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**“Social Protection and Safety Nets
for the Most Vulnerable in a Time of Crisis”**

General Assembly resolution 68/208, the “triennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system” recognized the complex challenges to the universal achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and requested the organizations of the United Nations development system to strengthen interdepartmental and inter-agency coordination in order to ensure an integrated, coherent and coordinated approach to assistance at the country level, which takes account of the complexity of challenges that countries in those circumstances face and the country-specific character of those challenges

It could not be more relevant in this time of crisis to talk about social protection and safety nets for the most vulnerable people. The current global economic crisis continues to produce dramatic social and economic hardships. Under such crisis conditions, social safety nets can potentially curtail the depth of those hardships. We in the international community should and can complement and strengthen national social protection systems that help vulnerable populations cope with the crisis, and improve their prospects for quick recovery from its effects.

Social Protection and Safety Nets – General Issues

Social protection refers to systems of institutionalized policies and programs that protect vulnerable people against shocks and promote their livelihoods and welfare by enhancing their resilience. By definition, these systems are nationally owned, although they can be supported by partners.

Safety nets are a sub-set of social protection systems. Safety nets mostly include conditional or unconditional transfers of cash, vouchers or goods such as food, as well as other interventions to improve access to food and basic essentials for healthy and productive lives. Safety nets are not a new concept, but their importance has grown considerably in recent years.

The implementation of safety nets has been a key recommendation for mitigating the effects of the food, fuel and financial crises. WFP and others have significantly developed their expertise, diversifying and targeting to achieve results. In 2008 and 2009, WFP scaled up its direct response to high food prices and market volatility, including through new projects, to support 31 million people in 26 countries. This was perhaps the largest scaling up in human history, reaching over 100 million people, and mobilizing over

US\$ 5.1 billion. This included scaling up food assistance to fill gaps in existing social or other livelihood protection programmes, including nascent safety net programmes, where access to food is difficult or unaffordable and there is risk of persistent social disruption. WFP also rapidly scaled up school feeding programmes, enabling children to stay in school, increasing their food security during a critical period, and quickly resulting in increased school enrolments.

Many shocks and risks to vulnerability are predictable, and thus can potentially be prevented and mitigated. This calls for comprehensive national and household risk management strategies, as opposed to relying only on *ex-post facto* coping responses. For example, such an approach has triggered the shift from annual relief to multi-annual predictable support under the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia, and through the Hunger Safety Net Programme in Kenya. The Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia delivers cash and food transfers to almost 8.3 million Ethiopian beneficiaries, an excellent example of an effective social protection scheme.

Predictable and counter-cyclical safety nets, put in place **before** crises, are key to enhancing risk management, and decreasing the need for relief assistance. Recent evidence shows that safety nets can be an integral component of inclusive growth strategies. Safety nets can foster growth in a number of ways, including protecting and accumulating human capital, encouraging risk-taking initiatives, addressing some market failures, and reducing inequality.

With support from the World Bank, the United Kingdom Department for International Development and other donors, a number of countries (e.g. Egypt, Mozambique and Malawi) are reviewing their national safety net programs, aiming to improve their effectiveness and efficiency, and to increase their coverage. Reform activities include rationalizing, appraising, re-targeting, costing alternative policy packages, and enhancing the coordination of partners and programs.

WFP is deploying a range of targeted food assistance measures across the globe, typically as crucial components of national social protection systems, while countries strive to cope with the effects of the unfolding global economic crisis. These measures include ramped up food assistance to urban areas where food is unaffordable; extended school feeding to children (through school holidays) and using schools as platforms to provide take-

home rations to vulnerable families; provision of supplementary rations of nutritious food to malnourished children and women; and cash and voucher programmes to enable people to access food through the market.

In Burkina Faso, for example, in response to the high food prices WFP launched its first food voucher operation in Africa, deploying a new tool to address hunger in an urban environment where food is available, targeting 120,000 people for six months. Under this programme, family members are given a voucher worth 1,500 francs CFA (US\$3), which they can use in shops that have signed a contract with WFP. In 2008, school feeding projects were expanded to an additional 7.4 million beneficiaries (children and their family members) in 13 countries, with the largest activities being carried out in Bangladesh, Haiti, Pakistan, Philippines, Senegal and Tajikistan.

Through the Purchase for Progress initiative (P4P), WFP is integrating its purchasing power in developing countries with supply-side contributions from other actors (including FAO and IFAD) to connect low-income farmers to markets and thereby improve their incentives to pursue productivity-enhancing practices. International assistance can support governments' capacities to gradually transition toward nationally-owned and funded safety nets systems.

Safety Nets and the UN Funds and Programmes

UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP, working with a range of other partners, are strongly committed to social protection and safety nets aimed at the vulnerable populations they assist governments to serve. At country level, UN Country Teams work together to support strengthening of national systems under the principles of national ownership and leadership.

UNDP has been responding to requests from programme countries for support in analyzing the impact of the crisis; designing policy responses – including on how to protect the most vulnerable; and facilitating resource mobilization. UNDP's support to countries takes MDG achievement and poverty reduction as the central policy concern. As such, UNDP supports the formulation of poverty reduction strategies, including PRSPs to help countries pursue national MDG targets. This involves support to linking poverty reduction strategies to: (a) economic policies for pro-poor growth; (b) budgeting, including expenditures and taxation; (c) national employment strategies; and (d) poverty-focused social security, including safety nets.

UNICEF and UNFPA focus on realizing the rights of women and children in poor families to survival, development and protection, and on enhancing universal access to reproductive health and rights of women; UNDP contributes to overall poverty reduction; WFP contributes to reducing hunger and its links to poverty.

UNFPA works with partners towards strengthening health systems (social institutions) and ensuring universal access to reproductive health, contributing to social cohesion and stability. Because it is a major indicator of inequality within and between countries, UNFPA works with governments to improve maternal health and include MDG 5 in all government plans and budgets. It also builds capacity for gender-sensitive budgeting. UNFPA helps gather and analyze data for policy dialogue and programme development to target the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, including youth, migrants, the rural poor, and victims of trafficking and gender-based violence. Special attention is given to addressing the needs of excluded youth. UNFPA also promotes the sharing of good practices from countries that developed effective social insurance schemes targeting the poor and safety nets, as in Rwanda, Ghana and Nepal.

UNICEF promotes child sensitive social protection as an evidence-based approach with a particular focus on nutrition security and essential support for vulnerable populations. Nutrition security implies more than just access to adequate food: it requires access to appropriate micronutrients, safe water, hygiene and sanitation, access to quality health-care services, and improved household and community practices in child care, food hygiene and environmental health. If designed and implemented properly, social protection measures, such as cash and in-kind transfers, fee waivers, services and supports for high-risk or vulnerable groups yield and reinforce gains in child nutrition, health, safety and education. They can remove current or structural barriers to access nutrition, medicines, water and other basic social services; reduce gender disparities and smooth consumption patterns over the life-cycle; promote supportive environments for children. As such, they are instrumental in sustaining progress towards the Internationally Agreed Development Goals and MDGs in the backdrop of multiple economic shocks and instability of food prices, and climate change.

WFP's Safety Nets Policy sets out how WFP's food-based safety nets can facilitate timely responses in shock-prone areas and reduce the need for repeated emergency appeals for recurrent crises. Safety nets complement

other interventions by ensuring that systems are in place to safeguard livelihoods in the event of shocks. When food assistance is integrated into national social protection strategies, the safety nets help to prevent duplication, promote efficiency and effectiveness, and support governments to develop sustainable food-assistance systems. A major goal for WFP is to promote stability and predictability of such national systems, thereby improving incentives for household-level investments that strengthen the capacity of the hungry poor to cope with risk.

In all of these efforts, we are working together in partnerships with governments, our sister agencies, communities and others.

Emerging Insights, Lessons and Challenges

Our collective experience and analysis suggest that safety nets programming within social protection systems should be tailored to meet context-specific challenges and constraints. There is no “one-size-fits-all” model. Rather, it is important to support national institutional, political, technical and financial capacity to introduce or expand safety nets.

Accounting for countries’ capacities has clear implications for the programming and performance of different safety nets in diverse contexts, in terms of appropriateness, effectiveness to reach a given objective (impact), and the efficiency (costs) to pursue it. While the evidence on safety nets in middle and some low-income countries is growing, the challenge often centers on how to make those lessons relevant to fragile states and other low-income countries with limited capacities. This is the most important challenge facing policy makers and practitioners seeking to design and implement safety net interventions at this crucial moment in human history.

We would identify four classes of challenges that must be confronted going forward. First, there are challenges linked to political commitment. Second, there are those linked to technical and conceptual hurdles. Third, there may be operational and procedural impediments. There may also be capacity constraints, including at the country level.

Political commitment to institutionalized social protection appears to be growing overall, but unevenly. Differences stem from combinations of the three other hurdles. In some cases (e.g., in highly fragile environments), technical and conceptual hurdles are paramount. In other cases, the central challenges are operational and procedural, as national agencies struggle to

overcome cross-sectoral barriers to coordination and information sharing. Across the board, the heavy financial commitments associated with safety net programs erect major political challenges.

Despite these several obstacles, we remain committed to the goal of enhanced protection of vulnerable groups. We will continue to deepen our overall understanding of the requirements of efficient and effective safety net interventions in different contexts. We will redouble our efforts to identify sustainable financial and organizational models for safety nets at global, regional, and country levels. Finally, and most important, we will continue to support national efforts to protect and promote livelihoods, and to find ways that we, as UNDG members, can - individually and collectively - support those efforts to ensure an environment conducive to achieving international commitments to development goals.