

Safety Net ≠ Social Assistance

Nicholas Freeland

This is an appeal – primarily to the World Bank – to stop using (or abusing) the term “safety net”. For reasons best known to itself, the Bank now uses the term interchangeably with the term “social assistance”. But the two are not synonyms; and now, as it launches its new “Social Protection and Labor Strategy” for the next decade, is a propitious moment for the Bank to recognise this publicly, and to mend its semantic ways.

“Social assistance” defines a subset of social protection¹, comprising those social transfers that are non-contributory (ie which are funded from general government revenue, rather than from specific contributions by individuals). There are many definitions of social assistance², but most people would agree that the key characteristics are regularity, predictability over the long term, government ownership, and entitlement.

“Safety nets”, on the other hand, is a dangerously elusive and baggage-laden term. It was originally coined by the Bretton Woods institutions in the 1980s and 1990s to refer to temporary measures to catch those who were transiently made vulnerable through structural adjustment and liberalisation. Most people continue to use it in this original narrower definition of a temporary social transfer project, usually operated for a finite period and often outside of Government structures.

The World Bank, however, has incrementally mutated the term “safety net” (often now prefaced with “social” – ie “social safety net”) to become synonymous with social assistance. Indeed the current draft of the “Strategy” makes this explicit, baldly stating on page 1: “Social assistance programs (also known as safety net programs...)”. In fact, social assistance programmes are not “also known as safety net programs” by the majority of people outside the Bank ...nor should they be.

But, the Bank might say, terminology is allowed to evolve, and often does. Why should we object in this case? For three reasons, one definitional, one practical, and one Macchiavellian:

The definitional reason is that “safety net” is a clumsy and inadequate metaphor to capture what social assistance is meant to achieve. An actual “safety net” (eg one under a trapeze artist) is there to catch those who fall, no more, no less. Yet true social assistance, as the “Strategy” itself accepts in its belated adaptation of the “3Ps” framework, has three goals: (i) to catch people who fall (“protection”, or “equity” in Bank parlance), (ii) to prevent people from falling in the first place (“prevention”, or “resilience”), and (iii) to allow people, where possible, to raise themselves out of poverty (“promotion”, or “opportunity”). “Safety net” encapsulates only the first of these three goals. As a result of this deficiency, there has been a proliferation of slightly ridiculous terms such as “social springboards”, “social trampolines”, “safety ropes” and “safety ladders” to try to capture metaphorically the other functions of social assistance.³ There has also emerged the meaningless concept of “productive safety nets”: but how can a safety net be productive, either literally or figuratively? It is like talking about an “intelligent log” or an “emotional toothbrush” ...or perhaps a “compassionate economist”!

¹Many would argue that “social security” (the term more commonly used in OECD countries) should also be used globally, in preference to “social protection”.

²There is some debate about whether “social assistance” itself is the best term for such non-contributory transfers, since it may have connotations of charity rather than entitlement.

³The previous iteration of the Bank’s strategy paper (for 2000-2008) was even called “From Safety Nets to Springboards”.

The practical reason is that the use of “safety nets” as being synonymous with “social assistance” creates unnecessary confusion, because there is then no way of distinguishing temporary, short-term, discretionary measures implemented by external actors from guaranteed, long-term, entitlements offered by governments. And this is an increasingly important distinction in the social protection debate. There is certainly a continuing need to provide true “safety nets” in some instances, for example after a shock such as a drought, an earthquake or a dramatic rise in food prices, but this is not at all the kind of programme that the Bank is trying to promote in its new “Strategy” for 2012 to 2022, where the focus is on “the need to build a coherent portfolio of social protection and labor programs”, and whose “strategic direction is to help developing countries move from fragmented approaches to more harmonized systems”.

The Machiavellian reason is that it may suit the Bank to perpetuate the term to promote its own primary agenda: that of making loans. In the same way as subliminal advertising works, the use of the term “safety net” implies something temporary and finite, and may sub-consciously make governments more prepared to take on a loan than if the same

package is dressed up as “social assistance” with its connotations of long-term commitment and rights-based entitlement. [This is the same logic as underpins the Bank’s promotion of conditional cash transfers, because it is much easier to sell loans for programmes that can be justified on their educational and health objectives than for child benefits or other forms of unconditional social assistance.] The only other explanation for the Bank’s reticence to change would be an inbuilt institutional inertia: in other words that so much has been invested in “safety net” websites, how-to tools, evaluations, reports, etc, that it now becomes too daunting to redo them all.

But whatever the explanation, the time has come to change. So, please, before the Bank goes final with its “Strategy”, could it (i) replace that definitional entry on page 1 with the wording: “social assistance (formerly, and sometimes still incorrectly, referred to as safety nets)...”, and (ii) replace all 100 or so other occurrences of the term “safety net” with the term “social assistance”, except in the rare instances where it is actually referring to a short-term response to transitory poverty, operated substantially outside of government social protection frameworks?

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About The Author

Nicholas Freeland is an independent consultant in social protection. From 2005 to 2011 he was the Programme Director of the Regional Hunger & Vulnerability Programme (RHVP) in southern Africa, working to promote social protection as a response to chronic poverty. It was here that he first acquired his distaste for the distortion of the term "safety net".

For more information please feel free to get in touch, our contact details are below:

DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

Development Pathways

483 Green Lanes, London,
N13 4BS United Kingdom

M +44 (0) 781 345 7624

E admin@developmentpathways.co.uk

W www.developmentpathways.co.uk