

Social Assistance for the Furthest Behind – What Works and How Across SDGs 1-5

A plain language brief based on the People Pillar synthesis of impact evaluations and UN-led process and performance evaluations supported by the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition. The full synthesis report was authored by the Center for Evaluation and Development.

10 key takeaways and their programming and policy implications

Key takeaway	Implication
What works	
Age-responsive vouchers and in-kind transfers improved outcomes across SDGs 1–5, with the strongest effects on food security and nutrition (SDG 2) and health (SDG 3). <ul style="list-style-type: none">In <i>Nigeria</i>, behavioural interventions engaging 8–10-year-old students through songs and aspirational role models increased acceptance and consumption of unfamiliar, nutrient-rich foods such as orange-fleshed sweet potato (rich in pro-vitamin A).In <i>Pakistan</i>, a low-cost multipurpose voucher model increased contraceptive use and improved child immunization status.	Age-responsive interventions are effective when embedded within well-designed delivery systems and complementary support mechanisms. Evidence suggests that age-responsive programming enables consistent improvements in child nutrition, education, and health outcomes, particularly in early and middle childhood. Effectiveness is contingent on programme design and context, with particular relevance in fragile or conflict-affected settings and with designs considering constraints that older children and adolescents face.
Disability-responsive vouchers and in-kind transfers showed positive evidence for poverty reduction (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), and health access (SDG 3). Evidence gaps remain for education (SDG 4) and gender equality (SDG 5). <ul style="list-style-type: none">In <i>China and India</i>, multi-component in-kind interventions such as combining training with accessibility improvements, employer engagement, or psychosocial support improved employment outcomes and household welfare among adults with disabilities.In rural <i>China</i>, a health voucher scheme increased eyeglasses uptake and use among children with myopia.In <i>Botswana</i>, food vouchers were successful in improving food security and raising BMIs for chronically ill individuals.	Disability-inclusive design requires intentional, multi-component approaches. Disability-responsive vouchers and in-kind transfers contribute to poverty reduction and improved health access for persons with disabilities when designed with inclusive, multi-component approaches. Strengthening disability-inclusive designs and disability-disaggregated evaluations are essential to close evidence gaps across SDGs 1-5.

What shapes performance

Integrated social assistance programmes outperformed stand-alone interventions. Transfers are most effective when paired with behaviour change communication, skills training, school-based services, or psychosocial support in addressing behavioural, informational, and structural barriers.

- In *Nepal*, combining school gardens with a complementary home-garden component for caregivers (knowledge and behaviour change) increased children's vegetable consumption compared to school gardens alone.
- In *Ethiopia*, adolescent girls receiving psychosocial support within a school-based nutrition education programme improved health and nutrition outcomes as well as enhanced emotional regulation and psycho-social behaviour.

Employment and income opportunities for vulnerable groups expanded through a combination of skills formation, capital, linkages to employment opportunities and support.

- In *Sierra Leone*, a comprehensive youth skills programme implemented during the Ebola crisis and combining technical and on-the-job training, a small capital transfer, and business coaching increased earnings, business viability, and consumption among urban youth.
- In *Tanzania*, adolescents from social assistance households who received livelihood and life-skills training, mentoring, productive grants, and improved access to health services showed significant increases in self-employment and livestock-related activities.

Integrating health, hygiene, and school-based feeding strengthens the impact of education interventions. Comparing school-based feeding programmes to general food distribution highlights the stronger role of the former in tackling education and health outcomes simultaneously.

- In *Cambodia*, combining school feeding with deworming increased school enrolment among children and adolescents.
- In *Kenya*, *Lebanon*, and *India*, integrating nutrition and health inputs – such as deworming, micronutrient supplementation, fortified school meals, specialized supplements, or nutrition education – produced stronger and more consistent improvements in educational achievement.

Multi-component programme design amplifies impact across multiple deprivations.

Programmes designed as multi-component packages address multiple deprivations simultaneously, ensuring that complementary activities are context-appropriate and aligned with household capacities. Embedding transfers within broader, integrated strategies helps to maximise their impact, aligns them to the needs of the target group, and supports longer-term gains in nutrition, education, health, and wellbeing.

Integrated skills and livelihood packages generate sustained employment and income gains.

Coordinated packages that blend training with capital and practical work opportunities are more likely to deliver stronger results when they pair vocational training with entrepreneurship or financial literacy training, access to capital, and linkages to employers or mentors. These elements enable participants to apply skills and overcome liquidity constraints. Inclusive approaches such as accessible infrastructure for people with disabilities and targeted support for youth with differing capacities further strengthen results.

Combining school meals with deworming, micronutrient supplementation, and parental engagement addresses health barriers and reduces schooling costs, strengthening both attendance and learning.

Early introduction and multi-year continuity deliver strong cognitive and educational gains, pointing to the value of predictable, long-term investments in school-based health and nutrition services.

School-linked transfers generate stronger educational outcomes compared to general food distribution.

School-linked transfers help prevent the diversion of children's time toward labour and improve attendance, particularly in fragile settings.

Key takeaway

Vouchers and in-kind transfers mitigate structural, economic, and individual barriers when designed to offset transport costs, reduce time burdens, or simplify access to health, education, and employment opportunities. These modalities address mobility constraints, restrictive norms, and information gaps, particularly for women, adolescents, and persons with disabilities.

- In *Uganda*, transport and service vouchers effectively relaxed transportation and health service access constraints and led to improvements in sexual and reproductive health outcomes.
- Food and health vouchers in *Botswana* and *rural China*, respectively, improved access to essential health and nutrition services for vulnerable and disabled groups through reduced direct financial and logistical barriers but also simplified decision-making in low-information environments.

Limited resources, including funding gaps, procurement challenges, and infrastructure deficits consistently weakened programme effectiveness and sustainability, with the greatest challenges seen in conflict-affected settings.

- In *Senegal*, a school feeding programme found that limited and poorly structured funding reduced its scale and impact, with some planned activities never starting and fewer beneficiaries reached.
- In *Mozambique*, funding shortfalls did more than limit scale: they blocked the integration of gender-transformative approaches, making resource gaps a barrier to both inclusion and effectiveness.
- In *Liberia*, school feeding results were weakened not only by funding constraints, but by infrastructure problems such as storerooms being too far from schools or too small to store food properly.

Implication

Context-specific voucher and in-kind transfer designs strengthen access and equity in social assistance. Vouchers and in-kind transfers reduce structural, economic, and individual barriers that limit participation and access in essential services and programmes. Aligning voucher and in-kind designs with context-specific barriers such as transport costs, mobility constraints, and caregiving demands enhances the effectiveness and inclusiveness of broader social assistance and human development efforts. Such programmes strengthen equity and reach by incorporating transport or service vouchers, tailoring delivery to local realities, and integrating enabling features such as flexible scheduling or childcare.

Predictable, sufficient, and well-timed resources are a precondition for effective and sustainable programming. Beyond securing adequate financing, attention to the timely availability of quality inputs and fit-for-purpose infrastructure make a meaningful difference to results. Building flexibility into resource planning helps programmes to absorb shocks and maintain continuity, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where volatility is greatest. If monitoring systems are designed to detect resource bottlenecks early, implementers will be better positioned to make timely adjustments during implementation.

Who is reached and who is left out

Although social assistance programmes aimed to be inclusive, research was missing on differentiated programme effects and on what promotes and hinders inclusion

- Only two UN process and performance evaluations examined intra-household dynamics affecting women's access to programmes, with one finding that intra-household food distribution was inequitable due to women's limited decision-making.
- Among evaluations examining feedback mechanisms, none assessed their accessibility for persons with disabilities, the elderly, or children.

Despite strong stated commitments to inclusion, the evidence base on who benefits and who is left behind remains thin. Investing more systematically in vulnerable group-specific needs assessments, targeted indicators, and accessible feedback mechanisms helps programmes identify barriers and track differentiated outcomes more effectively. Actively involving marginalized groups and their representative organisations in programme design and implementation helps translate inclusion commitments into practice. Strengthening staff capacities to recognise and respond to group-specific needs and barriers further supports this.

What changes at system level

System strengthening is a prominent feature of UN social assistance projects and country programmes, with multi-layered, tangible achievements. However, programmes and evaluations frequently overlook issues of long-term sustainability.

- In *Equatorial Guinea*, the UN Country Team supported the design of a Single Social Registry digital application to collect data on vulnerable individuals and families.

Effective programme implementation and system-level change is possible but highly dependent on political stability and governmental capacity.

- In *Nepal*, the full institutionalisation of a national food security monitoring system was put in question by insufficient awareness and commitment at the subnational level.
- In *Sudan*, elections and coups d'état prompted donors to temporarily suspend collaboration with the government, disrupting implementation and undermining the sustainability of results.
- In *Rwanda*, insecurity around a school feeding programme restricted women's access to project locations disproportionately.
- More broadly, the COVID-19 pandemic required significant project adjustments and caused implementation delays across programmes in multiple country contexts.

System-level sustainability represents a blind spot in how both programmes and evaluations currently approach system strengthening. Claims of systemic change without examining post-programme outcomes risks overestimating durability. Building sustainability assessments into evaluation frameworks and addressing risks such as staff turnover or dependency on programme-generated data increases the likelihood that system-level gains will endure beyond the programme cycle.

System strengthening in fragile settings requires intentional government ownership, context-tailored strategies, and adaptive management. Context fragility constrains prospects for system-level change. Programmes may still achieve tangible results if they invest additional effort in strengthening sustainable government ownership and successfully navigate complex local contexts. Building and sustaining government ownership, for example through participatory approaches and sustained capacity development, helps overcome governance instability and absorption constraints that commonly hinder institutionalisation in these settings. Tailoring system-strengthening strategies to context-specific barriers rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach improves the prospects for lasting change. In addition, designing interventions requires assessing broader contextual factors, political dynamics, security conditions, and their differentiated effects on population groups. Continuous monitoring of both the programme and the wider context enables timely adjustments to remain aligned with beneficiaries' needs. Accessible and inclusive monitoring, feedback, and reporting mechanisms help identify early whether certain groups are disproportionately affected and ensure responsiveness to the most vulnerable.

Why is this synthesis important?

Despite global commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals, progress on reducing poverty, inequality, and exclusion, particularly across SDGs 1–5, has been severely impacted by intersecting crises such as COVID-19, conflict, and climate change. Although substantial evidence exists on social protection interventions such as cash transfers, little is known about the implementation and effectiveness of other transfer modalities. Specifically, the role of vouchers and in-kind transfers for gender and age- and disability-vulnerable groups is not well documented. Commissioned under the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition’s People Pillar, the synthesis responds to this particular evidence gap by examining the evaluative evidence on voucher and in-kind transfers programmes, with a focus on five SDGs:

- SDG 1 (No Poverty)
- SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)
- SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)
- SDG 4 (Quality Education)
- SDG 5 (Gender Equality)

What was the purpose of this synthesis?

This synthesis examines through a mixed-methods lens the effectiveness, design, and implementation of gender-, age-, and disability-responsive vouchers and in-kind transfers in low- and middle-income countries. Its objective was to consolidate high-quality evidence on how these modalities contribute to reducing poverty, improve well-being, and advance progress across SDGs 1–5 while identifying design and contextual factors that determine success. It includes peer-reviewed impact evaluations, synthesis reviews, and country programme or project level evaluations from United Nations agencies.

It addresses four main questions:

1. Which voucher and in-kind transfer programmes improve outcomes for those who are often left behind across SDGs 1–5?
2. Which design, implementation, and contextual factors influence the performance of voucher and in-kind transfers?
3. How do these programmes strengthen the wider social protection system, including its policies, services, and institutions?
4. What evidence gaps remain in what works and in how programmes are designed?

How was this synthesis carried out?

The synthesis followed a systematic, rigorous, and transparent process:

- Extensive searches screened 4,202 records across academic databases, United Nations repositories, and evaluation sources.
- 154 impact studies (106 impact evaluations and 48 syntheses) and 94 UN-led process and performance evaluations met the eligibility criteria, covering publications from 2015 to 2024.
- A mixed-methods synthesis approach integrated quantitative impact evidence with qualitative implementation findings to capture both outcomes and system-level processes.
- Systematic search strategies, machine learning tools, and theory-driven coding were used to identify, prioritise, and synthesise evidence across geographic, institutional, and thematic contexts.
- A management group with representatives of several United Nations agencies (United Nations Children’s Fund, United Nations Development Programme, World Food Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Programme for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) guided the scope and priorities.
- A technical advisory panel of academics, practitioners, and policymakers provided subject-matter expertise.

Limitations of the evidence

- Evidence on elderly populations and related outcomes is notably scarce.
- The evidence base assessed reveals a gap in disability-responsive social assistance interventions.
- The evidence shows geographical concentration in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, with limited evidence from the Middle East and North Africa or urban and peri-urban contexts. Humanitarian and fragile settings are also under-studied.
- Evidence on social protection system-level change and sustainability remains weak.

How up to date is this evidence?

The synthesis included research studies and UN-led process and performance evaluations published between 2015 and 2024.

Learn more

Visit the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition's Peace Pillar webpage (<https://www.sdgsynthesiscoalition.org/pillar/people-pillar>) to explore the following resources:

- Full Synthesis Report: A comprehensive synthesis of what works and how to reduce poverty, inequality, and exclusion, particularly across SDGs 1–5.
- Evidence Gap Map: An interactive visual tool that provides an overview of the evidence base underpinning this synthesis:
 - Evidence Gap Map of quantitative impact evidence and of qualitative performance and process evaluations
- Brief on the Evidence Base and Gaps: An interim publication produced during the synthesis process summarising the nature, scope, and characteristics of the compiled evidence and best read alongside the Evidence Gap Map.
- Annexes – Supplementary materials providing additional methodological detail, supporting tables, evidence profiles, and other background documentation referenced in the full report.



The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition

The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition brings together evaluation offices from the United Nations, multilateral development banks, and international financial institutions to generate and share evidence on what works, how, and why to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Co-chaired by the *Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP* and the *Independent Evaluation Department of the Asian Development Bank*, the Coalition promotes joint learning and actionable syntheses that inform policy and practice toward achieving the 2030 Agenda.

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