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CAN FOOD VOUCHERS SUPPORT ADAPTIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION AND BUILD CLIMATE RESILIENCE IN THE PHILIPPINES?

Exploratory analysis of the linkages and synergies between Walang Gutom and the Philippines Adaptive Social Protection System

Policy Brief: March 2025

Photo credit: Ezra Acayan/AFD

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The Philippines is extremely vulnerable to climate change. At present the most important climatic impact drivers facing the country include increased temperatures and drought, rising sea levels, excessive precipitation leading to floods and landslides, severe winds and tropical cyclones. The impacts from these drivers will have effects on development outcomes including poverty, inequality and food security. Malnutrition may be further exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.

Beyond immediate response, **social protection** can enhance household resilience capacities and facilitate adaptation to climate change. Social protection can address climate risks through the following main pathways:

- **Retaining consumption and food security during shocks** and preventing harmful coping strategies, such as selling productive assets, that could subsequently have negative long-term impacts.
- **Reducing vulnerability and building long-term resilience** through asset formation, savings, and social networks and human capital.
- **Enabling adaptation** through investment and long-term shifts to less climate-sensitive livelihoods.

Box 1. Key concept

Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) is a concept that originates from the Institute of Development Studies, which defined it as the intersection of disaster risk management, social protection and climate change adaptation. Later literature, especially by the World Bank, defined ASP as including both programmes that are intended for rapid deployment, and those aimed at building resilience before, during and after shocks occur. This includes increasing adaptive capacity to prepare populations for climate shocks. The World Bank's approach to ASP has four key building blocks: **programmes, data and information systems, finance, and institutional arrangements and partnerships.**

The principles of ASP are broadly in line with good practices of strengthening social protection systems, but ASP does not represent a stand-alone branch of social protection, instead, it presents an approach to be adapted to existing national systems. The Government of the Philippines has adopted a road map to Adaptive and Shock Responsive Social Protection, consisting of measures to integrate a set of social protection programmes, built on comprehensive information systems and institutional arrangements, into a system that supports adaptation, shock response and recovery in an inclusive manner.



Source: AFD and DSWD (2024).

Walang Gutom is a new social protection programme introduced by the Government in 2023. It aims to address food poverty and hunger through digital food vouchers, from selected retailers, with predetermined thresholds for carbohydrates, protein and fruits and vegetables. Complementary programme activities are also delivered, including social and behavioural communication sessions (SBCC) on nutrition and job readiness. Linkages to government-run, active labour market programmes are also a part of the design and implementation. Through support to local retailers, Walang Gutom also aims to increase the availability of nutritious food and strengthen local food systems. The programme was piloted for six months, from December 2023 to July 2024, with findings intended to inform the national scale-up plans and for full integration into the Philippines' social protection system.

Impact evaluation of the Walang Gutom food voucher pilot on climate resilience

Walang Gutom itself may strengthen climate resilience among beneficiary households. This can occur by building three resilience capacities: **anticipatory**, **absorptive** and **adaptive**, referring to the ability to undertake preparatory actions, having appropriate buffers and safety nets to cope with shocks, and the means to make adjustments to lives and livelihoods to avert shocks and their impacts. The impact evaluation proposed a theory of change to explore Walang Gutom's potential contribution to climate resilience. The potential outcome pathways of Walang Gutom that were hypothesised and examined in the research are as follows:

1. Food security and nutrition are increased, this includes reduced child stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiency. Food security is directly linked to poverty, inequality and adaptability, as households that are food secure are better able to cope with the immediate impacts of climate shocks.

2. Increased household savings contribute to strengthened anticipatory and absorptive capacities. Access to savings and less indebtedness ensures that households have the resources to prepare for shocks before they occur.

3. Climate risk management is strengthened. Specific adaptive capacity could be built through livelihood interventions to the extent that they are geared towards, and consistent with, climate adaptation objectives.

Impact evaluation findings

Walang Gutom may have relieved the constraints of very poor households that were normally consuming too little food because of compulsory non-food expenditure, as the proportion of their total consumption spent on food increased in some cases. However, the findings also suggest that the impact of Walang Gutom on household investment in enhancing resilience may be limited. This does not necessarily contradict the objectives of the programme but highlights the need for complementary programming, additional income support or more flexibility to generate wider impacts overall and on climate resilience.

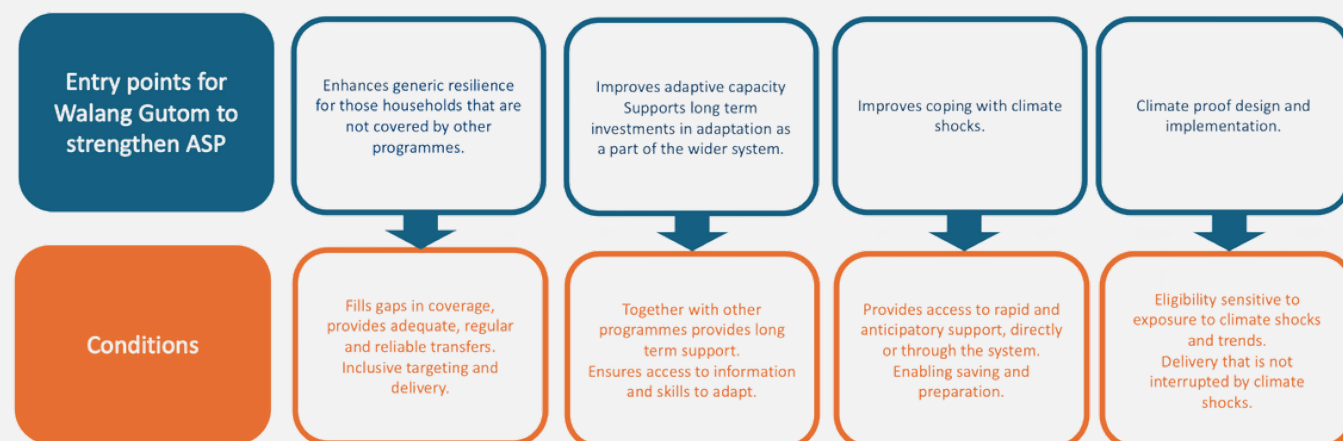
Some partial impacts were found on a fourth resilience capacity: **transformative capacity**. These effects occurred through investment in human capital. Investment in children's education, for

example, potentially enables them to participate in a systemic transformation to more climate-resilient livelihoods in the future. These impacts were most significant in Tondo. Other impacts observed were mild and heterogenous and specific to subgroups. For example, a positive effect on employment rate was observed in low-income households and food insecurity declined in farming households. Walang Gutom did not consistently protect households from the impacts of shocks or reduce negative coping strategies. In the case of subjective resilience, some impacts—both positive and negative—were observed at certain pilot sites; however, the overall impact remains limited.

Exploratory analysis of the linkages and synergies between Walang Gutom and the Philippines' Adaptive Social protection programmes and policies

Rather than just a stand-alone programme, Walang Gutom operates as a part of the social protection system and more specifically the ASP system. Walang Gutom can enhance climate resilience through several entry points (Figure 1). Such entry points are highly relevant, especially if Walang Gutom is rolled out to provinces with the highest expected risks from climate trends and climate-related disasters (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Entry points for Walang Gutom to strengthen Adaptive Social Protection (ASP)



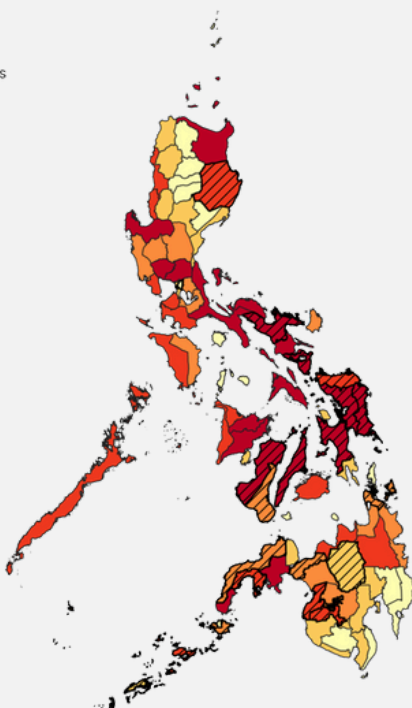
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 2. Philippines provincial climate risk categorisation and map of Walang Gutom provinces

WG Provinces

Risk exposure

1
2
3
4
5



There is regional variation in exposure to different climatic impact drivers, in terms of population and infrastructure impacted and the magnitude of the impacts. Figure 2 presents a map of provinces showing their exposure to projected climate-driven social, economic and physical impacts in 2030–2040, illustrated by a classification that combines exposure to sea level rise and floods, extreme heat and extreme winds.

Walang Gutom has been scaled up to 21 provinces across the country in 2024. As shown by the map, these provinces represent a relatively high exposure to the impacts of climate change.

Source: Authors' own elaboration of data from the National Adaptation Plan for the Philippines (2023), and data from DSWD on Walang Gutom scale up.

Recommendations for how Walang Gutom can enhance ASP

Adopt a system-level approach

Food vouchers alone are unlikely to address all the existing barriers to climate-resilient livelihoods. In practice, this also requires strengthening cross-programme governance mechanisms. This may be supported through documenting and socialising a system-level theory of change to support programme convergence.

For sustainable impacts on climate resilience, it is important to have a clear vision and criteria of when beneficiaries move on to other programmes or exit Walang Gutom completely. In practice, this would mean adopting a household-level indicator to establish clear logic and criteria for graduation. To implement this vision, it is necessary to make specific provisions for Walang Gutom beneficiaries within the Sustainable Livelihoods Programme and consider consolidating other livelihood programmes, such as those of the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE).

Strengthen the shock responsiveness of the system and increase institutional capacity to respond to climate shocks

There is promising, albeit nascent, progress towards including anticipatory action and strengthened shock response to bolster the adaptive components of the social protection system. Currently, none of the core social protection programmes implemented by the government include an anticipatory action component. On a programmatic level, there are design and delivery adjustments to Walang Gutom that would improve its adaptability in case of shocks. Recommended practical steps include amending the delivery mechanism so that it could be used to support emergency cash transfers or anticipatory action. This could be done by introducing a component on the Electronic Benefit Transfer cards (EBT) to support financial inclusion and the possibility of saving such as an additional sub-wallet on the EBT for savings.

Quick win adjustments should be considered to enhance shock responsiveness and the use of anticipatory action within Walang Gutom. These could include foregoing conditions or allowing more flexibility in using food credits when in the event of a disaster (anticipated or actual). In the long term, it is important to support continued and expanded efforts to integrate anticipatory action and shock-response into social protection programmes more generally. Progress has already been made, and it is important to ensure seamless delivery of social protection programmes in case of shocks. Consideration should also be given to the role of comprehensive lifecycle social protection as a basis for shock responses.

Integrate climate objectives and climate information within social protection programmes

Social protection objectives are included in several national climate policies and plans, but few programmes have explicit objectives, eligibility criteria or activities related to climate resilience. The starting point could be the development of a stand-alone document to provide clear and actionable pathways for how social protection will be integrated into and support climate policies. It is important to continue expanding the integration of climate information into all social protection programmes and consider developing and institutionalising climate awareness raising and capacity building training modules.

Mainstreaming climate sensitivity is a key component of this strategy and ensuring adequate local capacities to implement awareness raising is essential. When the aim is to enhance households' investment in climate adaptation or livelihoods, it is important to use the information on exposure, current and projected, to climate impacts and vulnerability of households and communities and link to the local approaches and processes, such as the Local Climate Action Plans. Progress towards a universal and comprehensive social protection system is key to building broad based climate resilience in the long term.



Source: AFD and DSWD (2024).

Information Systems recommendations

Strengthen cross programme interoperability

Information systems are the backbone of ASP, and the study has also highlighted key steps to improve these systems. It is important to implement DXCLOUD, a set of Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) that links different Management Information Systems (MISs), across all programmes. An example of this integration is an electronic fund transfer feature that enables direct communication with different partners i.e. banks for a seamless transfer of funds.

To achieve coherence across programmes it is necessary to strengthen cross-programme interoperability, by integrating information from multiple databases across the different government agencies. For example, there is no need for DSDW programmes to collect data on households, as that data is already being collected by the Philippine Identification System (PhilSys) during ID registration and can be utilized in data validation.

verification and updating. The onboarding and integration processes to connect social protection MISs and government registries with PhilSys should be accelerated. With the scale-up of the Dynamic Beneficiary Registry and the introduction of the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS), as the new national targeting database, there is an opportunity to centralise data and improve targeting accuracy. ADB and DSWD have already taken steps towards improving the interoperability of the Walang Gutom IT system through the creation of the Integrated Walang Gutom Management System (IWDGMS). The new integrated system is aimed to be fully operable within the programme in June 2026.

For shock responsive programming, amend the legislative framework

Within the legislative framework, information systems and data exchanged are governed through specific legislative frameworks. For shock-responsive programming in the long term, there is a need for a change in laws to accommodate bulk data exchanges. Data points should also be well defined across DSWD and government agencies for existing programmes. It is necessary to identify which services are required to support shock-responsive social protection, as well as determine which of these services are not yet digitalised or integrated into the e-government system. This will reveal crucial gaps in the digital infrastructure that must be addressed to ensure comprehensive data integration and effective shock response capabilities.



Source: AFD and DSWD (2024).