

# Social protection response to COVID-19 in rural LAC: social and economic double inclusion

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**In partnership with the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO-RLC),** the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) published three policy briefs on lessons learned from the social protection response to the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) to build social protection systems back better for rural populations.

The first policy brief in the series examines how social protection can ensure food security and social and economic 'double inclusion', and identifies good practices in LAC's rural social protection response during the pandemic. For this assessment, interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders of four programmes selected as good practices in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on food insecurity and poverty in LAC, which were already high in rural areas, and accentuated vulnerabilities of rural populations. Despite being fundamental for LAC's food security, rural populations are a traditionally marginalised social sector and one of the groups most exposed to some of the risks imposed by the pandemic. They face aggravated vulnerabilities caused by a lack of access to public services; a high level of informal, casual and seasonal employment, mostly in the agricultural sector; and a lack of access to social protection, particularly contributory schemes; among others.

LAC's social protection response to the COVID-19 pandemic addressed food insecurity by focusing primarily on food demand: 99 of the 413 responses mapped in the study related to cash transfers, and 62 to in-kind transfers. Only 10 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively, of these transfers explicitly targeted rural populations. In terms of food supply, only seven interventions focused on farmers or on food production, suggesting scarce attention to rural producers during the pandemic.

Four social protection programmes were identified as good practices addressing food security through social and economic 'double inclusion'—namely: Argentina's Critical and Direct Assistance Programme for Family, Peasant and Indigenous Agriculture (PACyD), Belize's Contingency Emergency Response Component (CERC), Mexico's *Bienpesca* and Panama's *Plan Panamá Agro Solidario*. All measures were led by the countries' respective Ministry of Agriculture, highlighting its role in social protection for rural communities.

Argentina's PACyD was created and implemented during the pandemic to become a permanent emergency response programme. It provides financial or productive inputs to family farmers. This may promote their economic inclusion by maintaining their food production and their income and livelihood strategies during shocks. It also supports their social inclusion through the involvement of farmers' associations in programme design and its integration with other social protection and economic inclusion programmes through the National Family Agriculture Registry (RENAF).

Belize's CERC is the emergency component of the Climate Resilient Infrastructure Project (CRIP), funded by the World Bank. During the crisis,

the ministries responsible for agriculture and social protection implemented a Cash+ intervention (CERC) and an emergency cash transfer, the Belize COVID-19 Cash Transfer Program (BCCAT). The combination of benefits and the engagement of these two ministries contributed to promote double inclusion.

Mexico's *Bienpesca* is one of the few social protection programmes in LAC that targets fishers. During the pandemic, it quadrupled its cash transfer coverage in comparison to 2019. It may contribute to double inclusion by being tailored to the specific characteristics of fishers' livelihoods in its design, while protecting fishers' incomes when they are unable to work. This may support fishers to invest in their well-being and productivity. *Bienpesca* can also promote fishers' financial inclusion through its distribution of bank cards.

The *Plan Panamá Agro Solidario* was implemented during COVID-19 to protect farmers from its socio-economic impacts. It comprises two programmes: the *Programa Agro Solidario*, offering credit to small and medium-sized producers; and the *Agro Vida*, offering productive inputs to family farmers. Further, its links with the *Plan Colmena*, Panama's strategy for delivering social services to poor rural populations, may promote their social inclusion.

The four case studies relied on pre-existing shock-response mechanisms or social protection programmes, used existing registries and received support from farmers' or fishers' associations and other non-state actors. This helped to build the basis for coordination between social protection and agriculture. However, the programmes faced challenges such as simultaneous climate-related shocks, barriers to social protection due to informality or limited data access, and a lack of access to digital technology or resources necessary for implementation or benefit delivery.

## How can we build back better?

- Integrate social protection better with the agriculture sector. This includes strengthening national social registries and their synergies with productive registries.
- Enhance programmes' potential for rural double inclusion by providing different types of benefits within the same programme and including the Ministry of Agriculture in the implementation of social protection programmes, and line ministries responsible for social protection in agricultural programmes.
- Adapt current social protection systems to rural realities, considering the legal, financial, administrative and institutional barriers to access in their design, with a gender-sensitive and intercultural approach.

## Reference:

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