

What role can food vouchers play in strengthening climate resilience?

Climate change threatens to intensify poverty, inequality and food insecurity. In countries like the Philippines, extreme weather (cyclones, floods or droughts) could disrupt livelihoods and exacerbate malnutrition. Social protection can play a role to preserve food security during shocks and prevent harmful coping strategies through income security. Exploring the results of a study jointly promoted by the Philippines Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the French Development Agency (AFD), this document inspects the pathways through which food vouchers can strengthen climate resilience. It discusses how to better integrate food vouchers into national Adaptive Social Protection systems and which design improvements are needed to strengthen climate resilience, illustrating this nexus for the first pilot phase of the program Walang Gutom. For the DSWD, ensuring household food security is central to reducing the impacts of climate-related shocks on the poorest and most vulnerable Filipinos. Walang Gutom, as a nutrition-sensitive social protection program, provides a critical safety net that helps families maintain access to food and recover faster after disasters.

Voucher programs typically address nutritional and distributional needs, but in some contexts, they could also be designed to support climate resilience.

In the quest to reduce hunger of a population, food vouchers offer a means to enhance dietary diversity and address risks of undernutrition, obesity, and nutrient deficiencies (Banerjee *et al.*, 2023; Rammohan, & Tohari, 2024). In principle, such vouchers could strengthen climate resilience among beneficiary households by building three types of resilience capacities: anticipatory (the ability to undertake preparatory action), absorptive (having appropriate buffers to cope with shocks) and adaptive (having the means to make adjustments to lives and livelihoods to avert shocks and their impacts).

The pathways through which food vouchers influence resilience are multiple. Kangasniemi *et al.* (2025) conceptualize the main pathways, and illustrate a simplified depiction of how the food voucher pilot for the Walang Gutom Program in the Philippines could influence climate resilience, even though it was not specifically designed for that purpose.

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How do food vouchers work? Vouchers are a type of social transfer under social protection systems, alongside cash and in-kind transfers. Food vouchers allow beneficiaries either to purchase a fixed amount of goods from a restricted list (often used in social protection systems, also called monetary vouchers) or a given quantity of goods from a restricted list (used more often in humanitarian settings, called quantity vouchers). The national authority (or agency) creates an accreditation scheme for sellers/retailers and clear rules on how vouchers can be used by a targeted population (for example, how often, for how long, and whether the voucher is a paper coupon or digital card). Food vouchers are often combined with other measures, like nutrition education or other social programs, to ensure the efficacy in the purpose of the program design.

What is climate resilience? The International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) defines climate resilience as “the capacity of social, economic and ecosystems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance, responding or reorganizing in ways that maintain their essential function, identity and structure as well as biodiversity in case of ecosystems while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning and transformation” (IPCC, 2022). In the context of social protection, the concept of resilience is most often used to refer to households or individuals and to represent well-being outcomes such as poverty or food security. High resilience means that shocks or stressors do not have negative impacts that persist long time after the shock.

What is Adaptive Social Protection (ASP)? ASP integrates a social protection system to disaster risk management, and climate adaptation (like investments in livelihood adaptation and employment transition) to enhance climate resilience. ASP requires adjustments of policies and legal frameworks, changes in operational and administrative processes, enhanced coordination and governance, plus factoring climate into financing strategies. Thus, an ASP policy framework aims to adapt existing national systems for becoming more interconnected in guaranteeing preparedness, response, and recovery from climatic shocks.

Broadly speaking, a food voucher program could influence populations’ climate resilience through three main outcome pathways:

1. Improve food security and nutrition: Food security is closely linked to resilience, as food-secure households are better equipped to cope with climate shocks, like they can maintain better health, nutrition and productivity because of better access to food and more diversified diets, and are less likely to respond to shocks by reducing the quantity and quality of food. The intervention enables households to avoid the long-term consequences of shocks on nutrition and health, such as keeping at bay or reducing stunting, wasting, or micronutrient deficiencies.

2. Increase household savings: By alleviating food costs, a voucher program may allow households to save more and eventually reduce debt. These financial buffers could improve the household’s ability to anticipate and absorb climate-related shocks.

3. Strengthen climate risk management: To the extent that livelihood interventions align with climate adaptation goals, a voucher program could contribute to building adaptive capacities. For example, livelihood interventions can build skills and facilitate investment and access to jobs and livelihoods that are less vulnerable to climate shocks, including activities directly enhancing climate resilience such as climate smart and nutrition sensitive agriculture and community level climate adaptation activities. Furthermore, better income liquidity due to a voucher program could influence overall adaptive capacity or even contribute to long term transformative capacity by enhancing human capital and thus providing a further layer of climate resilience.

Let us illustrate the example of the Walang Gutom Program in the Philippines. The Walang Gutom Program aims to address food poverty and hunger through digital food vouchers, redeemable at selected retailers, with predetermined thresholds for carbohydrates, protein and fruits and vegetables. Complementary activities include social and behavioral change communication (SBCC) sessions on nutrition and job readiness. Linkages to government-run, active labor market programs are also a part of the design and have been implemented. By supporting local retailers, the Walang Gutom Program also aims to increase the availability of nutritious food and strengthen local food systems. The first 6-months pilot phase (December 2023 to July 2024) was evaluated by Kangasniemi *et al.* (2025), who focused on the climate resilience aspect of the program to inform national scale-up plans and for full integration into the Philippines’ social protection system.

The overall pilot evaluation found modest improvements in beneficiaries’ nutrition and health, and generated positive improvements in well-being (ADB & AFD, 2025). The pilot’s short-term impact on climate resilience through absorptive and adaptive capacity was limited. However, its potential led the way for evidence-based recommendations to expand the program to better integrate with the national ASP system (Kangasniemi *et al.*, 2025).

A voucher program should be designed to be well integrated in a national social protection system, and should respond to national climate adaptation needs.

In principle, appropriate registration and delivery modalities can make food vouchers an adaptable instrument for climate response, enabling rapid scale-up and targeted support to affected groups. Interoperable and integrated digital information systems can further enhance the use of food vouchers to improve climate resilience and to respond to climate shocks. Such information systems enable consistent targeting without gaps, more efficient data collection, and simplified administrative procedures through dynamic registration, beneficiary identification, and timely shock response. The combination of a unified registry, integrated information systems and different delivery modalities could improve responses to climate-induced shocks, where the voucher may be adjusted to respond to beneficiaries’ needs.

A food voucher is not, however, a “one-size-fits-all” instrument, as alone it would not be capable of supporting the overall well-being of the entire population. Often, food voucher programs delivered at scale can be designed to be primary or secondary instruments of a “plus” initiative, that is, a social protection program accompanied by other instruments to accommodate additional objectives. Furthermore, the design and delivery should be well integrated into the national social protection system and national adaptation strategy. In what follows, we show some options to connect the Walang Gutom Program food vouchers to the Filipino ASP system.

How could the Walang Gutom Program food vouchers be better integrated into the national Adaptive Social Protection system?

Integrated programming is needed to create convergence with other programs in the ASP system.

This encompasses the idea that achieving progress on complex challenges, like poverty and resilience building, requires an intentional coordination in the design and delivery of programs in a way that crosses the boundaries of a single outcome or sector. Among the Philippine’s core social protection programs, including the Walang Gutom Program, convergence is a recognized key priority. However, in practice, convergence could be strengthened in the implementation of joint targeting exercises, the harmonization of complementary activities (like the SBCC initiatives), and more flexible payment mechanisms adapted to different situations (including the establishment of a joint mobile wallet).

The Walang Gutom Program operationalization provides opportunities to integrate anticipatory and shock-response activities, in order to strengthen its contribution to the national ASP system. There is promising, albeit nascent, progress towards including anticipatory action and strengthened shock-response measures to bolster the adaptive components of the Filipino social protection system. For instance, the Walang Gutom Program could align with other ongoing programs in reviewing and, where appropriate, adjusting (including suspending or removing) conditionalities during disaster periods.

Link the Walang Gutom Program and other social protection programs to climate policies through improved integration and data systems.

While specific climate objectives are not common in the Philippines’ social protection programs, there are more frequent examples of climate-sensitive components being integrated. As an example, the development of a Phase 2 for the Adaptive and Shock Responsive Social Protection Roadmap could be useful to develop a guiding document for the integration of ASP instruments in the support of national climate policies, in addition to defining a unified climate risk assessment of the ASP system, to ensure the presence of resilience building within programs’ objectives or implementation. As information systems and data exchanges are governed through specific legislative frameworks, the Roadmap Phase 2 could provide a space for agencies to define the legal changes needed to accommodate secure bulk data exchange for analysis, scenario building and programming.

Strengthen the interoperability and delivery of the Walang Gutom Program and the other ASP programs, extending joint e-governance and the utilization of the national ID system.

Creating a single, regularly updated database of beneficiaries (such as the dxCLOUD, or Digital Exchange – Client’s Link of Unified Data) would help ensure people get the right support across programs. To improve delivery, programs could use the national ID system to verify beneficiaries, avoiding the need for separate identification and authentication, also reducing administrative burdens. Its offline features can be used for beneficiaries in remote locations to register and authenticate for program access. Government agencies could also streamline the process for linking their systems with the national ID.

Based on Kangasniemi *et al.* (2025) and the Filipino experience in developing an ASP system, we can draw several global policy recommendations to strengthen the integration of food vouchers into broader ASP systems and its use towards enhancing climate resilience:

First, ensure the adaptive aspect is clear in the legal framework of the policy. Develop a clear logic of how the program can improve climate resilience and what is required for this in terms of design and implementation. Integrate with climate policies and national development plans, ensuring the awareness of climate risks and impacts is accounted for in the definition of program relevance.

Second, complement this with a regulatory framework that involves climate information, collection and use. This will allow accessibility and effective use of climate information both in the design (coverage, targeting, modality) and delivery (shock responsiveness and anticipatory action) of the vouchers.

Third, ensure that the program fits in the overall social protection system. To excel in its functions, a social protection system should progress towards universality. Thus, vulnerable populations should be covered by an appropriate program or several programs at all times, both in the long term and before, during and after shocks.

Fourth, ensure design adjustments are allowed to implement logical program linkages across the national system. This applies to both having access to several programs at the same time or sequencing programs over time.

Fifth, use delivery mechanisms that ensure vouchers are functional and respond to the needs of the population in all circumstances, also during and after shocks.

Sixth, make the most of digital food vouchers. For example, enhance financial inclusion and use anticipatory or shock responsive transfers using mobile wallets.

Lastly, the success of vouchers, as that of cash-based programs, depends on the underlying administrative and digital systems and on their interaction. To ensure a voucher program as the broader ASP system to work dynamically with evolving time, policy design and tweaks should be driven to ensure unified, dynamic and interoperable information systems built on national IDs.

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