourage the disincentivizing of work, dilute communal ties, and dependency on social protection programs. Many believe the biggest defect of the social safety net is that it is not financially sustainable in the long term. The “average social expenditure among OECD countries was over 21% of GDP in 2014,” and most economic crises in countries such as “Greece, Spain, and Ireland can be traced back to unsustainable social safety spending.” On the other hand, developing countries spend only 1.6% of GDP on social safety spending and may gain potential benefits by implementing certain sustainable and appropriate systems established by Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

**Major Parties Involved**

**Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**

OECD works to build policies for collective well-being and find solutions to various socioeconomic challenges. Through its expertise, convening power, and inclusive development, the OECD can devise policies and strategies to strengthen social safety nets and protect vulnerable populations globally.

**International Monetary Fund (IMF)**

 IMF is a global organization that works to achieve sustainable growth, financial stability, and prosperity of its member nations through economic support. The IMF can provide economic policies that facilitate the effective design and implementation of measures to strengthen social safety nets and promote social protection.

**United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**

 The UNDP works to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and exclusion, and build resilience so countries can sustain progress. Armed with deep insight into such issues, it can help address these topics by providing policy advice, technical assistance, and capacity building. It can thus foster inclusive policies where human rights and gender are sufficiently considered, enhancing the resilience and feasibility of social protection systems.

**United Nations Children's Fund(UNICEF)**

 UNICEF works in the world’s toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents. It would ensure that the rights and well-being of children as a vulnerable population should be considered in social protection, promoting their development to ultimately break the cycle of poverty.

**International Labor Organization (ILO)**

 ILO brings together governments, employers, and workers of 187 Member States to set labor standards, develop policies, and devise programs promoting decent work for all women and men. ILO would play a pivotal role in ensuring that social protection is integrated into labor policies, addressing the vulnerabilities of workers, and fostering inclusive economic and social development.

**Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

* Some leading institutions, including the World Bank, have embraced universal social protection. In 2012, the ILO adopted Recommendation No. 202 on social protection floors, calling on members to ensure “the universality of protection, based on social solidarity.” Four years later, the World Bank announced it would partner with the ILO to advance universal social protection, which it calls “central to its goals of ending poverty and boosting shared prosperity.”
* In America, President Joe Biden’s administration pursued efforts to bolster the social safety net through the American Rescue Plan Act, seeking recovery from the economic and health effects of the pandemic. It provided stimulus checks, increased aid for the unemployed, expanded social support, etc. Although the federal government spent a record amount of money in 2020 and 2021 to help the nation contend with the COVID-19 pandemic, many measures were temporary. Ultimately, the cost and lack of prospects led to the collapse of the party’s attempt in the fall of 2021 to push through Congress a $3.5 trillion package, which would have broadened the safety net as Biden had planned.
* Senegal has adopted a development model called “Plan for Emerging Senegal(PES),” the second goal of which is to Promote human capital through a significant improvement of people’s living conditions and a more sustained fight against social inequalities while preserving the resource base and fostering the emergence of viable territories. One of its strategic aims is to improve the living conditions of Senegalese people through a national social protection strategy underpinned by a lifecycle approach.
* Vietnam also established its social protection system, which consists of four pillars: “(i) Employment, income, and poverty reduction - Promotion; (ii) Social insurance - Prevention; (iii) Social assistance and (iv) Basic social services - Protection.” Among these, the second pillar is challenging to achieve. Compulsory social insurance schemes reach only 32% of the working population, while the coverage of voluntary insurance is very low, only 2.1%. Such low coverage reveals that social insurance programs do not cover about 37 million working people.
* In 2020, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) provided targeted support for vulnerable households in Arab countries as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done through cash transfer programmes and other forms of targeted non-contributory social protection, notably the health coverage programmes Régime d’Assistance Médicale (RAMED) in Morocco and Assistance Médicale Gratuite (AMG) in Tunisia.
* [E/ESCAP/67/23](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/B21/105/81/pdf/B2110581.pdf?OpenElement)- “STRENGTHENING SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC”
* [E/CONF.66/C.2/L.64](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/NL3/321/96/pdf/NL332196.pdf?OpenElement)- “SOCIAL SECURITY FOR WOMEN, INCLUDING THE ELDERLY AND THE DISABLED”

**Possible Solutions**

* The World Bank can conduct evaluations and diagnostic work to identify and eliminate gaps in social safety net programs in various countries further to enhance the effectiveness of the social protection vulnerable populations will be receiving. Furthermore, the World Bank can strengthen such systems by evaluating and corresponding the initial reform measures and policies. This solution can focus on targeting specific populations and foundational work to identify entry points to help build such targeted social security nets. To address the existing gaps in the social safety nets, the World Bank can also provide assistance mechanisms and data to encourage less extensive and drastic reforms to prevent the increase in such gaps.
* The World Bank can support creating coalitions and partnerships with the United Nations agencies, governmental and non-governmental organizations, donors, and nations to build effective social and economic safety programs. Particularly, organizations such as the International Labor Organization and the World Food Programme to address the high rates of employment and food insecurity post-pandemic. Various organizations and nations with previous experience in such areas can support developing nations or other nations with highly vulnerable populations by “promoting the exchange of knowledge, policies, programs, data, and information. Organizations such as ILO and WFP can help conduct data and benchmark the scope and performance of countries’ social safety nets, social protection, and other welfare services by monitoring and evaluating existing programs.
* Governments also should prioritize linking the assistance provided in social safety nets to opportunities for rehabilitating into society. Social safety programs should consist of steps and opportunities for vulnerable and impoverished communities to become employed and have necessary access to basic resources such as food, shelter, education, and more. The potential benefits and opportunities should also be ensured to have the capacity to emerge communities from poverty and help maintain stable livelihoods in the future. These programs should be effective and also have reduced costs and help incentivize the programs in the future as well. Governments can create appropriate outlines for necessary reforms and adjustments that would prevent such resources and funds from being misallocated.
* Firstly, developing countries must focus on whether the pre-existing safety nets are alleviating poverty sufficiently or on a substantial scale. Alleviating poverty with a feasible safety net scheme that considers the effect of limited social funds, and financial and situational opportunity costs is essential in managing the central objectives of social safety nets. Secondly, as most developing countries are faced with bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, a system of reform proposals in which safety nets are decentralized, and cooperating with Non-Governmental Organizations NGOs) or commercial private sectors will strengthen the efficiency and accountability of existing and newly formed safety nets. Furthermore, it is more particularly important in developing countries that social reforms and safety nets are not to be judged against the number of projects accomplished but rather should be perceived as a long-term social restructuring of society for the adequate conditions and distribution of power in a society. Therefore, developing countries should ensure that they are structuring an equitable direction of institutional change and reform that effectively utilizes decentralized systems, and is not withheld by them.

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