Social Protection
& Public Finance Management

THINK PIECE

Social Protection in Humanitarian Settings

Lessons Learnt from a Cross-Country Analysis

SPaN

Supporting people through crisis

This Brief forms a contribution to the European Commission Guidance Package on Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (SPaN), complementing Operational Notes 9 and 10 on Fragility and Forced Displacement.[1] The study draws primarily on experiences of the 'Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management' programme (SP-PFM), an EU-funded initiative implemented jointly by the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors (GCSPF).[2] The findings should be useful for development and humanitarian partners and governments working in the fields of social protection, disaster risk management and humanitarian response.

Key Lessons

▶ Gaps in routine social protection can be exacerbated in times of crisis.

▶ When used strategically, pilot programmes provide an opportunity to enhance the evidence base, which can then strengthen advocacy efforts for increased international development funding and technical support.

▶ Particularly in displacement contexts, it is important to ensure that social protection programming goes the extra mile to include vulnerable and marginalized groups, including displaced populations who may be difficult to reach.

▶ Crises can create opportunities to improve social protection systems.

1. Social Protection in Humanitarian Settings

There is clear international consensus on the need to work towards maximising the role of social protection in fragile, conflict and displacement settings to provide more effective, efficient and sustainable responses to affected populations. High-level commitments include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit Grand Bargain Commitments, the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants, the 2019 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, and the ILO Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205), among others. However, national social protection systems are at times too weak to respond to shocks or are not designed to have the flexibility to adjust, particularly in the face of covariate shocks, and may also be affected or compromised by the shock itself.[3] This paper draws on experiences of cash-based assistance provided in selected crisis-affected contexts, primarily those of the SP-PFM programme, to identify key lessons related to shock response and system strengthening.

In humanitarian settings, state capacity and legitimacy may be limited. In these contexts, respect for humanitarian principles as well as the maturity and flexibility of social protection systems are key factors to take into account when considering how to approach shocks. Other important elements to consider include the capacity to reach those affected in a timely manner, funding streams, community acceptance, and the degree to which systems have been impacted by crises.[4] The countries covered in this paper (Burkina Faso, Colombia, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Nigeria, Somalia) each represent contexts with varying degrees of state legitimacy, as well as interest and capacity in social protection, and thus provide a good range of examples for comparison. Also, whilst the terms 'shock-responsive', 'shock-sensitive' and 'adaptive' social protection have been used by different stakeholders to refer to broadly similar concepts, this

paper will focus on what these terms have in common, bringing attention to the role that social protection can play before, and in response to, covariate shocks for immediate, medium- and longer-term support, alongside other sectors

To analyse the effectiveness of interventions, the paper will draw on Reference Document No. 26 from the SPaN guidance.[5] This is a useful tool for helping practitioners navigate their approach to shock-responsive systems. In particular, the analysis will be based on the following criteria: coverage of affected populations; timeliness of the response; sustainability of support; and support to system strengthening.

2. Cross-Country Analysis of Social Protection Shock Responses

2.1 Coverage of affected populations

In response to COVID-19, many governments were required to scale-up social protection support to existing and new caseloads. In Nigeria, a country highly vulnerable to natural hazards, conflict, and economic shocks, calculations from a 2021 study estimated that the maximum envisaged expansion of the National Cash Transfer Programme (NCTP) in response to the pandemic would cover around 27.5 per cent of poor households. In relative terms, this would be a significant achievement although in absolute terms it still meant that over 13 million poor households were excluded from the coverage.[6] In the highly complex environment of Nigeria, one of the main issues limiting the shock response was the **low coverage of routine social protection.** For example, on the pilot roll-out of the Rapid Response Register, only 1,800 of the 11,000 households identified were already included in the National Social Registry (NSR).[7] Conflict across areas of the North-East of the country also restricted the implementation of social protection initiatives in that region.

Recent analysis from Somalia, a country similarly affected by multiple crises, suggests that coverage of locust and flood responses has been relatively strong due to scale-up of the *Baxnaano* programme – the government's flagship social protection programme – in rural areas. However, coverage of social protection responses to COVID-19 was less successful. The challenge was mainly due to the fact that **most existing programmes, including *Baxnaano*, have a rural focus, whereas the impact of the pandemic was felt more in urban areas.** Reaching areas under the control of Al-Shabaab also proved extremely difficult for national and international partners.[8]

In Ethiopia, development partners have supported the government to implement Shock Responsive Cash Transfers (SRCT) to over 288,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and people affected by conflict, drought and floods. Funding was channelled through government systems for the SRCT and through the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) for drought response (to over 321,000 existing and non-PSNP clients).[9] Partners also supported the COVID-19 response by helping the government vertically expand the Urban Productive Safety Programme (UPSNP) to provide almost 100,000 beneficiaries with cash top-ups for six months.[10] **In contrast to Nigeria and Somalia, the PSNP and UPSNP are both relatively well-established programmes** although adjustments were still required, particularly for conflict-affected IDPs, as the processes of the routine PSNP were not developed to take into account population movements.[11]

2.2 Timeliness of response

Timeliness is a key element of shock response. One constraint of the national response to COVID-19 in Nigeria was its limited ability to reach those who were not already social protection beneficiaries. The accelerated expansion of NCTP began in April 2020 and, over the course of two months, around one million households were added to the NSR. Whilst commendable, there were delays further along the delivery chain due to institutional bottlenecks and capacity constraints. **These were already an issue for the routine programme and were not adequately addressed for managing the scale-up.** Furthermore, there was no adaptation or simplification of the routine enrolment process to speed up the process. Ultimately, the dramatic increase in coverage of the NSR did not equate to an equally impressive increase in the number of people receiving assistance. **Context also played a role.** An overarching concern of the government was reportedly to ensure accountability and reduce the risk (or perceived risk) of fraud and corruption, which meant strong control measures were prioritised over a more rapid, 'no regrets' style approach.[12] While this is understandably a concern for governments who often face significant scrutiny and calls for accountability, it inevitably has implications for ensuring a timely response.

In contrast to Nigeria, the Palestinian National Cash Transfer Programme is a well-established programme that was relatively quick to respond to COVID-19. The first cash transfers were made in May 2020, just two months after the emergency declaration in March, and by June 2020 approximately 60,000 households had been reached. However, after this initial surge, the next tranche of payments was only made in November 2020, as **funding had run out** and the expected international contributions had not materialised.[13]

KEY LESSON:
Addressing gaps during times of stability strengthens resilience during crises

As the examples above show, gaps in social protection programming are exacerbated in times of crisis. This lesson cuts across many levels, including institutional capacity, ability to identify and target affected populations, fiscal space to secure response funding, mechanisms to respond to multi-dimensional needs, and more. However, if a national social protection system already has good coverage with comprehensive support that takes into account specific vulnerabilities such as gender, age and disability – and is resilient enough to function in times of crisis – then emergency support is less likely to be required, especially as families will be more resilient too.

2.3 Ensuring a sustainable impact

Whilst coverage and timeliness focus on ensuring that assistance reaches those affected in time, it is also important that the support provided is sufficient to tackle multidimensional needs in a sustainable manner. Experience of cash-plus programming in Lebanon and Burkina Faso has been key for not only providing a comprehensive response to needs, but also informing the broader social protection system. In Lebanon, development partners have supported the Ministry of Education to establish the *Min Ila* programme, which provided cash and linkages to complementary services to support the enrolment of Syrian refugee children in public schools. An impact evaluation found that the programme had positive impacts on several dimensions of children's well-being and *Min Ila* **has also helped change the perceptions of donors and government** about the feasibility of building child-sensitive social protection systems.[14] An

education-focused cash transfer has subsequently been introduced under the National Poverty Targeting Programme – Lebanon's flagship safety-net for vulnerable Lebanese citizens – and a new initiative known as *Haddi* has also been established which provides monthly cash transfers linked to behavioural change messaging and essential services.[15]

In response to the high prevalence of multidimensional poverty among children in Burkina Faso, the National Council for Social Protection is working with development partners to provide a combination of cash transfers alongside nutrition and water and sanitation interventions. Midline data highlights a measurable impact on food security and poverty[16] and, like Lebanon, **this model is also being used to inform the development of the national safety-net and social protection strategy.[17]**

KEY LESSON:

Pilot programmes can help to build evidence base and strengthen advocacy efforts

Significant attention is often given to increasing political will in crisis-affected countries to support social protection, and rightfully so. However, particularly in crisis contexts where international funding is also critical, donors and International Financial Institutions sometimes need to be brought onboard too. Agency-implemented pilot schemes, with government involvement and ideally ownership, are not only a way to increase local government capacity and buy-in for social protection but can also provide an evidence base to advocate for increased international development funding and technical support. In this way, what may start as a small programme for a couple of thousand families could end up informing, or even being the basis for, a larger-scale national initiative. Pilots should, however, be strategic in their development with a clear scale-up plan in mind should the opportunity to expand arise.

CASE STUDY:

Expanding support for displaced populations in Colombia

The case of Colombia is interesting as it combines an established response to internal displacement with a more recent international influx of over 2.4 million Venezuelans. The *Ingreso Solidario* unconditional cash programme was launched by the government in response to COVID-19 covering some 3 million households, including IDPs, host communities and Venezuelans. This represented a significant expansion of social assistance as the largest social protection programme – *Familias en Acción* – covered 2.6 million households, with very few Venezuelans supported. Beyond the pandemic, **the international response to Venezuelans is increasingly aligning or even fully integrating with government systems**, with joint coordination mechanisms, nationally led legal frameworks and instances of integrated financing. Where international actors deliver their own programmes, cash transfer values must align with national schemes, and eligibility criteria, targeting, and referral systems are often linked. The government's political will to develop such an effective joint response was in part linked to the magnitude of the crisis and need to expand coverage of support. For international actors, closer links with government systems also helped to maximise limited resources and support a long-term approach. COVID-19 also played its role in catalysing closer national-international collaboration given the additional socio-economic needs created.[18]

In terms of the support provided, one study[19] suggests that as many as 80 per cent of IDPs, Venezuelan and host community respondents felt that the social protection assistance they received was either important or very important, although the amount was not enough to meet longer-term socio-economic needs. Notably, the same study also found that **many IDPs and host households felt that the government should not provide further resources to Venezuelans until all vulnerable Colombian citizens were covered.** In such a context, any apparent increase in government provision for Venezuelans could cause further tension, especially if perceived to come at the expense of support for vulnerable citizens. **A lack of international funding exacerbated the situation:** in 2019 the Venezuelan refugee crisis was one of the least funded refugee responses in modern history.[20] As emphasised by the DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus[21], conflict sensitivity and ensuring that activities 'do no harm' are paramount and this can often have increased significance in displacement contexts.

Development partners in Colombia are actively working to enhance decent employment options for Venezuelans and Colombian returnees through skill strengthening, access to employment and adaptation of the social protection system.[22] A large awareness-raising and information campaign was also conducted to guarantee the realisation of Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees' labour and social security rights.[23] This is highly needed as one study found that **only 5 per cent of employed Venezuelans were part of the contributory social security system, that they were much less likely to have health insurance or medical coverage, and that their children were less likely to be enrolled in school.** The Government's new 'Temporary Protection Status for Venezuelans' decree provides an opportunity to develop a more coherent and comprehensive response. The decree will regularise many Venezuelans' residence, facilitating access to formal employment and contributory social protection.[24]

KEY LESSON:
Leave no-one behind

Whilst international agreements have reinforced the call for refugees to be able to access national social assistance, governments are often reluctant to open up their nascent, donor-supported systems in many humanitarian contexts. In such instances, a nexus approach is especially important as international support can mitigate domestic political sensitivities whilst responding to increased need. In addition, last-mile, hands-on assistance to reach the displaced also needs to be prioritised. This principle of leaving no-one behind is especially critical for displaced populations who might not be aware of their entitlements, may struggle with language barriers, lack necessary documentation or access to technology, and be vulnerable to exploitation. Data protection and sensitivity is another area for particular attention as some may be reluctant to identify themselves for fear of retribution.

2.4 System strengthening in crisis contexts

As highlighted in the sections above, both Somalia and Nigeria struggled to identify and reach vulnerable populations in response to COVID-19. That said, both countries are now taking meaningful steps to mitigate these limitations. In March 2019, the Federal Government of Somalia released a new Social Protection Policy and in 2020 launched the *Baxnaano* programme with support from international development partners. This process includes developing Management Information Systems and a Unified Social Registry. The latter will serve as a tool for the identification of beneficiaries for *Baxnaano* and potentially all social protection programmes going forward.[25] These are positive developments as the lack of transparency and accountability has been a key impediment to building donor trust in government systems, although the efficacy of the registry for humanitarian programming is still unclear. Significant work is also underway to develop Nigeria's NSR, intended to guide all social assistance and humanitarian efforts in the country. The National Social Safety Net Coordinating Office is expanding the overarching NSR to have two sub-registries, the Unified Registry of Beneficiaries (used mainly for IDP support), and the Rapid Response Registry (established to support the urban COVID-19 response) to provide a more comprehensive data system.[26]

In Lebanon, the 2020 Beirut port explosion created space to foster greater consensus for social protection systems. Following the blast, UNICEF and the ILO led the publication of a unified UN position on social protection which included medium- to long-term goals for developing the social protection system, incorporated the language of rights-based approaches, and committed to develop social grants alongside poverty targeted schemes. This represented a marked shift in the narrow focus of the international community on externally funded and implemented humanitarian programmes.[27]

KEY LESSON:
Crises present opportunities for change

In almost every country covered in this study, a crisis of some kind catalysed developments in the social protection system. Whether it be the sudden increase in need, attention, or international financing, shocks bring with them opportunities for national and international stakeholders to influence policies and programmes, improve administration of social protection systems, and enhance the evidence base for ongoing and future support.

Endnotes

1. The SPaN Guidance Package is available here.
2. More information on the SP-PFM programme is available here. Given the timing of SP-PFM programme, most examples relate to the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples from other contexts, including more acute humanitarian crises, are integrated where appropriate.
3. Shocks that affect a large proportion of the population simultaneously, such as conflict, drought, earthquake, flooding etc.
4. For more on this, see UNICEF (2019) *Programme Guidance: Strengthening Shock Responsive Social Protection Systems*, Link; the SPaN Guidance Package, Link; SPACE (2020) *Strategy Decision Matrix: Using or leveraging social assistance programmes*, Link; and Oxford Policy Management (2015) *Shock Responsive Social Protection Systems Research*. Working paper 1: Conceptualising Shock-Responsive Social Protection, Link.
5. European Commission, Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (2019) *Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus. A Game Changer in Supporting People through Crises*. Publications Office, Brussels, Belgium. Link.
6. Smith, G., and Ammoun, J. (2021) *Using Social Protection to Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria*. Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 Expert Advice Service (SPACE), DAI Global, UK. Link.
7. Ibid.
8. McClean, C., and Ammoun, J. (2021) *Using Social Protection to respond to COVID-19 and other shocks in Somalia*. Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19: Expert Advice Service (SPACE), DAI Global, UK. Link.
9. Respondent feedback,
10. SP-PFM (2021) Appendix 6, Ethiopia. Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management, Second Progress Report January-December 2021. Link.
11. Respondent interview.
12. Smith and Ammoun (2021).
13. Pongracz, S., Sammon, E., and Ammoun, J. (2021) *Using Social Protection to Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*. Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 Expert Advice Service (SPACE), DAI Global, UK. Link.
14. De Hoop, J., et al. (2018) *"Min Ila" Cash Transfer Programme for Displaced Syrian Children in Lebanon (UNICEF and WFP)*. Impact Evaluation Endline Report. American Institute for Research (AIR), Washington, D.C. Link.
15. UNICEF (2021) *Paving the Way for a National Child Grant in Lebanon: The Haddi Programme*. UNICEF Lebanon, Beirut. Link.
16. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (2022) *Impact Evaluation of Cash, Nutrition and WASH Interventions in Burkina Faso*. Midline Research Brief. UNICEF, Florence, Italy. Please note, findings are subject to final validation.
17. Respondent interview.
18. Ham, A., et al. (2022) *Social protection responses to forced displacement in Colombia*. Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London. Link
19. Ibid.
20. Bahar, D., and Dooley, M. (2021) 'Venezuelan refugees and their receiving communities need funding, not sympathy.' Brookings. Link.
21. OECD (2019) DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. Link.
22. SP-PFM (no date) 'Colombia'. Link.
23. Respondent feedback.
24. Ham et al. (2022).
25. McClean and Ammoun (2021).
26. Respondent interview.
27. UNICEF Innocenti (forthcoming) *Strengthening Social Protection Systems in Fragile Contexts: Lebanon*. UNICEF, Florence, Italy.

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https://socialprotection-pfm.org

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