

Poverty alleviation efforts are shaping the success of environmental targets

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Social protection programs can facilitate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but can also create trade-offs across divergent social and environmental goals that can undermine their effectiveness, say the authors of new research published in the journal *PNAS*. This is one of the largest studies on the sustainability implications

of social protection, funded by the Grantham Centre for Sustainable Futures at The University of Sheffield .

Focusing on Brazil's flagship Zero Hunger (ZH) social protection scheme, designed to alleviate [food insecurity](#) and hunger through cash transfers and agricultural support, the study highlights the importance of considering the social and environmental outcomes of development policies. The authors used data spanning 13 years (2000-2013) and covering around 4,000 rural municipalities in Brazil. Their results draw out implications for Brazil's progress towards the SDGs, specifically: no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and wellbeing (SDG 3) and life on land (SDG 15).

The ZH program was implemented in 2004 with the primary target beneficiaries being small-scale family farmers with the goal of lifting 44 million Brazilians out of poverty and food insecurity. This is a globally important group with 12% of the world's agricultural land managed by some 475 million smallholders. The programme has been praised for playing a key role in enabling Brazil to meet its Millennium Development Goals in 2015.

The study found that successful elements of the ZH program include evidence of an increase in food production (SDG 2) and slightly reduced poverty (SDG 1). However, this can be contrasted with more variable outcomes in food security dimensions across regions, depending on whether cash transfer or agricultural support were used. In addition, they were widespread trade-offs with other [sustainable development goals](#), notably [environmental protection](#) (SDG 15).

Dr. Cecilie Dyngeland (who conducted the research as part of her Ph.D. at the University of Sheffield) said:

"Alleviating poverty is essential, but we rarely think about the

unintended environmental consequences of poverty alleviation policies. A key strength of our analysis is that it allows us to understand how policies affect multiple social and environmental outcomes simultaneously."

Despite these evident shortcomings, the authors suggest there are ways to balance human development with environmental integrity.

Dr. Johan Oldekop (at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester) said:

"We find that the same programme can lead to contrasting outcomes in different regions of Brazil. It is critical for us to understand what processes have enabled joint positive social and environmental outcomes, in order to learn from these synergies and develop incentives that avoid trade-offs."

The research team's analysis of the ZH programme provides insights on how to achieve multiple sustainability outcomes whilst being directly relevant to the design and implementation of social protection mechanisms around the world. This is particularly salient in Africa, where social protection programs based on ZH currently operate in several countries. The research compared two different types of protection programmes and found that cash transfers were less likely than agricultural support to generate synergies across development and environmental objectives.

As Dr. Karl Evans (from the Animal and Plant Science Department at the University of Sheffield) added,

"This research demonstrates that development policies can enhance or degrade the [natural environments](#) which are vital for the well-being and livelihoods of many vulnerable people. Development policies need to

focus on strategies that enhance rather than degrade this capacity. Linking social protection to environmental conditionalities is one potential mechanism to achieve poverty alleviation without degrading the natural environment."

Governments, international donors and financial organisations are making large investments in social protection to mitigate the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. For social protection programmes to continue to contribute to progress on multiple development objectives, their trade-offs and synergies will need to be at the front and centre of the design and implementation of poverty alleviation strategies moving forward.

To ensure robust policy impact evaluation, the measurement of intended and unintended sustainable development outcomes of initiatives needs to become the norm.

More information: Cecilie Dyngeland et al., "Assessing multidimensional sustainability: Lessons from Brazil's social protection programs," *PNAS* (2020).

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