



Balancing Protection and Self-Reliance: Safety Net Programs and Community Dependency Risks in North Gondar Zone Administration

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Executive Summary

The implementation of the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in North Gondar Zone has generated mixed views among scholars and community members. While the program plays a significant role in protecting vulnerable households from chronic food insecurity and livelihood shocks, the findings reveal emerging dependency risks among both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Using a mixed research approach, data were collected from 392 randomly selected respondents. The study found that PSNP participation has, in some cases, become a social factor influencing household behavior and marriage decisions. Some beneficiaries reportedly reduce productive efforts to maintain eligibility, while others fail to use the program as a stepping stone out of poverty. A large majority (89.9%) of respondents indicated that beneficiaries are not creating sustainable wealth and livelihoods as often claimed by government officials. Graduation from the program frequently appears temporary, with many households relapsing into dependence. The absence of complementary development interventions and limited transparency in beneficiary selection further undermine the program's effectiveness. Based on these findings, the study recommends; (1) PSNP should promote self-reliance among beneficiaries as its name implies by minimizing its more engagement in short term supports; (2) integrating transfers with

sustainable livelihood activities such as irrigation, livestock rearing, poultry production, weaving, and other income-generating schemes; (3) establishing confidential grievance mechanisms to address targeting errors; (4) creating incentives for beneficiaries who improve their livelihoods through personal initiative; (5) introducing post-graduation follow-up systems; (6) strengthening community-based targeting; (7) enforcing accountability measures to ensure development support is used for productive purposes.

Keywords: Balancing Protection, Self-Reliance, Safety Net Programs, Community Dependency Risks, North Gondar Zone

1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, the government, in partnership with international organizations, aid donors, and civil society, sought to shift from reactive emergency food aid to a longer-term solution through the National Food Security Program (FSP). At the core of this strategy is the Safety Net Program (SNP), formally launched in 2005 (Abay, K. A., et al, 2022). This initiative focuses on addressing chronic food insecurity while also strengthening resilience to shocks. It reaches more than 20 million people two-thirds women and children through food, nutrition, water, healthcare, and protection services (Sabates et al, 2022). The Ethiopian safety net program, the largest of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa, combines direct food and cash transfers with complementary support such as literacy training, business advice, and livelihood linkages (Wondim, 2018). However, its implementation has faced obstacles, including political interference and deviation from its intended objectives (Tadesse, T., & Gebremedhin Zeleke, T. (2022). North Gondar Zone in Amhara Region is one of the areas where safety net programs have been widely implemented to address livelihood insecurity (Preliminary interview, 2015). Chronic vulnerability in the area is driven by land degradation, overgrazing, declining productivity, displacement by conflict, war, and natural disasters such as drought and floods (Shafiq, 2019; Limenih & Kassa, 2014).

2. Problem statement

Despite its achievements, the safety net program has been criticized. One concern is that it creates a “**moral hazard**”, where individuals reduce their own efforts wrongly perceiving the social support forever continues (Sadoulet et al., 2001). Critics argue that safety nets encourage **dependency** among beneficiaries, undermining beneficiaries’ motivation to achieve self-

sufficiency (World Bank, 2013). In North Gondar Zone, households receive safety nets through two main channels; direct support (DS) and public works (PW). The core function is to provide predictable transfers such as cash, food, or both to chronically food-insecure households (Devereux et al., 2008; MOA, 2014). However, persistent reliance on such transfers raises the question on whether safety nets are inadvertently creating a cycle of dependency, where recipients are less motivated to seek alternative livelihood sustenance, impacted on the psychology of other members of the community interested just to qualify for inclusion in the program interested us to conduct this study or the program's support really help beneficiaries create wealth and independence.

3. Evidence and analysis

Based on my evidence and analysis, while the safety net program's intervention plays short term protective role, it generate unintended negative effects on beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. The safety net becomes a criterion for marriage, social relation, and base of livelihood. I also admit that limited local capacity lead to weak monitoring, delayed payments, or corruption risks (supports flow to channels). I demonstrated that youth growing up in prolonged beneficiary normalize reliance than entrepreneurship. I conclude that safety net programs possibly decline in self-esteem or autonomy when assistance is prolonged without clear graduation pathways. No evidence showing development initiatives launched just to support the livelihoods of safety net beneficiaries in a sustainable manner as far as my field visits in different Woreda's concerned. Finally, there is no graduated safety net beneficiary indeed creates wealth and ever supporting its own livelihood. Inclusion and exclusion into the safety net program is made by local government bodies without consulting the wider community.

4. Key policy implementation options

- Shift the program's approach from protection-only to protection-plus-productivity: The program should evolve from **short-term** consumption support toward structured economic graduation pathways that promote self-reliance.
- Strengthen pragmatic graduation and exit strategies: post-graduation follow-up mechanisms reduce the safety net risks of becoming a permanent support system.

- Improve targeting and reduce strategic inclusion behavior: Strengthening community-based targeting, periodic reassessment, and transparency mechanisms is essential to reduce inclusion errors and prevent perverse incentives.
- Social transfers must be directly integrated with sustainable livelihood and development initiatives (small-scale farming, irrigation projects, cattle rearing, poultry production, weaving).
- Enhance community-led targeting to reduce inclusion & exclusion errors
- Recognize & incentivize safety net beneficiary's progress toward self-sufficiency by their own efforts.
- Provide supports that enable beneficiaries to achieve self-reliance within a specified period of time (skills, capacities, and access to sustainable livelihood opportunities).

5. Key policy recommendation

- **Employment-Centered Social Protection and Rural Enterprise Promotion:** This policy option focuses on transforming safety net programs into employment-generating and enterprise-supporting mechanisms that stimulate local economic participation and self-employment opportunities. The policy proposes linking beneficiaries with labor-intensive public works projects that create durable productive assets while simultaneously generating temporary employment opportunities. Public works activities would focus on irrigation infrastructure, rural roads, market centers, environmental rehabilitation, and community development projects that improve local economic productivity.
- **Climate-Resilient and Shock-Responsive Safety Net System:** This policy option aims to reduce chronic dependency by addressing the underlying environmental and climatic vulnerabilities that repeatedly push households into food insecurity and poverty. Since many households in North Gondar Zone are highly exposed to drought, land degradation, and agricultural shocks, the safety net system should become more climate-resilient and adaptive.
- **Human Capital Development and Behavioral Change Approach:** This policy option emphasizes strengthening human capital development and transforming dependency-oriented attitudes through education, skills training, and behavioral change interventions. The policy recognizes that sustainable graduation from safety net dependence requires not only economic support but also knowledge, skills, and social empowerment.

- **Integrated Rural Transformation and Poverty Reduction Strategy:** This policy option views safety net programs as part of a broader rural transformation and structural poverty reduction agenda rather than isolated welfare interventions. The policy seeks to address the root causes of chronic poverty and dependency through coordinated long-term development planning.
- **Social Accountability and Anti-Dependency Governance Reform:** This policy option emphasizes strengthening accountability systems and institutional reforms to minimize misuse, corruption, favoritism, and dependency incentives within safety net programs. The policy proposes transparent beneficiary selection criteria, regular audits, participatory monitoring systems, and independent oversight committees at Kebele and woreda levels. Public disclosure of beneficiary lists and periodic reassessment of eligibility would reduce strategic inclusion behavior and strengthen community trust.

6. Implementation consideration

6.1. Employment-Centered Social Protection and Rural Enterprise Promotion

Implementation of this policy requires integrating safety net programs with local labor markets and rural enterprise systems.

- **Institutional coordination:** Establish a joint implementation committee involving woreda administrations, agriculture offices, cooperatives agencies, and local NGOs to align public works with local development priorities.
- **Labor-intensive public works design:** Prioritize projects such as irrigation schemes, feeder roads, watershed management, rural marketplaces, and soil conservation structures. Project selection should be based on participatory community planning.
- **Wage and productivity linkage:** Introduce a dual benefit system where participants receive short-term wages while building productive assets that generate long-term community income.
- **Enterprise linkage:** Connect beneficiaries graduating from public works with microfinance institutions, cooperative formations, and vocational training centers to facilitate self-employment.
- **Monitoring mechanism:** Use performance indicators such as asset quality, employment days created, and post-program income changes to assess effectiveness.

6.2. Climate-Resilient and Shock-Responsive Safety Net System

Implementation focuses on building adaptive capacity into existing safety net structures.

- **Early warning systems:** Strengthen meteorological and agricultural monitoring systems to trigger early interventions before crises escalate.
- **Scalable assistance model:** Design flexible transfer mechanisms that can increase support during droughts, floods, or price shocks and scale down during stable periods.
- **Climate-smart public works:** Prioritize environmental rehabilitation such as reforestation, terracing, and water harvesting structures.
- **Risk mapping:** Conduct regular vulnerability assessments at kebele level to identify households most exposed to climate risks.
- **Integration with climate policy:** Align safety net interventions with national climate adaptation strategies and environmental protection programs.

6.3. Human Capital Development and Behavioral Change Approach

This policy requires long-term investment in education, skills, and mindset transformation.

- **Skills training programs:** Introduce vocational training in agriculture, small business management, carpentry, and agro-processing alongside safety net participation.
- **Adult education initiatives:** Implement literacy and numeracy programs targeting long-term beneficiaries.
- **Behavioral change campaigns:** Use community dialogue, local leaders, and extension workers to encourage savings culture, productivity, and reduced dependency attitudes.
- **Youth empowerment programs:** Focus on youth in safety net households through entrepreneurship incubators and apprenticeship schemes.
- **Incentive structures:** Provide graduation bonuses or asset transfers for households completing training and achieving self-reliance benchmarks.

6.4. Integrated Rural Transformation and Poverty Reduction Strategy

Implementation requires multi-sectorial coordination and long-term planning.

- **Cross-sector coordination:** Align safety net programs with agriculture, education, health, infrastructure, and finance sectors under a unified rural development framework.

- **Area-based planning:** Develop integrated development plans at woreda level that combine infrastructure, productivity, and social protection goals.
- **Value chain development:** Support farmers to move from subsistence to market-oriented production through cooperatives and agro-processing linkages.
- **Infrastructure investment synergy:** Ensure roads, irrigation, and market centers created through safety nets feed into broader economic development plans.
- **Long-term financing mechanisms:** Mobilize government budgets, donor funding, and public-private partnerships for sustained rural transformation.

6.5. Social Accountability and Anti-Dependency Governance Reform

This policy strengthens transparency, fairness, and institutional integrity.

- **Transparent beneficiary targeting:** Publish beneficiary lists at Kebele level and allow community verification and grievance reporting.
- **Regular audits:** Conduct periodic financial and performance audits of safety net programs at woreda and regional levels.
- **Community monitoring committees:** Establish elected local oversight groups including elders, women, and youth representatives.
- **Digital registry systems:** Introduce digitized beneficiary databases to reduce duplication and manipulation.
- **Eligibility reassessment:** Implement annual or biannual reassessment of beneficiaries help ensure only eligible households remain in the program.
- **Whistleblower protection:** Create safe reporting channels for corruption or favoritism cases within program implementation.

7. Conclusion

The Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in North Gondar Zone continues to play an important role in protecting vulnerable households from chronic food insecurity and livelihood shocks. However, the findings indicate that prolonged dependence on program support, weak graduation mechanisms, limited livelihood opportunities, and challenges in beneficiary targeting have constrained the achievement of sustainable self-reliance among beneficiaries. To ensure that social protection contributes to long-term poverty reduction, the program should move

beyond temporary consumption support and promote productive livelihoods, skills development, climate resilience, and governance accountability. Integrating safety net assistance with income-generating activities, strengthening graduation pathways, and improving transparency in beneficiary selection can help transform the program into a catalyst for sustainable economic empowerment.

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