**Burkina Faso**’s economy is predominantly agrarian-based. Over 90 percent of the country’s population lives in rural areas and more than 80 percent of the working population derives their income from agriculture, mostly subsistence farming. Due to the country’s reliance on agriculture, **Burkina Faso** is susceptible to environmental crises. Severe weather fluctuations, such as a reduction in rainfall that damages agriculture, cause severe decreases in families’ income causing malnutrition and other health-related problems. The country’s population is particularly destitute. Most recently, the [UNDP Human Development Index](https://www.undp.org) that is based on three basic dimensions of human development - health, education and income - rated **Burkina Faso** one of the lowest in the world (161 out of 169 countries). Over 40 percent of the country’s population lives under the poverty line and more than 20 percent of the population lives permanently in chronic poverty and is food insecure.

In **Burkina Faso**, like many African countries, the need to support poor and vulnerable households is great. However, the scope and coverage of the existing social safety net system is very limited. Governments are lacking resources, thus, the resources that do exist need to be well targeted to cover the poor. In **Burkina Faso**, almost half of the funds spent on social safety net are not targeted to poor households. For instance, in 2007, the total spending on social safety net programs (including fuel subsidies) reached about 1.3 percent of GDP but spending on targeted safety nets was 0.6 percent of GDP while a universal fuel subsidy that barely reached poor households was 0.7 percent of GDP. It is estimated that 84 percent of the fuel subsidy beneficiaries were households from higher income groups. Furthermore, most of the financing for social safety nets is dependent on the availability of external donor financing. Consequently, programs are donor driven since they are susceptible to funds that disappear when donors’ priorities shift. For instance, the World Food Program (WFP) funded a voucher program in the two largest urban areas in **Burkina Faso** and attempted to support 30,000 individuals; unfortunately, the program was short lived because funding was no longer available.

Given the persistence of chronic poverty and the lack of a comprehensive social safety net system to mitigate against shocks, such as severe drought, the country is vulnerable to crises. Because the poor are most exposed to risks and have the fewest means to cope with these risks, shocks affect the poorest Burkinabes particularly hard. Currently, the Government of **Burkina Faso** is eager to strengthen its social safety net system to protect poor households. There are many examples of social safety net programs that are working in countries in Latin America, South Asia, and Africa. But the central question here is how can a social safety net system, which can offer the best results within the social and economic context of **Burkina Faso**, be designed and implemented? The [World Bank’s Rapid Social Response Program (RSR)](https://www.worldbank.org) is supporting the work necessary for the Government, donors and other stakeholders to develop a more efficient and cost effective safety net system in **Burkina Faso** to address these issues.

Before receiving RSR support, the **World Bank**, with the request from the Government of **Burkina Faso**, had already conducted a careful review of the country’s existing social safety net system. During the review process, the Government, donors (particularly UNICEF and WFP) and other stakeholders were closely collaborating and discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the existing programs. They were also planning the next steps towards building a social safety net system.

One of the steps, currently funded by the RSR, is to conduct feasibility studies to assess the viability of how cash transfer and public works programs might perform in **Burkina Faso**. To build a well-functioning system requires
a methodical approach in which decisions are based on credible information on existing experiences within the country and best practices of social safety net programs of other countries. The feasibility studies will examine the existing experiences of cash transfer and public works programs within Burkina Faso and best practices of these programs in other countries. With this pool of information, the project will then accomplish the following:

- outline the key operational and design features of public works and cash transfer programs that are most relevant for Burkina Faso and that have best chances for success including delineating the mechanics of implementing the programs such as targeting method (how beneficiaries will be identified); how households will be registered, payment modalities, operational costs, etc;
- identify who (e.g., central and/or local government agencies, etc.) will be implementing the selected programs;
- define monitoring and evaluation indicators to be used to measure program outcomes;
- prepare implementation plans for a potential pilot project that specify scale, cost and duration of implementation; and,
- develop an interim operational procedures manual to guide the implementation of selected programs.

The preliminary draft feasibility studies will be ready by September 2011.

Finally, the project will compile the lessons learned from these feasibility studies, and organize workshops with government, donors, and other stakeholders to disseminate information. With this information on hand, the Government of Burkina Faso can exercise leadership and make effectual planning decisions about the development of the safety net system that is both suitable for the country’s social and economic conditions and that can best meet the needs of its poorest and most vulnerable families - that is, 10 to 20 percent of the population in Burkina Faso. By clearly defining a system, the government can guide the programs funded by donors, rather than being dependent on donor driven decisions.

Presentation of the findings and discussions with the Government of Burkina Faso, donors, and other stakeholders on designing a more comprehensive social safety net system will continue through 2012. The findings of this work will provide valuable inputs to the design of a Safety Net project that is planned for 2013 to be financed by the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank’s funds for the poorest countries.

Written by Andrea L. Robles, May 2, 2011

This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank Group, its Executive Directors or the governments they represent. Rapid Social Response Program (RSR) is part of the World Bank’s response to the Food, Fuel and Financial Crisis. Its mission is to help the World’s poorest countries become better prepared to cope with systemic and unpredictable shocks. RSR has been generously supported by the governments of Russian Federation, Norway and United Kingdom. For further information, please visit http://www.worldbank.org/rsr.


These are estimated figures are for 2009 based on economic projections. The World Bank is currently preparing an updated poverty assessment based on the 2009/2010 Household Budget Survey.


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