POLICY BRIEF

How to Improve Social Assistance Delivery through Good Governance

Good governance practices can improve the beneficiary selection and targeting of social assistance programs. Photo. ADB.

To build a well-coordinated government assistance program, focus on communication and outreach, targeting, service delivery, and evaluation.

Introduction

While many countries in Asia have intensified their efforts to strengthen social assistance for supporting the poor and vulnerable population, there are a number of weaknesses in the governance of social protection in the region at the broader, system level as well as at the program level.

Governance in social protection is defined as "the set of incentives and accountability relationships that influence the way in which providers are held accountable for their behaviors and [their] ability to deliver services with quality and efficiency."

At the system level, bottlenecks pertain to the extent of coordination and linkages across social protection programs. For example, there are more than 90 food- and cash-based social assistance programs in Bangladesh. The 90 programs are administered by multiple agencies, including various

government ministries, nongovernmental organizations, international aid agencies, and bilateral donors, and coordination among these actors is ineffective. Bangladesh has at least 13 ministries engaged in delivering social protection services, and all of them administer their programs independently, without much coordination between them. Similarly, social protection programs in Pakistan are operated by various ministries and departments at the federal and provincial levels and there is a need to reduce overlaps and promote synergies between programs.

At the program level, governance challenges exist at the stages of the program cycle, including communication and outreach; targeting; benefit delivery, payment methods, monitoring, evaluation, and oversight; and grievance redress. These governance constraints are largely caused by inadequate design and implementation arrangements, along with weak institutional capacity. Poor people, for example, often have difficulty accessing their entitlements due to limited awareness; information opportunities are especially limited for women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups. Many poverty-targeted programs exhibit a high degree of exclusion and inclusion at the stage of beneficiary identification and selection. There are a number of factors that contribute to poor targeting, including hasty design and inadequate implementation, weak administrative capacity of implementing agencies, and ineffective channels for grievance redress and citizen participation.

Policy Options and Recommendations

At the system level, developing a well-coordinated and coherent social assistance programs is crucial. This necessitates setting coherent policy goals and coordinating programs in terms of their objectives, target groups, benefit levels, and administrative systems. The actual measures and avenues for promoting coordination depend on initial conditions and country-specific institutional shortcomings.

At the program level, it is important to establish and enforce context-specific institutional arrangements for good governance, including transparent and clearly defined rules and procedures for communication and outreach, targeting, service delivery, evaluation and oversight and grievance redress. Programs need to incorporate resources required to implement effective information dissemination and outreach and must contain indicators to allow policy makers to assess the effectiveness of outreach efforts to promote participation of women and socially excluded groups.

As for targeting, global evidence suggests that accurate poverty targeting is technically and operationally challenging, and programs are unlikely to achieve "perfect targeting." Designing feasible mechanisms for measuring and verifying income in countries with large number of poor and informal households is especially difficult. At the same time, carefully designed institutional arrangements and effective governance practices can reduce targeting errors. The capacity of line agencies to undertake appropriate monitoring and effective oversight can improve fairness in beneficiary selection. Program oversight, particularly through internal and external audits, periodic program reviews, and spot checks, can help promote quality of service delivery. Effective grievance redress and social monitoring can reduce likelihood of unfair selection and exclusion. As the Philippines example shows, grievance redress systems with a link to a computerized database can significantly enhance the effectiveness of the system in recording and tracking complaints.

Upholding good governance requires careful analysis, planning, design and implementation of social protection programs. Good governance in social protection also necessitates broader institutional improvements across the public sector to remove legal, administrative and socio-cultural barriers to people's ability to benefit from their entitlements.

Resources

Bassett, L., S. Gianozzi, L. Pop and D. Ringold. 2012. Roles, Rules and Controls. Governance in Social Protection with an Application to Social Assistance, Social Protection Discussion Paper No. 1206 , Washington, DC: World Bank, p. 6.

Related links

Social Protection and Social Exclusion: An Analytical Framework to Assess the Links

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