



Enhancing Public Works Programmes: Sustainable Impact through Participatory Asset Creation and Digitalisation

Francesco Burchi & Tekalign Gutu Sakketa

Summary

Public works programmes (PWP) are widely used social protection instruments in low- and middle-income countries. Participants carry out temporary, labour-intensive works in exchange for cash or in-kind compensation. The available empirical evidence indicates that these programmes are usually effective in improving outcomes such as food security and earnings in the short term, but these positive effects rarely persist in the long term.

Our knowledge of PWP's effectiveness is, however, incomplete as scholars have mostly examined programme impacts through the wage channel, largely neglecting the skill-development and, especially, the asset channels. PWP participants engage in the construction of assets, such as roads, check dams and sewage systems, that could provide important benefits for the whole community. Without assessing these effects, it is normal to arrive at the general (biased) conclusion that cash transfers (CTs) are always more cost-effective than PWP.

Moreover, the effectiveness of PWP largely depends on programme design, implementation and context. Based on the existing empirical evidence and our recent fieldwork to analyse Malawi's PWP, this policy brief provides the following policy recommendations for how to enhance the potential of these programmes.

- Policy-makers should design PWP to guarantee stable, reliable employment; set wages not higher than market levels but high enough to incentivise participation; ensure transparency in the targeting, possibly by involving communities and at the same time avoiding elite capture; align the timing of work cycles with local agricultural calendars; and assign tasks in a way that reduces travel burdens, especially for women.
- Policy-makers should promote active community participation in the identification and maintenance of the assets created through PWP. Evidence points to the importance of community participation for the implementation of higher quality infrastructure and better long-term maintenance. Only in this way, can these assets provide sustainable benefits not just for programme participants, but for the entire community. Approaches like those used in Ethiopia and Malawi can serve as models to enhance active community participation in the programme cycle.
- Digitalisation of PWP (and social protection in general) should be promoted as it offers great advantages, but specific measures should be adopted to avoid their negative consequences:
 1. The construction of a digital registry of beneficiaries is a great tool to reach the intended beneficiaries and coordinate the various schemes. Development cooperation actors should provide technical support for the creation and updating of these databases, then leave them in the hands of national institutions.
 2. The digitalisation of reporting systems for work activities is likely to improve the accuracy and efficiency of the information reported. To achieve this, it is essential to provide the "digitisers" with proper training.
 3. It is important to move from physical cash payments to e-payments, but it is firstly necessary to ensure adequate digital literacy through training. Moreover, to compensate for the impossibility to interact with programme officials at the time of payment, PWP should include complaint handling points, as is done in India.

Public works programmes in low- and middle-income countries

PWPs – also referred to as workfare or cash/food/input-for-work programmes – provide temporary employment opportunities typically to individuals in poor or vulnerable areas. Participants in PWPs engage in labour-intensive tasks, such as constructing or maintaining public infrastructures or delivering public services; in return for their work, they receive compensation either in cash (more common) or in kind (often in the form of food).

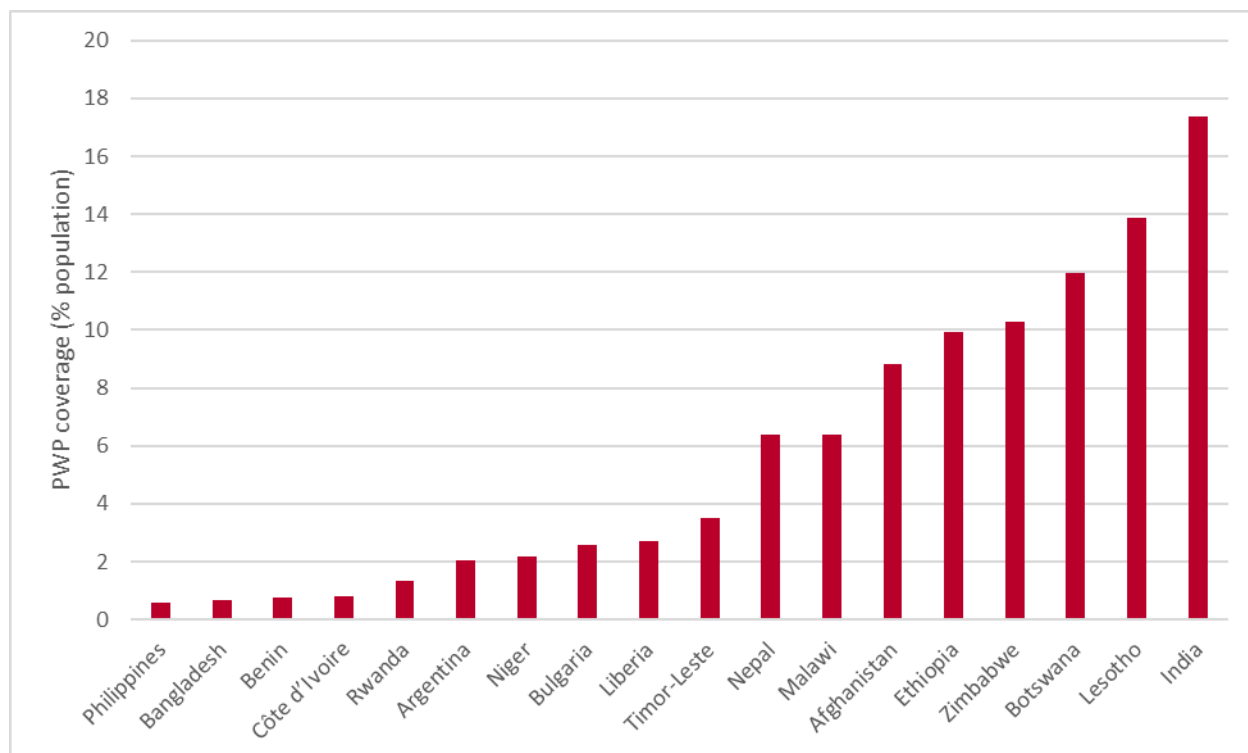
PWPs are commonly used social protection schemes in low- and middle-income countries. Globally, they are implemented in over 90 countries. As shown in Figure 1, the percentage of population covered by this social protection scheme varies greatly: from less than 1 per cent in countries like the Philippines, Bangladesh and Benin to 14 per cent in Lesotho and even 17.4 per cent in India, where participation in the PWP is a legal entitlement (World Bank, 2025). Public spending on PWPs makes up a large share of the

social assistance budget in South Asia (25 per cent), less in Sub-Saharan Africa (12 per cent) and even less in the Middle East and North Africa (World Bank, 2018).

The general objective of these programmes is to reduce poverty and vulnerability by providing income support (wage channel) and by creating or improving community assets (asset channel), and to enhance employability through training (skill-development channel). The positive effects can, therefore, extend from the immediate PWP participants to the whole community where the programme is implemented. Recently, in a few countries, such as Malawi, PWPs have directly integrated climate adaptation objectives into their design, paving the way to enhance climate resilience.

This policy brief discusses some of the main factors that determine the success of PWPs in low- and middle-income countries and, above all, provides policy recommendations on how to design and implement these programmes to be successful.

Figure 1: PWP coverage (% population), selected countries



Source: Authors' elaboration based on World Bank (2025)

Specifically, we emphasise two key areas that have been given less attention: (1) how to identify assets in such a way to ensure their sustainability over time and maximise their effects and (2) the challenge of digitalising PWPs in societies with low digital literacy. In doing so, we build on existing academic literature and policy papers, as well as on insights gained during our fieldwork in Malawi in September 2024 for the analysis of the Climate-Smart Enhanced PWP (CS-PWP).

Are PWPs an effective instrument?

Over the past two decades, the growing importance of PWPs has spurred numerous empirical studies examining their effects on outcomes such as food security, employment, and earnings (Bagga et al., 2023; Gehrke & Hartwig, 2018). By ensuring temporary employment for households living in poverty, these programmes are usually effective in improving the outcomes above in the short term; however, most of these effects tend to fade in the long term.

PWPs have also been sometimes associated with broader benefits, such as social cohesion and women's empowerment (Zintl & Loewe, 2022). In addition, a recent study shows PWPs' important role in promoting climate resilience (Aurino et al., 2024).

The available evidence so far is, however, still limited for two main reasons. First, it largely focusses on two prominent programmes: the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in India and the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in Ethiopia. Second, it investigates PWPs' effects almost exclusively through the wage channel, with scarce attention to the asset/infrastructure channel (Bagga et al., 2023). Some of the important reasons for this negligence are related to the difficulty in assessing programme impacts through the asset channel as they may materialise only in the long run and to the fact that infrastructure creation is often not considered an inherent component of social protection, and, therefore, is

outside the competency of the ministers usually in charge of PWPs.

This oversight is significant, as neglecting the assets created through PWPs undermines their justification compared with simpler social protection schemes like cash transfers (CTs). Constructing assets can be costly, but it holds transformative potential. As emphasised in Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's (BMZ) strategy on "Health, Social Protection and Population Dynamics," the choice between cash-for-work and other social protection schemes should be context specific (BMZ, 2023).

Aurino et al. (2024) further highlight that in the few cases where the asset channel has been assessed – mostly through qualitative methods – it has demonstrated promising benefits, particularly in enhancing climate resilience. This evidence calls for a re-evaluation of how PWPs are designed and assessed, placing greater emphasis on their capacity to deliver effective, durable and context-appropriate infrastructures.

Designing and implementing PWPs: established determinants of success

As is often the case, the evidence on the effects of these programmes is not clear-cut and depends on several factors. In particular, how PWPs are designed and implemented makes a huge difference in their effectiveness. In what follows, we outline some of the established determinants of success that have been widely discussed in the academic and policy arenas.

Duration of employment: By their nature, PWPs are designed to provide employment for a limited period, which varies widely from country to country, ranging from a total of 2.5 months in Djibouti to 18 months in Egypt (distributed in three consecutive years). While it is still unclear what the optimal duration of employment is, it appears evident that programmes with limited duration, like the Cash-for-Work programme in Somalia, yield significantly fewer benefits.

Wage level: Setting the right daily wage is crucial for the effectiveness of PWP. Wages should not be too high – and normally not above market wages – so that only poor and vulnerable groups are incentivised to participate, and it does not create major distortions to the local labour market. On the other hand, they should be high enough to increase take-up and lead to larger impacts. Evidence shows that only when wages are not too low, do PWPs generate mid-term effects on outcomes such as savings and investments. Although there is important variability across programmes, the tendency is to set pay close to the national minimum wage (where available) (Bagga et al., 2023).

Targeting: Some PWPs, such as India’s MGNREGS, rely on self-targeting of the beneficiaries, while others, such as those in Ethiopia and Malawi adopt targeting criteria similar to those normally used for CTs (such as proxy means tests). These are usually accompanied by geographic or community-based targeting, with PWPs more often operating in rural areas. Which approach to follow must be decided on a case-by-case basis, bearing in mind that a proxy means-test type of targeting may lead to a more accurate identification of the expected beneficiaries than self-targeting, but the former is far more costly than the latter. Regardless of the specific targeting mechanism, it is essential that these criteria are perceived as transparent and properly communicated; involving the community in the targeting process can be useful for that purpose (Loewe et al., 2020).

Skills development: While most PWPs involve short-term, low-skilled work for a short duration with limited opportunities for skill transfer, there are cases where PWPs complemented with training activities are better at facilitating transitions from temporary PWPs to more stable forms of employment and generate higher benefits, as seen in Argentina and Côte d’Ivoire. It is therefore advisable to integrate basic training in animal husbandry, crop production and soil conservation in the design of PWPs.

Timing of the PWPs’ work: Timing is critical to creating quality assets as well as economic benefits. Temporary work offered to beneficiaries should take into account the agricultural calendar so that it does not create an additional burden or conflict with household farming activities, unless these activities are time-sensitive and require additional work outside the PWP cycles. In Malawi, for example, PWP participants complained that they had to work in the mornings and on Sundays, which had negative consequences on personal and household wellbeing.

At the same time, there are design and implementation features that have not been adequately taken into account in the formulation of PWPs. In the next sections we discuss two crucial aspects: (1) how to identify and maintain assets and (2) the multiple challenges in digitising PWPs.

The role of assets: how to identify and maintain them?

As already highlighted, the role of the asset created through the PWP has often been neglected in academia as well as by policy-makers. However, this means disregarding a consistent share of the possible benefits generated by these programmes for PWP participants and even more for non-beneficiaries (whom there are potentially many more of than in other programmes like CTs). Not considering the asset creation under PWPs leads to an assessment of CTs being more cost-effective than PWPs.

How little attention is paid to the assets is clear in a few studies that show that the quality of the infrastructure was poor from the onset of the project or deteriorated after just one or two years (Beierl & Grimm, 2018). It is, therefore, important to understand how to enhance the quality and sustainability of assets so that PWPs can ensure long-lasting positive impacts through this component. This is what we discuss in the next paragraphs.

As a general point, the quality and sustainability of the assets depends on the combination of labour

and machines used to realise them. While in general PWPs are employment-intensive, the degree of this intensity depends on the type of assets and the main objective. If the main purpose is to enhance access to markets and public services through rural roads, a lower labour-intensity may guarantee higher quality. In contrast, if there is a need for a better sewage system or restoration of ecosystem services, more labour-intensive solutions are likely to yield better results.

Another crucial aspect is that communities do not always perceive PWP infrastructure as useful (often even from the beginning of its construction), and thus they may have little incentive to use and maintain it properly, especially once the programme is discontinued. Some evidence shows that this is strictly related to the lack of participation of the community in the different phases of the programme cycle: selection, implementation, management and maintenance of the assets. In fact, a few studies have shown that higher community participation is associated with creation of higher-quality infrastructure (Mansuri, 2012), as well as improvement in the design and construction of PWPs and their maintenance (Shigute, 2022). Therefore, greater emphasis on community participation is essential.

The next step is, then, to understand *how* to better involve communities in the various project activities. While it is impossible (and dangerous) to provide a one-size-fits-all solution as these processes are strictly dependent on local institutions and social norms, we believe that the experiences of Ethiopia's PSNP and Malawi's CS-PWP offer good lessons.

PSNP used the Community-Based Participatory Watershed Development (CBPWD) approach, which aims to create long-lasting, high-quality rural infrastructure by empowering communities to participate in all project phases: planning and implementation, project usage and benefit distribution, maintenance, and project monitoring and evaluation. By doing so, this approach fosters a sense of ownership and sustainability in watershed development projects.

Detailed guidelines provided in the CBPWD project manual outline the necessary steps to ensure community involvement, offering practical advice on selecting and realising appropriate assets in different conditions. The first step consists of the correct selection of watersheds; this includes forming and organising watershed teams at the district level. Next, the community forms and organises watershed planning teams by calling the general assembly to provide an introduction of the relevance of watershed and management issues (to raise interest among the community) as well as to elect a representative community watershed team. Then, through a survey aimed at knowing the watershed and especially people's needs, strengths and aspirations, programme designers identify the core interventions to prioritise. Then the different intervention options are discussed and approved by the general assembly, leading to the preparation of maps, inputs and action plans. Finally, this manual indicates how people participate in the realisation, monitoring and evaluation of the selected assets. Shigute (2022) shows that the average levels of participation within PSNP are relatively high and that they become very high in districts with higher awareness of the watershed, leading to higher quality assets.

Malawi's CS-PWP also follows a watershed logic called the Village Level Action Plans (VLAPs). The activities take place at the micro-catchment level, where a micro-catchment is a climate-vulnerable, geographical hotspot, usually less than 250 ha, and there are on average about five per district. By design, all catchment residents, whether enrolled in the programme or not, are invited to participate and develop these VLAPs through the formation of local committees to steer and coordinate the implementation of these plans as well as to determine how to implement the projects. During our interviews with communities in the Southern districts of Malawi, most of the respondents reported being satisfied with their general level of engagement in the programme and, above all, considered the assets constructed – mostly check dams, swales and planting trees – very useful. They even stressed that they found these assets

more useful than those constructed in the old phase of Malawi's PWP – mostly seasonal roads and bridges – as they see how they contribute to their resilience against climate-related shocks, primarily droughts and floods. For this reason, they repeatedly stated that they would continue to do the maintenance of the assets even if the programme is discontinued, contributing this way to the sustainability of projects. Also, community members who were not directly participating in the PWP seemed aware of the benefits of these assets. Finally, both our direct observation as well as previous assessments confirmed that CS-PWP assets are generally of high quality.

Digitalisation of PWPs

Digitalisation offers significant opportunities to improve the effectiveness, efficiency (in targeting), monitoring and payment processes of PWPs. That is why it is currently very high on the international agenda on social protection among policy-makers, including the BMZ (BMZ, 2023). The shift to digital is also associated with improved well-being and reduced poverty among digital recipients, in part due to the reallocation of reduced time to productive activities (Aker et al., 2016). However, to exploit the benefits of digitalisation, it is necessary to address some critical points.

We discuss opportunities and challenges in the digitalisation of PWPs in three different activities: (1) the registration of beneficiaries, (2) the reporting of PWP activities and (3) payments.

Digitalising the registration of beneficiaries: programme registry systems

Digitalisation of programme systems is not specific to PWPs, but it can be applied to other social protection schemes. In some countries, mostly middle-income countries, over 70 per cent of the population is registered (Grosh et al., 2022). Digital databases of programme beneficiaries serve as a useful starting point for identifying new beneficiaries and ensure interoperability with national identification systems for better targeting and coverage. For instance, during the COVID-19

response, countries using digital databases and data exchange to identify populations reached a much higher share of their population with emergency social protection than countries that had to collect new data (Lowe et al., 2023). Additionally, responses tend to be faster in countries that can enrol participants using pre-existing social registries covering more than 15 per cent of the population (Beazley et al., 2021). Moreover, digital approaches help improve the accuracy of service provision by removing duplicates and reaching the intended participants. For example, the implementation of new digital systems in Turkey revealed that about 10 per cent of social assistance benefits were duplicates.

Similar issues are likely prevalent in many PWPs where universal beneficiary registries (UBRs) are rarely digitalised. Even in cases of PWPs with self-targeting mechanisms (like MGNREGS in India), UBRs are still very useful as they provide a general picture of which households/individuals participate in which social protection programme. In Malawi, over the past years, GIZ (Germany's main development agency) with funds from BMZ has played a prominent role in producing a comprehensive country-wide UBR. This is currently active and used to identify CS-PWP's beneficiaries. This system was highly appreciated by the programme participants we interviewed, as they consider this list of beneficiaries as coming from official government sources rather than from the local chief, whom they often trust less. However, in the absence of adequate personal data protection policies, the digitisation of beneficiaries in automatic regimes poses several risks, such as surveillance or misuse of data, as it involves the collection and management of sensitive data in a context where power is often concentrated and accountability mechanisms may be weak.

Therefore, development cooperation actors should provide technical support for the creation of these databases, as this instrument then remains in the hands of national ministries, ensuring country ownership. At the same time, these systems should be regularly updated, which

may sometimes be a challenge as is now the case in Malawi. In addition, the system requires a stable management information system (MIS). The functionality of the MIS system is critical and requires well-equipped IT capacity.

Digitalising the reporting of PWP activities

The digitalisation of activity reporting systems (working hours, work typology) can increase PWP's efficiency and transparency, too. In Malawi, for instance, this has significantly expedited the time-consuming process of report compilation by extension workers and foremen during PWP activities. Before digitalisation, foremen manually recorded the log sheet participants' daily hours worked in micro-catchments and reported them to extension workers, who then consolidated all the reports and submitted them to the district council. The district council then forwarded the reports to the national social protection officer to proceed with the payments. With the introduction of digitised reporting of PWP activities, foremen (hired to digitise log sheets) can enter participants' working hours directly into an ad-hoc application. This data is accessible in real time to both the district council and national desk officers, streamlining the reporting process and reducing delays and errors in reporting.

However, building the capacity of programme staff and local governments, including digitisers at the front line, to facilitate the use of digital tools is also critical. In conclusion, shifting from a paper-based to a digital reporting system can be very useful for PWPs. Of course, one must expect these benefits to emerge more in the mid-term as it could take some time to train the "digitisers", especially in contexts where the average digital literacy is low.

Digitalising payments (e-payments)

There is a growing trend towards using digital methods for government payment distribution, replacing paper-based mechanisms. Digital payment instruments include a wide range of mechanisms, such as direct bank transfers, mobile money and payments to digital wallets. In many

countries, the majority of government payments are now made through these methods (Gentilini, 2022). In India, for example, direct bank transfers are used to reach social programmes' recipients through biometrically authenticated accounts. In Sub-Saharan African countries, like Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, instead, mobile money is largely employed to disburse social assistance and pensions. Payments to digital wallets are used in Colombia's national CT programme.

E-payments can enhance the ease, quality and scope of access to services; moreover, they are generally safer, less stigmatising and more flexible than manual payments. E-payments can save beneficiaries time and costs by reducing transaction costs to access provision and cutting down waiting times and delays. For example, in India, PWP participants spent about 20 per cent less time collecting their wage payments through biometrically authenticated smartcards compared with physical cash disbursements; this also led to a reduction in leakage by 41 per cent (Muralidharan et al., 2016). Similarly, mobile payments were highly preferred in Bangladesh due to reduced travel requirements and greater flexibility in timing as well as in Ethiopia due to increased proximity, flexibility and speed in collecting payments.

However, the shift to e-payments can also have negative effects. First, it can increase the "distance" between beneficiaries and institutions. For example, CS-PWP participants in one district of Malawi where e-payments were recently piloted complained that they were no longer able to inquire directly with officials when they received less money than expected; moreover, they were forced to go through a cumbersome process that causes delays and additional costs to reclaim the payment. Second, e-payments are clearly incompatible with programme participants' possible preference to receive payments in kind, especially food. A strong preference for payments in food was reported among PSNP beneficiaries in Ethiopia, among CTs' beneficiaries in several

countries, as well among our respondents in Malawi (Hirvonen & Hoddinott, 2020).

Moreover, PWPs with e-payments may have lower effects than those using traditional paper-based cash payments in areas with low digital literacy, which is quite common in low-income countries. For example, in Malawi several PWP beneficiaries were not aware of how to use SIM cards to receive the payment; this led to delays and extra costs for paying local agents who supported them in receiving the money. Therefore, it is fundamental to accompany PWPs with digital literacy training and at the same time to adopt user-friendly, accessible digital platforms.

Policy recommendations

PWPs are widespread social protection instruments with great potential to reduce poverty and vulnerability. However, to achieve these objectives, policy-makers should pay major attention to the following issues.

First, key design and implementation features, such as the duration of employment, wage levels, targeting and the timing of work cycles. For programmes with limited employment duration, providing more stable and reliable employment is essential. Additionally, while wage levels should be set to avoid market distortions, the rate should be set in a way that incentivises participation and makes a difference for people's economic conditions. While self-targeting is cost-effective, care should be taken in minimising targeting errors. In all cases, it is fundamental to have selection criteria that are perceived as transparent by the population, to involve the community in the selection process and, at the same time, to avoid elite capture. Finally, the timing of work cycles should align with local agricultural calendars, and work should be allocated in a way that reduces travel burdens by locating tasks closer to beneficiaries' homes, especially for women (as is the case in India).

Second, policy-makers should promote active community participation in the identification and maintenance of the assets created through PWPs.

Only in this way, can these assets be contextually appropriate and provide sustainable benefits for the communities. Approaches like the PSNP's CBPWD and Malawi's VLAPs can serve as models to enhance active community participation in the programme cycle. Moreover, in the selection and realisation of the infrastructure, it is important to find a good balance between use of labour, which is fundamental for short-term poverty reduction, and use of machines, which can enhance the quality of the infrastructure.

Third, although the digitalisation of PWPs (and social protection in general) offers great advantages, there are some important challenges:

- The construction of a digital registry of social protection beneficiaries is a great tool to improve efficiency in reaching the targeted beneficiaries, in coordinating the various schemes and to ensure a prompt response to external shocks. Development cooperation actors should provide capacity building support for the creation and updating of these databases in low- and middle-income countries, then turn them over into the hands of national ministries.
- Specifically for PWPs, it is useful to ensure digitalisation of reporting systems for work activities as they are likely to improve the accuracy and efficiency of the information reported. For this to happen, it is fundamental to provide the "digitisers" with proper training.
- It is important to move from physical cash payments to e-payments, but this should be done with extreme caution. In particular, it is necessary to ensure an adequate level of digital literacy through training and adopt accessible digital platforms. The specific payment methods should be tailored to the needs of beneficiaries. Finally, to avoid negative consequences for social cohesion due to the impossibility to interact with programme officials at the time of payment, PWPs should include complaint handling points, as is the case in India.

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