



SOCIAL SAFETY NETS IN POLARIZED AND CONFLICT-RIDDEN SOCIETIES

AKANNI Waliyu Oladotun (PhD)

ADEDAYO Adedeji Matthew (PhD)

**¹Department of Social Justice and Security Studies, Kwara State University, Malete,
Kwara State,**

+2348066377766,

oladotun.akanni@kwasu.edu.ng

**²Department of Peace and Security Studies, Bamidele Olumilua University of
Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria,**

+2347031537294

adedayo.adedeji@bouesti.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper examines the role of Social Safety Nets (SSNs) as policy instruments for addressing poverty, vulnerability, and instability in polarized and conflict-ridden societies, moving beyond their traditional conceptualization as mere welfare mechanisms to recognize their broader social, political, and peacebuilding functions. Using a qualitative, non-empirical approach grounded in a critical review of existing literature and policy documents, and anchored on a multi-theoretical framework comprising Social Protection Theory, Political Economy Theory, and Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Theory, the study demonstrates how well-designed and inclusive SSN programmes can mitigate social unrest, enhance social cohesion, strengthen state-citizen relations, and serve as stabilizing forces by reducing vulnerability, preventing reform-induced shocks, and fostering trust in public institutions, as illustrated by evidence from Nigeria and other conflict-affected societies. The paper concludes that the effectiveness of SSNs in divided societies depends critically on transparency, inclusiveness, political neutrality, and strategic positioning as peace-sensitive development interventions, and recommends that policymakers design SSNs with explicit conflict-sensitive frameworks, integrate them into broader peacebuilding and state-building agendas, and ensure sustainable financing and institutional anchoring to maximize their stabilizing and cohesive potential in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Social Safety Nets; Conflict; Polarization; Social Cohesion; Peacebuilding

Introduction

Social Safety Nets (SSNs) have been developed to offer assistance to the most at-risk members of society. These programmes are specifically designed to provide support and aid to those who are vulnerable and in need (Iqbal et al. 2008). Iqbal et al. (2008) further clarify that SSNs initiative are not aimed at alleviating poverty directly; instead, they focus on mitigating transitional poverty by ensuring that people have access to necessities like food, education, and

healthcare. Pakistan Economic Survey (2015) advances the argument by stating that SSNs serve as a channel through which the poor and vulnerable people are provided with regular and predictable transfers in cash or in kind to lessen poverty, promote inclusive growth and spread prosperity. This assistance also reduces food insecurity and malnutrition, increases demand for education and health services, improves risk management, and absorbs unanticipated shocks. SSNs specifically provide succour to the most vulnerable populations who are the hardest hit by these unforeseen shocks, which include conflict and violence (Ovadiya et al. 2015). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020) points out that among the most vulnerable members of society, SSNs are regarded as an important catalyst to alleviate poverty, enhance food and nutrition security, and build resilience. When compared to other anti-poverty programmes, SSNs place more emphasis on the target group's historical position. In particular, they focus more on vulnerability instead of chronic poverty. People who are vulnerable may at first sustain a lifestyle above the poverty line but may suffer economic hardship that could force them to slip into poverty without a safety net to cushion their fall, while others who are chronically poor lack the means to live a modest and basic life (Stephen Devereux 2020).

Gosh et al. (2008) assert that SSNs are now recognized by the World Bank as being a vital component of the agenda for growth, even though they were originally thought of as tools for money transfers and instruments for enhancing the welfare of economically disadvantaged people. According to the United Nations (2018), SSNs serve a dual purpose beyond simply reducing poverty. It contributes to the overall welfare of societies even as global evidence indicates that transfers within social protection programs have the potential to enhance demand and increase consumption, thus fostering economic growth. This is particularly evident during periods of economic decline when investment in social protection can rejuvenate economies and spur job creation. Mahmud and Sharpe (2021) emphasize that the way social assistance is formulated, it can foresee and mitigate economic shock impacts and the attendant impending social unrest triggered by critical economic reforms. SSN programmes can be a game-changer for communities facing crises. These programmes, designed to anticipate and react quickly to emergencies, can strengthen existing safety nets. This means more people will be lifted out of poverty, have better opportunities, and contribute more to the economy. The programmes also empower people, help them bounce back from environmental disasters, and bring communities closer together. Ultimately, the approach makes Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (FCAS) weather tough times and bounce back from crises while fostering sustainable development (Bharadwaj and Karthikeyan 2023).

Khaleque et al. (2008) establish that for chronically impoverished households and nations to build wealth, strengthen their ability to cope with shocks and risks, and ultimately escape poverty, effective SSNs are essential. Asian Development Bank (2010) acknowledges that if properly implemented, SSNs can be effective strategies for poverty reduction and inequality because they promote inclusive growth and extend resources to the most vulnerable members of society (Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) 2011). Pakistan Economic Survey (2013) reports that for the most vulnerable groups in society to be shielded from the social and political costs of economic and structural reforms, SSN transfers are required. Such expenditures' effectiveness is dependent on both their quantity and quality. Even when it does not considerably improve household income, social assistance becomes crucial to reducing the number of poor people and preventing poor households from becoming chronically poor (Prayitno et al. 2018). When people have access to steady income and livelihood support

opportunities, Bharadwaj and Karthikeyan (2023) contend that such SSNs programme bring stability to the affected communities and reduce frustrations caused by poverty. This, in turn, paves the way for the country's economic comeback and long-term development.

Income redistributions and wage subsidies as components of SSNs are being utilized as an antidote against crime and disruptive behaviours because these approaches provide opportunities for poor people to earn legitimate income and reduce the temptation towards social unrest and criminal activities (Martins 1996). Iqbal et al. (2008) assert that the existence of SSN programmes is justified by the fact that they serve both redistributive and productive purposes, while also supporting moral philosophy and managing risks. These two pillars are fundamental in understanding the significance and necessity of SSNs. (Asian Development Bank 2010). The lack of SSNs puts at risk the many households that are vulnerable to poverty, not just the chronically poor, and a single event or shift in circumstances can trap these families in long-term poverty. Preventing such scenarios is surely as important a development objective as providing services or extending infrastructure. SSN programmes are primarily fashioned at redistributing resources to uplift the poor populations within the society out of poverty and make sure that better opportunities are created for them and improve their living conditions so as to overcome the challenges posed by unexpected circumstances (Ahmed et al. 2014). SSNs are not merely a means of support; they are also a crucial component in fortifying the social contracts that exist between governments and their citizens (Pakistan Economic Survey 2015). These programmes can strengthen a social contract between a state and its people. The ultimate goal is to ensure that the government fulfills its obligation of catering for the less privileged segments of society by helping them to escape poverty and improving their overall well-being.

Iqbal et al. (2008) explain that SSNs are government interventions to keep the most vulnerable members of society from sliding into extreme poverty. These policies foster self-reliance by enabling households to make investments that enhance their quality of life. Moreover, they provide governments with the flexibility to adopt more effective strategies, leading to robust economic growth and potentially elevating standards of living for all households (Grosh et al 2008). Mahmuda (2015) affirms that SSNs are considered an instrument of the government that can sustainably help reduce poverty by fostering opportunity, security, and empowerment. They also offer people access to insurance mechanisms, financial support and job opportunities through the provision of income security. Through these policies of government, social cohesion is strengthened with the likelihood of less violence and lower social conflict (Ovadiya et al. 2015). The critical importance of SSNs, as emphasized by the World Bank (2015) makes them a pressing issue for governments worldwide, as well as for countless individuals, both young and old, who are endeavouring to enhance their quality of life. SSNs serve as bridge builders that connect citizens with the government. Favourable experiences by the beneficiaries can deepen the trust and increase people's confidence in the state, while bad or less satisfactory experiences have the tendency to damage that trust (Mahmud and Sharpe 2021). Robust SSN programmes can also aid governments in implementing necessary structural reforms by protecting vulnerable people from potential negative effects while gaining public support in the process (International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2023).

The effectiveness of SSNs in polarized and conflict-ridden societies remains as complex as it is controversial, with some arguing that SSNs exacerbate existing tensions and divisions, while many conclude that they can be a crucial tool for promoting peace and stability. Probing deeper into this conversation, this study seeks to offer valuable insights by exploring the multifaceted

impacts of SSNs in such contexts and how they can contribute to building an inclusive and more peaceful society.

Methodology

This study adopts a non-empirical qualitative methodology based on conceptual analysis and desk review of secondary sources. The methodological approach is suitable for the paper's objective, which is to explore the conceptual, theoretical, and policy dimensions of SSNs in polarized and conflict-ridden societies rather than to generate primary empirical data. Data for the study were drawn from academic journal articles, books, institutional reports, media narratives and policy documents produced by international organizations, development agencies, and scholars in the fields of social protection, peacebuilding, and conflict studies.

The study employs thematic content analysis to systematically examine recurring arguments and perspectives on the design, objectives, and impacts of SSNs in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The analysis is guided by a multi-theoretical framework integrating Social Protection Theory, Political Economy Theory, and Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Theory. These theoretical lenses provide an analytical foundation for understanding how SSNs interact with inequality, polarization, and state–society relations.

Illustrative country examples, including Nigeria and other conflict-affected societies, are used to support conceptual arguments and demonstrate practical relevance. However, the study does not attempt statistical comparison or causal inference. Instead, it offers an interpretive synthesis of existing knowledge. The non-empirical nature of the study allows for broader generalization while acknowledging contextual variations in SSN design and implementation

Conceptual Analysis of Social Safety Nets

SSNs are non-contributory social programmes used by governments worldwide to alleviate poverty. What sets them apart is the fact that, unlike contributory schemes, they provide benefits without requiring prior payments from recipients, aiming to support the poor and vulnerable while enhancing their resilience to risk (IEG, 2011). World Bank (2015) explains that Social safety nets are non-contributory measures designed to provide regular and predictable support to poor and vulnerable people. World Bank (2018a) describes SSNs as non-contributory instruments aimed at providing consistent and predictable assistance to the impoverished and vulnerable people. They are also referred to as safety nets, social assistance or social transfers and are a key part of a broader social protection system. The concept of SSNs is part of a broader social protection scheme which fundamentally symbolizes non-contributory cash transfer programmes with the poor and vulnerable segment of society as the primary target. Put differently, they refer to people who live in abject poverty and cannot survive on their own without receiving external assistance or those who are at risk of falling into poverty due to old age, illness and other adverse social-economic conditions. (Onyeonoru, 2018).

SSNs conceptualized to address a specific challenge can or cannot be tailored to suit another circumstance. SSNs' objectives in a particular country are subject to change due to situational adjustment of that country; however, that can be modified with a suitable design (IEG, 2011). Ahmed et al (2014) argue that SSNs are public support strategies of government to ameliorate the sufferings of the poorest segment of society who face socio-economic hardship as a result

of a drastic drop in their income. They are resources redistributive tools designed in favour of the poor to rescue them from the poverty trap and provide opportunities that will protect them against unpredictable occurrences. In fact, SSNs are conceptualized to combat uncertain events, poverty, vulnerability and so forth. The usefulness of SSNs goes beyond merely providing assistance to the needy alone; they have proven to be a critical instrument for establishing and sustaining the social contract between the government and its citizens (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2015).

Asean Development Bank (2003) reports that SSNs are intended to minimize poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient and productive labour markets, reducing the sufferings of the poor and empowering them against negative socio-economic circumstances. By providing financial security, safety nets prevent individuals from having to sell essential assets during a crisis and protect the vulnerable from catastrophic losses that can lead to chronic poverty (IEG, 2011). In addition to helping poor families build human capital (for example, health and education), safety nets can enable investments that increase the growth of other assets (IEG, 2011). SSNs are a portion within the larger social protection programmes with the objectives of reducing poverty and mitigating risk, such as insurance-related interventions (like health insurance and pensions) and a set of labour-oriented programmes. (Banerji and Gentilini, 2013). Part of the objectives of SSNs, according to Onyeonuru (2018), is to enhance the consumption and accessibility of basic commodities and essential services either directly or indirectly through substitution effects.

SSNs are vital in reducing poverty because they are a catalyst for inclusive growth and tools for rendering support and delivering resources to those most at risk (IEG, 2011). Ahmed et al (2014) state that apart from protecting individuals from transient periods of poverty like loss of employment, sudden illness, or natural disasters, SSNs' objectives also extend to shield people from generational poverty stemming from lack of access to education and a poor healthcare system, most especially during childhood. This assistance aims to alleviate poverty, foster inclusive growth, improve nutrition, encourage the use of education and health services, enhance risk management, and build resilience against major shocks (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2015). When economic growth is neither sustainable nor inclusive, SSNs offer predictable transfers to assist the poor and vulnerable (The Energy Sector Management Assistance Program [ESMAP], 2020).

Apart from serving the purpose of reducing poverty, SSNs are recognized for their significant contributions to national political, social, and security landscapes. Particularly in fragile or conflict/post-conflict environments, governments use SSNs to assert state power, prove their ability to care for citizens, and cultivate the public legitimacy necessary for stability (IEG, 2011). IEG (2011) further cites instances that with the aid of SSNs, the political agenda has been utilized to bridge the inequality gap in Latin America and the Caribbean. While in Jamaica and some countries within Africa and the Middle East, SSNs have helped reduce unemployment problems by empowering young people to curtail political and security threats. Also, in many fragile countries in Africa and places like Nepal and Bosnia and Herzegovina, SSNs were extended to former combatants to ease their reintegration into society. It is for this reason that the World Bank (2015) refers to SSNs as one of the major strategies employed to build resilience and protect poor people in fragile and violence-ridden environments. Common SSNs in fragile and crisis-affected states include unconditional cash transfers, conditional transfers (e.g., beneficiaries must comply with certain conditions such as sending their children to school or attending a health centre), school feeding programmes, and in-kind transfers (food, shelter, agricultural inputs) (Cooper, 2018).

Coady (2004) also ascertains that the government has categorized SSNs into different components, which include cash transfers, food subsidies, subsidized rations, public goods and public works. Furthermore, governments can structure these programs to promote positive social outcomes, such as school attendance, healthcare visits, and community infrastructure rehabilitation. (IEG, 2011). World Bank (2018a) mentions the poor and the vulnerable as the targeted members of society covered by SSNs such as unconditional and conditional cash transfers, non-contributory social pensions, food and in-kind transfers, school feeding programs, public works, and fee waivers. SSNs are therefore regarded as strategies of reducing poverty in a sustainable manner, thereby creating opportunities, security and empowerment for the targeted population.

Irfan (2003) admits that evaluating the totality of social safety net impacts on the poor, society, and the economy is a complex endeavour because of its pervasive consequences. However, these programmes have generally been examined with a particular emphasis on their implications for the impoverished. In line with this orientation, SSNs' evaluation has often relied on

- (a) coverage;
- (b) targeting efficiency;
- (c) access;
- (d) incentive effects;
- (e) income equivalence of the transfers; and
- (f) the cost-effectiveness of the delivery mechanism

As an all-inclusive programme, SSNs are designed to eradicate poverty, reduce vulnerability, promote productivity, minimize indolence and enhance the culture of collectivism. When SSNs are implemented, human welfare is improved as household income increases and an increase in household income automatically pushes a significant number of poor people out of poverty (Prayitno et al, 2018).

Paitoonpong et al (2008) posit that informal SSNs comprise both private and public safety nets. Private informal SSNs consist of transfers from family members, friends, neighbours and community members and institutions, including NGOs, while public informal SSNs are assistance individuals expected to receive from the government through programmes that create assets or employment, transfer income, or provide basic social services, to prevent people at-risk from falling into poverty. What distinguishes formal from informal public SSNs is whether there is an existing formal legal support. SSNs serve dual, redistribute and productive roles, with one supporting moral philosophy and the other managing risks. These two are the foundation that defines the existence of SSNs (Paitoonpong et al, 2008). Kidd (2012) opines that to consider SSN as an effective instrument, it must be available and accessible when needed. For instance, if calamity struck a family, such as the instant death of a breadwinner, immediate financial support should be readily available to the dependents to meet their needs and rescue them from wallowing in abject penury. Hence, the emergence of SSNs in practically all societies is mainly to ensure that poverty is reduced to the barest minimum (Ahmed et al, 2014).

Sen (1992) observes that in most cases assistance dedicated to people living in poverty is underfunded and ineffective, reflecting a low-quality intervention. Since cash and in-kind

transfers both contribute to household income, Deveraux (2000) argues that they can be invested in education or productive ventures and are frequently redistributed to a broader circle, like the beneficiary's extended family. The fact that it is a social assistance programme does not necessarily translate to being a beneficial and effective programme (Kidd, 2012). Through SSNs, according to Pakistan Economic Survey (2013), the poverty-stricken population is catered for and shielded from the social and political costs of economic and structural reforms. Their effectiveness is dictated by both the level and the quality of such programmes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the belief that SSNs are not merely welfare instruments but also political and peacebuilding tools in societies characterized by polarization, violence, and fragility. To capture this complexity, the study adopts a multi-theoretical framework, combining Social Protection Theory, Political Economy Theory and Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Theory. These theories explain how safety nets address vulnerabilities, mediate power dynamics, navigate instability, and rebuild trust amid division. Each highlights the safety nets' role in mitigating risks that fuel polarization and violence.

Social Protection Theory

Social Protection Theory, advanced by proponents like Harvey et al (2007) and Mackinder (2018), posits safety nets as mechanisms delivering universal minimum protections against economic shocks, violence, and exclusion in fragile contexts. It emphasizes transformative approaches that adapt financing and delivery to chronic crises, strengthening state-society relations without exacerbating divisions. For polarized societies, this theory supports broad cash transfers and public works to prevent resentment from targeted aid, fostering resilience where inequality entrenches group isolation.

Political Economy Theory

Political Economy Theory, as modeled by McCarty et al (2016) and Stewart (2020), links rising inequality and economic decline to risk-averse in-group strategies that drive polarization. SSNs counter this by reducing poverty thresholds that trigger withdrawal from diverse out-group interactions, which yield higher rewards but higher failure risks. In conflict-ridden settings, the theory underscores redistribution's role in breaking bistable polarization traps, where divided groups persist even post-recovery, promoting cooperation over entrenched hostility

Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Theory

Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Theory, developed by scholars like Colletta and Cullen (2000), identifies relational elements (trust, equality, participation, shared identity) as resilient buffers against recurring violence. Safety nets enhance cohesion by equitably distributing resources, countering grievances that fragment polarized groups. In conflict-ridden societies, universal programs bridge divides, integrating peacebuilding into development to prioritize quality peace over instability-prone fragmentation

Social Safety Nets in Conflict Mitigation and Peacebuilding

There is a growing body of evidence showing that SSNs can be very effective in curbing social unrest, aiding violence prevention, strengthening community bonds and promoting an inclusive society (Harvey et al. 2007; Gosh et al. 2008; IEG 2011; Justino 2011; Taydas and Peksen 2012; Ovadiya et al. 2015; Crost et al. 2016; Schjød 2021; Bharadwaj and Karthikeyan 2023). This is illustrated in the specific examples of Bolsa Familia (conditional cash transfers) to low-income families, which contributed to social stability and a decrease in violent crimes in Brazil. And Mexico's conditional cash transfer under the Prospera programme, formerly called Oportunidades, drastically brought down criminal activities, especially property crimes. Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF) and Kenya's cash transfer programme have also been credited with a reduction in cattle raiding and other forms of violence. Also in India, despite its propensity for high crime rates, there are indications that SSN programmes have noticeable impacts in reducing unrest across Indian states. For instance, a correlation between increased spending on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREG) and a decrease in Maoist rebel activity in certain Indian districts has been well established.

The rising recognition of SSNs as a valuable tool for building peace lies in their power to help vulnerable people navigate the pains of economic challenges that come with major reforms. Amidst tough economic reforms, circumstances arise where SSNs have to be deployed to mitigate economic shock and serve as a buffer against public discontent. When the new government in Nigeria removed fuel subsidies and liberalized the foreign exchange market as part of the reforms to kick-start the economy, there was an unprecedented food crisis and astronomical cost of living. Social consequences of the reform were evident in the growing number of protests, including the attendant looting of food storage facilities across major cities and hijacking of truckloads of foodstuffs. Government, both at the central and state levels, launched a variety of SSN programmes that include non-repayable cash transfers, distribution of free food, subsidized public transportation, discounted food prices, salary increments, and interest-free loans. These programmes proved to be successful in preventing the social unrest that was rapidly degenerating from escalating into full-blown violence. A nearly similar scenario occurred in Indonesia too, when the government, in reaction to the sharp increase in international fuel prices, embarked on drastic fuel subsidy reform to save the economy from collapse. Although the subsidy reform was greeted with riots and demonstrations, with the majority of Indonesians vehemently opposed and resisted the policy, SSN measures put in place by the government considerably offset the economic hardship experienced by the people. Direct cash transfer (Bantuan Langsung Tunai) (BLT) to the poorest households, targeted subsidies to the most impoverished families, and expanded healthcare and educational support to a wider population are some of the approaches employed to cushion the price shock and reduce the adverse social and economic effects of the subsidy reform.

It is evident that SSNs can also assist people in managing violence-induced shocks (Schjød 2021). Following the release of the violently abducted 137 school children within the school premises in March 2024 in Kaduna state (Northern part of Nigeria), the government offered them free education and took full responsibility for their well-being. Full scholarships granted them act as safety nets to help overcome shock and ensure reintegration into the school. It is important to note that one in every five of the world's out-of-school children resides in Nigeria. In the Northern part of the country where the prevalence of out-of-school children is a major concern, getting these abducted children back into school without provision of SSNs poses a

massive challenge. In addition, the conditional cash transfer programmes extended to the poorest households after the Liberian civil war contributed to communities' recovery from violent conflict. Following the 1994 Rwanda genocide, various SSNs implemented like "support for local development initiatives" had positive effects in Rwanda's recovery from the war. In Sri Lanka, SSN programmes such as "Samurdhi" played a major role in helping people cope with the trauma of violence and rebuilding their livelihoods. According to Birch et al. (2023) lack of SSNs may even exacerbate vulnerabilities, thereby intensifying the yearning for safety nets, caused by violence or the threat of violence, destruction of infrastructure, services, and markets, or biased and politicised pronouncements by discriminatory rulings or authorities of government.

In fragile societies already destabilized by conflict and overwhelmed by the economic slump, cash donations directly to the poor can be a lifeline with ripple benefits of lifting them out of poverty, revitalizing markets and boosting local economies. Money received is largely going to be spent within the communities and in the local markets, which can stimulate businesses and fast-track rebuilding of communities devastated by conflict or economic crisis. Gosh et al. (2008) and IEG (2011) ascertain that SSNs are frequently employed in unstable regimes or in nations that are at war or just transiting from war, to offer citizens the most basic services, exercise popularity and maintain a certain level of government authority. In societies that are experiencing instability, for instance, SSN programmes perform double roles of reducing inequalities and enhancing government legitimacy by strengthening the social contract between the government and its citizens (Ovadiya et al. 2015).

In times of conflict, Darcy (2004) argues that SSN interventions play important roles by ensuring that the survival of the victims is prioritized and their basic needs are catered for. Violence or threat of social unrest can be checked through the power of cash transfer most especially in a situation where the previously marginalized groups who could foment trouble are captured in the new programme. Such an arrangement promotes inclusivity and eliminates bottled-up grievances that could trigger violence (Babajanian, 2012). Ovadiya et al. (2015) maintain that notwithstanding the likely capital-intensive nature of SSN programmes in conflict environments, the benefits are huge in restoring peace and sustaining stability for countries recovering from conflict. Because these programmes not only help people cope with the hardship created by conflict but can also prevent impending violence from happening (Barsoum and Kassem 2019).

Darcy (2004) asserts that in post-conflict periods, the extent of destruction and the degree of prolonged insecurity may necessitate the need for SSNs and the mode of providing them. Based on the principle of rapid response, SSNs allow for prompt delivery of resources to restore normalcy so that people can quickly feel the dividends of peace in the aftermath of conflict. However, if they are not well conceived, there are associated risks when delivering the programmes (Harvey et al. 2007). Moreover, Babajanian (2012) submits that in post-conflict societies, SSNs are mechanisms for building peace and stability by enhancing social cohesion, minimizing tension and grievances and ensuring that social unrest and violent conflict are mitigated. Idris (2016) specifically makes reference to public work projects to buttress the narratives that SSNs can be an instrument of unifying the people and building a sense of commonality more importantly, among the displaced individuals who have just been resettled after the conflict has subsided. Community gathering for public work programmes, joint collaborative efforts, meal sharing and teamwork are some of the shared attributes that promote a sense of belonging and help breathe life back into people. Other SSN programmes extended

to people in fragile and conflict-ridden countries include unconditional cash transfers (no strings attached), conditional cash transfers (like compelling children to attend school or access medical facilities), school feeding programme (free food for school children) and in-kind transfer providing shelter, food and farming inputs (Cooper 2018).

Harvey et al. (2007) maintain that despite concern about the practicability of SSNs in conflict situations, experiences in countries like Somalia, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have proven that such programmes can be delivered safely even when the conflict had not abated. SSNs are used in several nations as significant political, social, and security goals apart from their objectives of addressing poverty (IEG 2011). To reduce political and security threats, (IEG) (2011) argues that SSNs have been occasionally deployed to keep young people employed in the Middle East, Africa, and other nations, including Jamaica. SSN transfers have also been specifically designed for ex-combatants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nepal, and a number of unstable African states to help with their reintegration into the society and reduce the risk of renewed violence. Countries that face fragility, conflict, and violence often have higher levels of spending on SSNs. Timor-Leste is an example of such a country, as it introduced a universal social pension in 2008 specifically for war veterans in response to the violent conflicts it experienced in the mid-2000s. Same with South Sudan which devoted the entirety of SSN disbursements to people affected by conflict including internally displaced persons and war returnees (World Bank 2018b). In short, SSNs are gaining recognition as an essential instrument engendering food and nutrition, strengthening security, eliminating poverty, and fostering resilience in the most vulnerable societies (OECD 2020).

Social Safety Nets, Inclusivity and Social Cohesion

SSNs act as a stabilizing force and promote a more inclusive society where there is increased access to essential services and public utilities among the marginalized people. When implemented in marginalised parts of a country, SSNs can also play an important role in redistributing resources, reinforcing a sense of solidarity and contributing to national cohesion. Mahmud and Sharpe (2021) explain that SSN programmes are more than rendering financial assistance; they can be an avenue for women to participate in decision-making, acquire education and learn new skills which can strengthen social interactions and foster social capital among marginalized groups. Along with the women, these programmes can equally protect the interests and cater for the needs of the displaced people and the Children who form part of the marginalized groups and are most at risk in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States. This could be through economic empowerment, reduction in gender inequality and protection against gender-based violence (Bharadwaj and Karthikeyan 2023). Financial security gained through SSNs by vulnerable populations, especially womenfolk, generates ripple effects that allow them to take control over their lives, improve mental and emotional well-being, reduce domestic violence and deepen stronger communal relations.

Cash transfers distributed to people can discourage them from migrating and prevent them from fleeing their homes, thereby maintaining families and communities' cohesion as evidenced in countries like Ethiopia and Mexico (Babajanian 2012). Mahmud and Sharpe (2021) believe that households with fewer economic burdens are better equipped to cope with unforeseen setbacks and can create positive multiplier effects ranging from boosting family investments in education and healthcare to curbing domestic violence. Prior studies confirm that people suffer displacement and forced migration due to devastation caused by climate change-induced

disasters. However, the provision of SSNs guarantees secured livelihoods that reduce these risks by 66% in rapid-onset and 59% in slow-onset settings. Furthermore, such coverage can also support and equip Fragile and Conflict-Affected States to adapt and thrive in the face of assorted economic, environmental, social, and institutional threats (Bharadwaj and Karthikeyan 2023).

Unequal or lack of access to education, healthcare system, and a dearth of other life-sustaining opportunities can make people lose faith in the institutions of government and weaken bonds of solidarity between them, contributing to class divide and resistance to authority. This is more pronounced in societies where there are high levels of trust deficits between the government and the governed. Babajanian (2012) believes that the less divided a society is, the easier it is to create opportunities conducive to bolstering the implementation of successful government policies and reform initiatives such as SSN programmes. In addition to rendering financial assistance, Schjød (2021) asserts that SSN policies can also help to increase social capital and rebuild trust between citizens and the state, particularly in post-conflict situations. In Timor-Leste, for example, SSNs have been utilized as a tool for re-creating linkages between citizens and the state and rebuilding trust after the war. While the effects may not be too apparent, Strupat (2021) argues that SSN programmes can ignite trust in government and the parliament, as well as foster inclusive identity and cooperation among the people, including towards government initiatives. Countries that invest in SSNs possess the leverage to solidify social cohesion, restore trust and be a springboard to achieving enduring peace and development (Bharadwaj and Karthikeyan 2023).

As demonstrated in the study conducted by Babajanian and Hagen-Zanker (2012), SSN policies and programmes are capable of tackling the consequences and root causes of social exclusion. These programmes can institutionalize legal and regulatory structures alongside organizational support by ensuring that previously marginalized groups are granted citizenship rights and receive social support. Universal SSN, being a powerful development policy instrument, stands out in directly mitigating poverty, closing the inequality gap and combating social exclusion. Indeed, many countries that have witnessed dramatic improvement in their poverty levels and living standards rely heavily on comprehensive SSN programmes (United Nations 2018). Reduced poverty levels and access to steady sources of income through SSN programmes are considered by Schjød (2021) as key factors in building a cohesive society. These programmes are primarily planned to reduce poverty as a strategy for combating economic challenges and weathering difficult periods that can instigate social unrest, inequality and exclusion (Mahmud and Sharpe 2021).

Social cash transfers deliver multiple benefits by empowering people to share resources with families and communities and also spurring active and regular participation in social, ceremonial and communal activities (Attanasio et al. 2009; Babajanian 2012; Babajanian and Hagen-Zanker 2012; Camacho 2014). SSN programmes have the attributes to dismantle the obstacles and level the playing field, paving the way for all groups and individuals to participate actively in socio-economic and political activities (United Nations 2018). Schjød (2021) claims that the importance of SSNs is not restricted to or extends beyond levelling up economic inequality between individuals within a population, but can also be instrumental in closing inequality gaps among ethnic nationalities and geographical regions

Babajanian (2012) affirms that through SSNs, citizens enjoy an improved quality of life which enhances a greater communal integration and a stronger sense of belonging, and with the

confidence that society will protect their interests. In countries marked by conflict and division, SSNs are necessary ingredients in maintaining peace and achieving social cohesion and inclusion among all groups within such societies. Ovadiya et al. (2015) provide a good example in Nepal that shortly after the end of its armed conflict and subsequent signing of peace agreement, comprehensive SSN programmes were implemented starting in 2006. These programmes helped to alleviate lingering grievances, deepen bonds, and build cooperation and reconciliation among the people affected by conflicts. Building on this study, Strupat (2021) further emphasizes this correlation in an investigation carried out during a public health emergency. He demonstrates that during the pandemic, SSN programmes have a positive influence on social cohesion whereby the recipients maintained a strong sense of social cohesion, whereas the reverse was the case with the non-beneficiaries.

Ovadiya et al. (2015) note that SSN programmes are now widely employed largely in post-conflict situations to serve broader purposes such as easing social unrest, promoting social inclusion and cohesion, and acting as an instrument of building peace for specific population groups. Even though the main objective is originally geared toward safeguarding individuals from life-threatening challenges, economic hardship and livelihood shocks in fragile and conflict-affected settings

Conclusion

SSNs have indispensably evolved as vital public services for empowering communities, rebuilding trust in government, facilitating reconciliation and inclusivity in polarized societies, promoting peacebuilding and fostering national cohesion. They can be a stabilizing force in divisive societies affected by conflict, creating conditions necessary for enduring stability and sustainable peace. The provision of social safety nets has the capacity to address pressing and immediate needs of the poor and disadvantaged populations and build their adaptive capacity to withstand and recover from crises situation. Evidence from this study indicates that SSN programmes serve as an effective instrument to strengthen social cohesion, curtail social unrest from escalating into violent conflict, prevent the recurrence and outbreak of fresh violence and ultimately pave the way for a more peaceful society. By providing economic opportunities and livelihood support to marginalized individuals through social protection, wealth is redistributed, income security is enhanced and destructive coping strategies are eliminated. This paper emphasizes that in order to navigate the challenges posed by fragility and conflict, particularly those rooted in poverty, social safety nets must be central in the entire process because these programmes provide a lifeline to vulnerable populations in the most difficult periods. This undeniable impact underscores their critical roles and positive contributions to security both locally and nationally.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The analysis underscores the importance of positioning Social Safety Nets (SSNs) as strategic instruments for managing vulnerability and promoting peace in polarized and conflict-ridden societies. First, governments should ensure that SSN programmes are inclusive and conflict-sensitive, with transparent targeting mechanisms that minimize perceptions of exclusion or favoritism. In deeply divided societies, broadly inclusive or universal programmes may be more effective in reducing grievances than narrowly targeted interventions.

Second, SSNs should be integrated into broader peacebuilding, governance, and development frameworks. Rather than functioning as isolated welfare initiatives, SSNs should complement post-conflict recovery efforts, economic reforms, and state-building processes to enhance legitimacy and public trust.

Third, strengthening institutional and administrative capacity is essential for effective SSN delivery. Predictable and timely transfers enhance programme credibility and reduce the risk of social discontent arising from implementation failures. Investment in monitoring and accountability mechanisms is also critical.

Fourth, SSN policies should deliberately address the needs of women, youth, displaced persons, and other vulnerable groups, whose exclusion often fuels instability. Gender-sensitive and youth-focused interventions can generate positive multiplier effects for household welfare and community cohesion.

Finally, sustainable financing and long-term commitment to SSNs are necessary, particularly in fragile contexts. International partners and governments should move beyond short-term humanitarian responses toward institutionalized social protection systems that contribute to peace, inclusion, and sustainable development.

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