



European  
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# Learning from and for operations

Outcomes from a Workshop  
on evidence on social protection  
in contexts of fragility  
and forced displacement,

UNICEF Innocenti, June 2018

**SPaN**  
Supporting people through crisis



*Guidance Package on Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus*

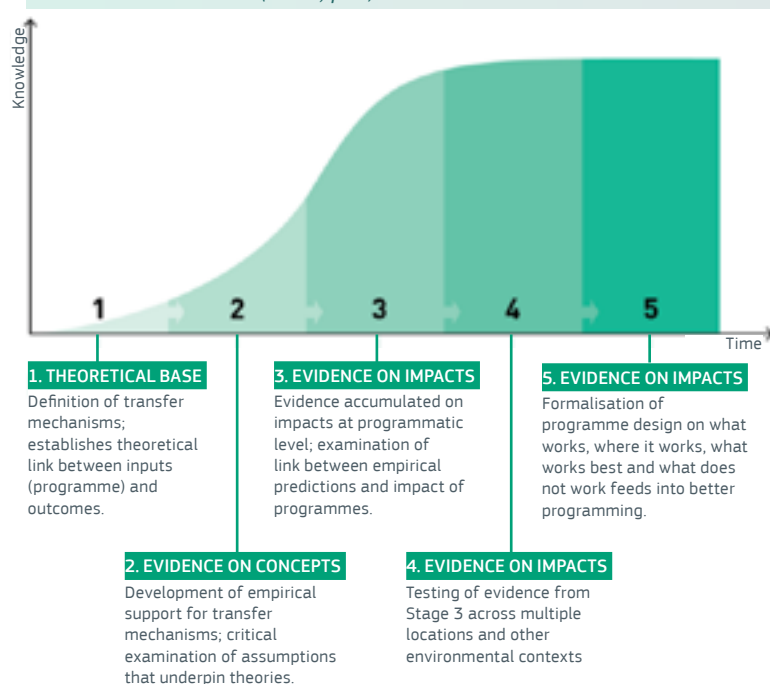
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The [workshop on evidence on social protection in contexts of fragility and forced displacement](#), which gathered development and humanitarian practitioners, donors and researchers at UNICEF Innocenti June 2018, has offered a great opportunity to reflect on our collective learning journey in this emerging field. Taking stock of recent scientific evidence, and exchanging on priority research gaps, has led to a deeper reflection on strategies and practices to progressively build the body of knowledge in a way that is directly relevant and easily accessible to front-line practitioners.

## I. Rising to our collective challenge

The [international conference](#) on social protection in contexts of fragility and forced displacement, held in Brussels in September 2017, set the scene very clearly: we are under pressure to act now; our knowledge base in this field is still weak and needs building up — we may be at state 1 or 2 of learning (Figure 1); but the lack of evidence should not stop us. We do not have the luxury of time; as a conference participant put it, “we need to fix the plane while we are flying.” This implies that we need to invest in knowledge creation and robust monitoring and evaluation systems now in order to rapidly build the knowledge stock.

Figure 1: Stages of Learning  
Source: Brück et al. (2016, p. 5).



For professionals operating in this field, this situation implies making difficult decisions and trade-offs:

- In a context of scarcity of resources, donors need to strike an appropriate balance between funds invested in research and funds invested in saving lives and building resilience in crisis settings;
- In challenging, often fast-changing and insecure settings, researchers need to innovate and, at times, trade-off best quality and robust research with the need to supply decision-makers with ‘good enough’ evidence in due time;
- Practitioners, prompted to make evidence-informed decisions to maximise efficiency and cost-effectiveness, need to keep up-to-date with the latest research and promising practices on a wide variety of topics, while maintaining the ability to adapt to change in a timely manner in some of the most challenging and complex contexts in the world.

In order to rise to these challenges, we need a collective knowledge strategy that works. As a global community of practice, we need to get more systematic with our knowledge in order to avoid duplicating efforts, leaving gaps, losing time and drawing excessive financial and human resources away from operations.

### PAUSE, BREATHE, SENSE

What can we learn from a recent major innovation in the sector such as the introduction and rapid expansion of the use of cash transfers in emergencies some 15 years ago? Which strategies were put in place to build knowledge and facilitate its dissemination and uptake? Which ones proved successful and would be worth replicating? Which practices proved counterproductive and should be avoided this time around? What new threats and opportunities do we need to take into account today when considering how to create, share and apply knowledge around social protection in crisis contexts in a timely and effective manner?

## II. Creating, sharing and using knowledge effectively

The [workshop report](#) offers a summary of the evidence base presented and discussed during the two-day meeting – with hyperlinks to the respective publications. As a complement, below are some highlights of a break-out group reflection on “learning from operations” held during the workshop. Interestingly, the group tended to agree that quantitative evidence brought by randomised control trials (RCTs) have limited use for practitioners tasked to design or adjust operations: results often come too late (2-3 years down the road) and are very specific to one operation and setting; and RCTs are often focused on uncovering whether an operation worked rather than how it worked or not. Surely quantitative evidence is useful for accountability and advocacy purposes, but to inform programme design and implementation, investment in alternative forms of research and learning is also urgently required.

When considering appropriate approaches to learn from operations, the group ended up drawing a distinction between ways of learning from one specific operation or setting to inform programme adjustments, and ways of learning across settings in order to build the global body of knowledge, providing general principles to inform future operations.

### LEARNING FROM AN OPERATION

#### *Applying existing research*

- ▶ Before investing in new research, how can we get better at applying existing research findings? Research needs to be translated into actionable lessons easily accessible to practitioners.
- ▶ Research can also limit operations. For example, normative/semantic considerations (to figure out if an option envisaged qualified as a vertical expansion or piggybacking) impeded operational discussions in Malawi.

#### *Investing in real-time monitoring*

- ▶ Robust, scientific research takes time. Programmes operating in complex, fast changing environments need shorter feedback loops.
- ▶ Developing real-time monitoring and evaluation mechanisms includes investing in robust accountability mechanisms (see, for instance, the work of Ground Truth Solutions in Chad) as well as multi-scenario planning and context monitoring (see, for instance, the work of Groupe URD in Mali) to adjust programming in real-time.
- ▶ Going further, recognising the complexity of situations where operations are run, could we operate a paradigm shift and (instead of having external actors coming in, observing and advising on what to do) adopt a systems approach, allowing the system (that is, the many stakeholders making up that systems) to see itself and adjust in real-time (see, for instance, the work of Synergos to reform maternal health system in Namibia or transform agriculture in Ethiopia)?

#### *Building national capacity (that is, supporting national counterparts' own learning)*

- ▶ This requires a different business model – for many development partners, it may mean one foot in the graveyard (handing over to government).
- ▶ In particular, it requires (greater) rationalisation, including rationalisation of benefits between government-led programmes (notably benefiting citizens) and donor-led interventions (reaching refugees, for instance).
- ▶ More donor coordination is needed to give incentives for implementing partners to align – for instance, avoiding having one development donor supporting one UN agency to provide assistance through the national programme and one humanitarian donor supporting another UN agency to provide assistance directly (as happened in Lesotho).
- ▶ Development partners should speak to the government with one voice (for instance, through a donor coordination team as in Ethiopia around the introduction of the PSNP) to avoid having one government official losing time and energy on dealing with five divergent development partners.
- ▶ How to ensure programme will be mainstreamed among government? What is the experience to ensure government takes over (that is, ensuring that the government is leading an intervention even if it is co-funded by donors and implemented by NGOs)? More research is needed on this too.
- ▶ Budget support can be an appropriate modality to empower the government, linking disbursement indicators to the establishment of specific components of the national system (such as, engaging an institutional reform, setting up a single registry, etc.).
- ▶ If the position of the government in the driving seat is to be fully respected, development partners should allow national counterparts to follow their own trial-and-error approach and learn from it – are we ready for that? This calls for prototyping approaches allowing actors to fail early to learn quickly through rapid, iterative feedback loops (the mantra of prototyping – typically, a pilot project is introduced to test or demonstrate that a pre-defined approach works, whereas a prototype allows nurturing a concept before it has been fully worked out) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Piloting vs. Prototyping*

	PILOT	PROTOTYPE
<b>Intention</b>	Test a pre-defined approach works (proposed solution)	Nurture an initial rough idea (incomplete approach)
<b>Mantra</b>	Succeed to prove the approach works	Fail early to learn quickly
<b>Feedback loop</b>	Phased, sequenced	Rapid, iterative
<b>Implementation</b>	Phased, careful rollout of a pre-defined plan	Series of small experiments successively defined along the way
<b>Actors</b>	Led by actors external to the system	Owned by system's stakeholders
<b>Results</b>	Only outcomes are important	Learning and outcomes matter

Source: Cherrier (2016, p. 274).

## LEARNING ACROSS SETTINGS

### *Research for decision-making*

- ▶ More research is needed on specific operational aspects (such as, delivery mechanisms, case management, etc.). Comparing operations manuals and their efficiency may be a good starting point.
- ▶ More research is also needed on intra-household dynamics (exploring, for instance, sharing/allocation of resources, gender issues, etc.).
- ▶ Research is to pay greater attention to evaluating processes, not solely focusing on output and outcome (that is, uncovering how a programme worked or not, rather than whether it worked).

### *Collecting stories from practitioners*

- ▶ There is still a very linear approach to research, but each crisis context is different and practitioners will necessary need to learn by analogy.
- ▶ There is a need to pick up experiences from field teams and make them accessible to all. These could be captured in the form of 'stories' (for instance, asking practitioners to reflect on why an operation, or specific aspect of an operation, was designed the way it was, how it operated, what worked, what didn't and why, and what they would have done differently if they had known).

### *Supporting the global community of practice*

- ▶ How to organise a community of practice (CoP) to avoid it being used to showcase operations, but really as a platform where practitioners can also discuss difficulties and failures (and collectively learn from them)? Useful insights may be drawn from the experience of the CoP on cash transfers in Africa.
- ▶ Such a community should be targeted at, and tailored to the needs of, middle-level practitioners.
- ▶ A mix of virtual interactions and face-to-face events can be envisioned. A number of online platforms are already available, such as the open CoP on social protection in crisis contexts on [socialprotection.org](https://socialprotection.org).
- ▶ A learning framework is needed to help organise knowledge. The community should be clustered, not looking at the whole story of an operation but focusing on a few critical aspects.

#### PAUSE, BREATHE, SENSE

As a global community of practice, what are we called to do? What change do we want to bring? Where do we want to be in five years from now? What would success look like?

As individual professionals in this field, how would we like to contribute to and gain from global knowledge in the future? What would an easily accessible, ready-to-use knowledge base look like? What would we need to find there?

### III. Creating change in day-to-day behaviours

Everyone operating in this field can play a role in creating, sharing and applying knowledge effectively. Without engaging in costly, sophisticated research initiatives, there are simple things one can start with. For instance, as highlighted during the workshop, designing the collection of [administrative data](#), to serve the dual purpose of feeding into programmatic decisions and evidence generation could in some occasions be a low hanging fruit that merits further exploration.

Working in this field also requires developing new soft skills to steer dialogue and negotiate differences across researchers and practitioners from different fields (social protection, disaster risk reduction, humanitarian, etc.). We need to allocate sufficient time and develop practice for coordination and in-person communication to build trust and empathy to enable effective [interdisciplinary collaboration](#).

The mainstream approach in the aid sector appears inadequate to address complex issues. Tools like theory of change, logical frameworks and best practices reflect a linear model biased towards puzzle solving that ignores the messy nature of systems. In contrast, the application of a systemic approach, through an inclusive co-learning and creating movement, allows hitting three targets with one shot. It provides an inclusive *analysis* of a system; it builds the *capacity* of system actors by empowering them to find their own solutions; and it results in immediate *action*. Faced with increasing complexity, we need to change our mindset, focusing on developing approaches to problems (rather than seeking solutions), and promote [adaptive management](#).

We also need to encourage new forms of knowledge sharing to facilitate learning across settings, making insights gained in various contexts easily accessible, in quasi-real time. Indeed, people who need them most often have the least time to search for them. Busy practitioners report valuing short formats ([blogs](#), [vlogs](#), [videos](#), etc.) with practical, simple and powerful tips. So, what is that one practical tip or insightful story we would like to share with the rest of the community?

#### PAUSE, BREATHE, SENSE

In our own organisations, what shall we continue, stop, or try in order to create, share and apply knowledge around social protection in crisis contexts in a more effective manner?

At an individual level, how can we contribute? Is there a tiny step we can take, individually, to create, share, access, and apply knowledge more effectively?

**Please share your insights!**

#### Acknowledgments

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#### Contact us

To learn more about the SPaN initiative, collaborate with our team via [capacity4dev](#) and [socialprotection.org](#).



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