IFPRI has conducted research on social protection (SP) issues since 2000, building on its earlier work on understanding the determinants of poverty and malnutrition and the linkages between them. The primary focus of the SP program was to (1) evaluate nutrition-related programs that address the underlying causes of malnutrition in order to improve the health and nutrition status of poor households; and (2) enlarge the knowledge base regarding the appropriate design for, and implementation and evaluation of, large-scale interventions for building human capital and reducing poverty.

In 2014, IFPRI commissioned an external review of the impact of its SP research program over the period 2000 – 2012 (see IIAR-40). The assessment included an extensive review of public goods produced by the program (including publications), stakeholder perceptions of the program’s public goods and research activities, case studies of countries and development assistance agencies (Bangladesh, Mexico; London, Rome, and Washington, DC), and policy or programming changes that resulted from IFPRI-sponsored research, capacity strengthening, and research-policy linkages between 2000 and 2012. Over 40 interviews were conducted with national stakeholders, donors, IFPRI staff, government officials, and individuals who participated in or had knowledge of IFPRI’s activities regarding social protection during this timeframe.

MAIN FINDINGS

Between 2000 and 2012, IFPRI’s SP research activities led to over 350 publications—journal articles, policy briefs, reports, discussion papers, etc., many of which are published in good quality journals and/or are highly cited. Together they provided relevant, high-quality, evidence-based research on a wide range of topics related to social protection broadly and contributed greatly to the body of knowledge regarding social protection and social safety nets, and particularly of conditional cash transfers (CCT). By mid-decade, the program was considered by stakeholders to have contributed to a global “evaluation culture” in regard to social-protection and safety-net programming. Additionally, stakeholders felt that IFPRI’s research activities influenced government policies in a number of countries:

- In Mexico, IFPRI’s work with PROGRESA was key to government acceptance of the importance of using evidence in developing social-protection policies and programming. Although now known as Prospera, many of PROGRESA’s original elements remain intact nearly 18 years later.
- IFPRI’s work with the Red de Protección Social in Nicaragua provided the government with evidence that would be used to make adjustments in implementation between the pilot and expansion of the program, such as eliminating a weight-gain requirement, increasing communications and monitoring to improve understanding of program elements by beneficiaries, use of geographic rather than household targeting, and provision of a small benefit to teachers from nonbeneficiary households with children.
- As a result of IFPRI’s evaluation of the Bolsa Alimentação CCT program in Brazil, its successor program, Bolsa Família, changed its targeting approach to no longer target households with underweight children. IFPRI’s influence also resulted in inclusion of a monitoring and evaluation system.
- IFPRI’s evaluation of Bangladesh’s Rural Rationing Program in the early 1990s resulted in its replacement with one of the first ever Food-for-Work programs, which provided a monthly ration of grains conditional on school attendance by primary-aged students from poor households. IFPRI subsequently conducted several assessments from which the Government of Bangladesh would make informed policy decisions regarding both its primary and secondary school educational systems, including better targeting in its primary and secondary schools, providing stipends to boys from poor households at the secondary level, and increasing the transfer amount to include opportunity costs of attending school.
- IFPRI conducted several studies on food versus cash transfer programs not only on school outcomes but also on food
security and livelihoods, the findings from which influenced WFP’s social-protection policy (for example, the type and size of transfers).

- Recommendations from a recent IFPRI performance evaluation of the World Bank-funded Employment Generation Program for the Poorest to be implemented by the Government of Bangladesh include better targeting, a quota for female participation, direct deposit of payments, and improved program monitoring systems.

- In Ethiopia, IFPRI’s studies suggest that social safety-net programs can in fact be effective in poor countries where administrative resources and capacity, as well as physical infrastructure, are often limited. IFPRI’s multiple studies of the Productive Safety Nets Programme (PSNP) have influenced the appropriate wage for public works beneficiaries, graduation criteria, targeting, and the timing of payment to beneficiaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholder interviews identified a number of lessons learned that should be considered when planning future research activities in order to further enhance impact:

- Although capacity building is one of the main objectives in IFPRI’s strategic plan, it has not been given the amount of attention it deserves in its social-protection research program. A recent internal review of IFPRI’s capacity-strengthening approach could be used to improve its social-protection research program in the future (IIAR-38), without necessarily diverting resources from quality research.

- IFPRI’s reputation for high-quality research earns the Institute a prominent place at global policy dialogues on social protection, yet many stakeholders felt that IFPRI was mostly absent, or came to the table late in the process. Global-level stakeholders expressed a true desire to see IFPRI’s researchers more engaged in high-level dialogues driving the global social-protection agenda.

- Rightly or wrongly, IFPRI’s research topics are perceived by some stakeholders to be influenced by donor-driven interests—that the topics chosen are based on what will get funded. By helping to drive the global agenda regarding key issues in social protection, IFPRI can help shape national and donor research priorities, including through better-informed donors and government entities, helping to bridge the gap between demand- and supply-side interests and research.

- IFPRI places a great deal of emphasis on quantitative approaches and several stakeholders felt there is a need to revisit research activities designed to understand the value of a mixed methods approach for conducting impact evaluations. Strengthening its research efforts on the use of qualitative methods in designing effective impact evaluations would help promote a mixed methods approach.

- In order to strengthen its policy impact, IFPRI should consider partnering with a broader mix of organizations or entities that can facilitate this process.

- IFPRI needs to strengthen its monitoring system to track the process by which research results are brought to attention of those able to act on the information and to determine the policy impacts of its social-protection research.

CONCLUSIONS

IFPRI’s research program on SP has provided relevant, high-quality, evidence-based research on a wide range of topics broadly related to social protection and contributed greatly to the body of knowledge and global public goods regarding social protection and safety nets generally, and particularly of CCTs. There is also convincing evidence that the SP research program had influence within a number of developing countries and development assistance agencies in improving the design of their SP programs, and contributed to an “evaluation culture” in several countries in the development of social-protection policies and programming. The impact of future SP research could be strengthened by giving more attention to capacity building and partnerships within countries, by exploring more systematically the role of qualitative and mixed methods for SP evaluation. A clear indicator of the success of IFPRI’s SP research program is that many stakeholders expressed a true desire to see IFPRI’s researchers reach out to become even more engaged in high-level dialogues driving the global social-protection agenda.

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