Nearly 40 percent of Cameroon’s 19.5 million people live under the poverty line. Poverty rates are much higher in rural areas. Whereas in urban areas the incidence of poverty dropped from 17.9 percent to 12.2 percent from 2001 to 2007, in rural areas it rose from 52.1 percent to 55 percent during the same period. Moreover, the chronic poor, those that are poor and expect to remain poor, account for 26 percent of the population. Following the latest series of economic crises and recurring natural disasters such as drought, poor families in these regions are susceptible to falling deeper into poverty.

In Cameroon, the poorest and most vulnerable households have minimal access to social services or other forms of social protection. For example, in response to the food and fuel crises of 2008, the government relied on universal food and fuel subsidies. Neither has been successful in reaching the poor. Food subsidies on maize, flour, frozen fish, rice, and wheat do not specifically target the poor, children or other vulnerable groups. Fuel subsidies do not benefit the poor either because commercially available fuel, such as gasoline for cars, is more likely to be consumed only by households in higher income groups.

The Government of Cameroon is committed to strengthening its social safety net system to support the poorest and most vulnerable households during crises. However, it is a complex challenge. The World Bank’s Rapid Social Response Program is funding a project to make the system more comprehensive, flexible and suitable to the country’s economic and social conditions. In order to achieve its goal, the project will follow a series of steps (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Steps Towards Strengthening Cameroon’s Social Safety Net System**

1. **Step 1.** Build an inventory of existing social safety net programs in Cameroon and review their effectiveness.
2. **Step 2.** Appraise all potentially viable social safety net programs in Cameroon and elsewhere and prepare feasibility plans.
3. **Step 3.** Design, implement, and evaluate pilot projects to help fine tune best candidates (from Step 2).
4. **Step 4.** Evaluate the results from the background studies (Steps 1 and 2) and pilot projects (Step 3) and present findings to Government staff and other stakeholders.
5. **Step 5.** Design a comprehensive, flexible and suitable social safety net system to reach the poorest and most vulnerable households.

The first step encompasses building an inventory of existing social safety net programs in Cameroon and reviewing them to answer the following questions: What are the current programs and their objectives? Who are the beneficiaries? How are they targeted? How effective are the programs? How much do they cost?

In the second step, the project will appraise all potentially viable options for social safety nets—for example, cash transfers and public works—available in Cameroon and elsewhere. Cash transfers could help support very poor...
households, such as those in northern regions of the country. Public works programs could assist poor families when the labor market is slow and at the same time improve physical infrastructure. Both types of programs have shown good results in other countries and demonstrated flexibility to be scaled up in moments of crisis. The project will assess the feasibility of these types of programs as well as other safety net options in Cameroon by highlighting key operational and design features such as beneficiary identification and registration, modality of benefits payment, and overall program management practices. Based on the findings, the project will narrow the range of options to a few that have the best chances for success in Cameroon.

In Step 3, the project will design and support the pilot-implementation of the best program options identified in Step 2 in order to generate lessons that are useful for fine-tuning the design features of the programs. The pilot programs are planned to take place in the two poorest regions, North and Far North, where two out of every three people are poor, and about a third live in chronic poverty. The pilot project will include the training of local staff to begin building the capacity necessary for full-fledged implementation in the future.

In Step 4, the findings from the all the background studies in Steps 1 and 2 and the results and lessons of the pilot programs in Step 3 will be evaluated and presented to government staff, development partners, and other stakeholders.

In Step 5, the Government of Cameroon, in partnership with donors and other stakeholders, will be in the position to design and implement an effective nation-wide social safety net system suited for the country’s social and economic conditions. Implementing such a system will be beneficial for chronically poor and vulnerable households in both rural and urban areas.

The review of existing safety nets program in Cameroon (Step 1) will be completed by June 2011 and the identification and feasibility assessment of best options (Step 2), by September 2011. The design and pilot-implementation of the best options (Step 3) are scheduled to commence in late 2011. The evaluation of the lessons learned from the pilot implementation (Step 4) and the design of a new safety net system (Step 5) will continue through 2012.

Written by Andrea L. Robles, April 14, 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 Russia, Norway and United Kingdom. For further information, please visit http://www.worldbank.org/rsr.

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ii The World Bank team leaders for this project are Carlo del Ninno (Senior Economist, Human Development Department, Africa Region) and Setareh Razmara (Lead Social Protection Specialist, Human Development Department, Africa Region).

iii Important development partners for Cameroon include World Food Program, UNICEF and UNDP.