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## SOCIAL PROTECTION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO MIGRATION?

An assessment of the role of social protection in reducing  
push factors for migration in different country contexts

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push factors for migration in different country contexts

GVG Gesellschaft für Versicherungswissenschaft  
und -gestaltung e.V. (Hrsg.)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (EN)

This study aims to highlight the significance of social protection for migration policies and research. It recommends a shift of focus from short-term measures – such as border controls and stricter immigration rules – to comprehensive long-term strategies on migration. The study was jointly conducted by the *Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg*, University of Applied Sciences, and the *Institute for Political Science and Sociology* at the University of Bonn. The *Deutsche Gesetzliche Unfallversicherung e.V. (DGUV)* both funded and contributed to the study, and the *GVG Gesellschaft für Versicherungswissenschaft und -gestaltung e.V.* provided further input and has been responsible for its publication and distribution.

The study reviews the concept of social protection and its potential to influence migration and refugee flows. Evidence indicates that social protection can facilitate as well as impede migration, and the extent to which it influences migration decisions largely depends on the conditions and the predominant motives for emigration and flight in the countries of origin. How social protection systems are designed and how well they are implemented in countries of origin determines and differentiates the effect it can have on the decision to migrate. The adequacy, frequency and reliability of benefits influences, whether individuals and households consider migration amongst other options.

To take full account of the relevance of contexts, four countries were selected for in-depth analysis: Albania, Iraq, Nigeria and Pakistan. If the German government were to direct its attention to social protection in these countries, it would make a significant contribution to reducing (future) migration pressures. Measures where German support could be particularly effective in this respect include the institutional reform of social protection systems, enhancing the accountability and reliability of social services, expanding social protection coverage and improving

targeting mechanisms, especially in countries with high levels of poverty and corruption. Migrants who consider returning to their home countries have a much greater likelihood to go back if a functional social protection system is in place and the portability of social security benefits is secured.

The study concludes that social protection needs to be recognized as a stand-alone sector that brings about sustainable long-term development and has great potential for counteracting the causes of flight and migration. Therefore, social protection should be strategically integrated into development policies, as a main component of interventions. Today, this is too seldom the case. Moreover, those interventions which do include social protection in fragile contexts focus predominantly on short term measures. The study therefore calls for approaches to migration which combine short-, medium- and long-term strategies. Other policy recommendations presented include increasing social expenditure and investment in social protection, improving financial assistance and reintegration support for migrants wishing to return, and concerted efforts by all countries to reduce migration pressure and to fight the causes of flight.

## **A conceptual framework for social protection and migration**

The study presents a conceptual framework for the link between social protection and migration. Its main argument in favor of social protection goes beyond social protection's established effect of reducing poverty and inequality by pointing out its direct and indirect impact on the factors which push migration. Social protection can have direct effects on either impeding or facilitating migration by increasing household income, reducing poverty and increasing individual's capacity to cope with life-cycle risks. Ensuring basic living standards and providing perspectives in the country of origin can prevent emigration under conditions that the study outlines.

Indirect effects of social protection, in contrast enable households to manage future risks, accrue savings and plan future investments. Reliable and continuous delivery of social protection benefits has the added

advantage of strengthening ties between citizens and the state. Hence, social protection with a high degree of accessibility and quality can build and/or restore trust in public institutions. It prevents the emergence of structural tensions which threaten social concord and it has a positive effect on state-citizen relations. Thus the indirect effects of social protection also serve to neutralize the causes of emigration and flight.

The adequacy and reliability of social protection schemes in the countries of origin play an important role. In many cases, the minimum benefit level fails to “provide beneficiaries with the means to a life in dignity” (ILO, 2012); in others, transfers are unreliable or unpunctual. This creates mistrust in state and government officials and can end up boosting emigration. The access to social services, social protection coverage and related state expenditures are closely linked to emigration rates as well. The study shows that the lack of access to decent healthcare services or of fair employment conditions can nudge potential migrants towards leaving their country. Moreover the capacities of a state including its physical and financial infrastructure as well as external shocks like droughts or floods, influence the efficiency and quality of social protection programs and hence the migration decisions of the population. However, there are cases where these effects do not apply. For example, employees holding decent jobs in their countries of origin are usually more likely to find a decent workplace abroad.

Yet evidence demonstrates that social protection has a significant impact not only on those factors which determine the decision to emigrate but also on those which affect the decision to return. Again, the impact is associated with the design, quality and accessibility of social protection and with the portability of social transfers. There is, however, no generally accepted understanding of when or how social protection either fosters or prevents migration, and this explains the need to examine the linkage contextually.

## Case Studies

The study empirically examines the interplay of social protection and various causes of migration and flight. It assesses how social protection can both influence individual decisions to migrate and to return to their countries of origin. The study focuses on four countries, Albania, Iraq, Nigeria, and Pakistan, which represent the range of structural differences underlying the causes of flight and migration to Germany.

### *Albania*

The number of Albanian asylum seekers in Germany reached its peak during the 2015 refugee crisis, but has since drastically decreased due to low acceptance rates. High youth unemployment and poverty are the primary factors driving emigration. Other important causes are economic concerns as well as the persecution of, and discrimination against, minorities (especially Sinti and Roma). Social protection coverage in Albania is among the lowest in Europe, with significant gaps in the fields of education, housing, and social assistance. Access to social benefits is severely impeded by corruption, which has led to immense distrust of public institutions. The failure of social protection systems to cover the poorest citizens hinders social and economic development, providing further motivation for migration. The study's suggests first steps should entail tackling corruption and promoting transparency by supporting institutional reform and enhancing accountability. These measures could extend from the involvement of civil society in political decision-making and the training of government employees. The Albanian social protection system should then focus on increasing coverage and benefit levels directed to vulnerable groups. Such measures would contribute to alleviating poverty and thus reduce incentives for emigration.

### *Iraq*

The main push factors for people leaving Iraq originate in the country's deteriorating social and political situation. Terrorist attacks and persecution in the context of religious and ethnic conflicts are the main factors driving Iraqis to flee. In such tense and fragile situations, social protection takes on

a more humanitarian role and is mostly needed to provide immediate access to basic services and maintain a minimum standard of living. Although social protection is a minor factor for migration decisions today, it is likely to lay the foundation for improving future living conditions by for example providing potential recruits of extremist groups with alternative perspectives.

### ***Nigeria***

Economic despondency, extreme poverty, malnutrition, infectious diseases and inequalities between the country's regions are push factors for migration in Nigeria. In the future, population growth will only reinforce these push factors, especially for the young, who represent a large proportion of the population. Social protection in Nigeria is characterized by a substantial lack of coverage, poor financing and administration, corruption, and consequently a lack of trust in government. Supporting economic growth, expanding social protection and providing financial assistance to deprived areas are first steps towards tackling these challenges and towards reducing migration pressures.

### ***Pakistan***

Many Pakistanis are threatened by extreme climate conditions and particularly religious minorities by persecution. These dangers constitute the major causes of migration and flight. Implementing social protection in Pakistan is challenging because the realization of such schemes lies in the responsibility of a variety of different stakeholders. Moreover, social protection is confined to Pakistanis who are formally employed. If social protection and its influence on migration are to be enhanced, priority must therefore be given to closing the social security gap by increasing coverage, including workers of the informal economy and tackling climate-related risks. In addition, the budgetary commitment for social protection as a total percentage of GDP needs to be raised and the capacities of all relevant stakeholders in the field of social protection expanded.

## Implications for migration policies in Germany

Within this international context, the study particularly highlights German strategies for combating the causes of flight and migration. Germany is of unique interest due to the high proportion of migrants in the country's population and the large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in the last three years. To reduce migration pressure, Germany has implemented special initiatives to fight hunger, poverty and destabilization. In addition, Germany provides bilateral support in dealing with migrants and refugees both to countries of origin and countries of destination through measures at the political, economic and military levels.

Although social protection is an important instrument at the domestic level, it plays only a minor role in German development policy. Nevertheless, Germany has made some efforts to assist countries with a systematic approach to implementing social protection for vulnerable groups. These measures have been promoted through policy dialogue, technical assistance, financial support, professional consultancy and training. However, only a few bilateral programs and partner countries have included social protection as a significant component.

Overall, social protection is not regarded as an independent field within the development sector and as such is mostly included as a subordinate topic within broader frameworks and programs of economic development, good governance, health and rural development. Under these circumstances, its promising function and potential as a beneficial and sustainable element of development policy is not yet fully acknowledged.

To more prominently place and position the role of social protection in German development policy, the study sheds light on how social protection is linked to the field of migration. Currently, there are three governmental strategies for mitigating the causes of displacement and migration. The first strategy addresses both acute and structural causes of migration and flight through improved access to basic social services, education, and employment. For example, cash-for-work programs have been established

as part of this strategy. The second strategy aims to strengthen host communities in third countries and to provide immediate humanitarian aid without addressing long-term needs. The third strategy promotes the integration or reintegration of migrants and refugees, by supporting return options and giving migrants a future perspective in their home country (Bundesregierung, 2016).

Reviewing all three strategies, the study concludes that the focus up to now has been too often on short-term measures and single interventions and fails to strategically combine short-, medium- and long-term measures. The recent focus on cash-for-work programs may be deceiving, since it mainly fulfills short-, and medium-term needs, while only limited evidence exists on its long-term effects on sustainable employment and improved living conditions. Creating linkages between short-, medium- and long-term interventions is therefore essential to reduce poverty, enhance productivity and foster economic growth in the long run.

Since little research has been conducted in the field of return migration and reintegration, the study recommends the development of effective and evidence-based approaches to research in this field, with increased monitoring and evaluation.

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