Policy Briefing

institute of development studies

Irish Aid
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Integrating Humanitarian Response with Social Protection Systems: Limits and Opportunities

The separation between provision of short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term development programmes – such as social protection – often creates inefficiencies, wastes resources and means support fails to reach those who urgently need it. Social protection is usually funded, managed, delivered and monitored separately from humanitarian assistance, by distinct actors with conflicting priorities but increasingly similar target groups. The Shock-Responsive Social Protection (SRSP) approach aims to link and integrate these sectors. This Policy Briefing uses research from three countries to consider how SRSP should be implemented, making four recommendations for policymakers working in humanitarian response, disaster risk management and social protection.

Key messages

– The SRSP approach aims to harmonise two historically distinct sets of policies, systems, programmes and actors and, in doing so, help social protection programmes adapt to shocks such as food insecurity, health crises or conflict.

– Integrating social protection systems with humanitarian assistance is hugely appealing and forms a key pillar of current global development frameworks.

– IDS research from Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda examines how the SRSP approach is being implemented, including the challenges and opportunities it brings.

– Findings from these case studies emphasise that national and global policymakers should:

   1. Coordinate roles and align key programming features such as transfer values and targeting criteria;
   2. Take a systems-building approach that cuts across sectors;
   3. Build capacity and resources down to the local level; and
   4. Identify and explore relevant political economy factors that are too often ignored.

Rachel Sabates-Wheeler and Daniel Longhurst

Introduction

The historic separation of humanitarian and longer-term development programmes, such as social protection, means that funding arrangements, priorities, actors and delivery mechanisms are often distinct and insufficient in tackling complex needs arising from disasters and crises. To this end, the international community has called for the better integration of humanitarian assistance and social protection, known as Shock-Responsive Social Protection (SRSP), which forms an integral part of global commitments under the World Humanitarian Summit Agenda for Humanity and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The idea of harmonising and integrating historically separate sectors is hugely appealing, but comes with its own distinct policy and programming challenges and solutions.

About this Policy Briefing

This briefing draws together IDS research in Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda during 2019–20.

– In **Ethiopia** researchers used primary fieldwork to investigate the response of the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) to the 2017–18 acute food security situation in five districts across two regions.

– In **Malawi** and **Uganda** researchers reviewed the current state of SRSP through literature reviews and key informant interviews with principal humanitarian and social protection stakeholders.

What is SRSP?

SRSP involves a range of activities that link humanitarian assistance, disaster risk management and social protection. Innovative SRSP design has focused on creating flexible and scalable systems and programmes. SRSP consciously connects policy, financing, targeting and delivery, aiming to improve the overall comprehensiveness, coverage, and adequacy of support for poor, vulnerable and crisis-affected people in a more predictable and effective way.

A variety of innovative SRSP measures have been trialled across these countries. By identifying common lessons and country-specific approaches, this Policy Briefing aims to help policymakers put into practice the various global commitments on SRSP, and help build responsive national systems that can flex and adapt to shocks.

Key findings

1. Coordinate and align across sectors

SRSP requires that disaster risk management, humanitarian assistance and social protection actors come together. Effective collaboration provides the foundation for SRSP, and is also its biggest challenge. Despite the range of SRSP initiatives employed in the three countries, vertical and horizontal coordination, and planning between sectors and departments to enable coherence along the delivery chain is limited, and alignment of key programming parameters is nascent. Emerging activities are demonstrating what is possible. For example:

– **Clarifying roles and guidelines takes time, but leads to efficiency gains.** Interviews in all three countries highlighted a lack of clarity and alignment in institutional mandates, responsibilities and operational guidelines for the ministries overseeing social protection, disaster risk management and humanitarian assistance. Clarifying guidelines and investing human resources in coordination across joint working groups would enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery system, as shown in Ethiopia. Research in Malawi demonstrated that considerable effort is required to align systems with different principles, operating procedures, accountability measures, geographic coverage and resourcing, which is now gaining traction as partners begin new arrangements to deliver SRSP. These issues are not only technocratic, but also political. The lack of clarity over mandates reflects both domestic and international political interests, with organisations often aligning to specific ministries to achieve

narrow policy and programming goals. Overcoming this 'fragmentation by design' requires a broader understanding of the political economy context and incentives.

- **Aligning transfers allows systems to respond quickly but can cause friction.** Frequently, and often for good reason, the value of cash or food provided in emergencies is not equivalent to longer-term social transfers for the chronically poor. A lack of harmonisation across the different types of transfers (e.g. food or cash) and values across humanitarian and social protection sectors is a key operational issue, and when merged under SRSP, this can lead to programming friction and social tension. Research in Malawi clearly revealed these issues. However, alignment not only enables the sharing of technical insight that enables systems to flex, it can also lead to efficiency gains and wider government buy-in. Trade-offs should be carefully analysed.

- **Aligning targeting criteria supports integration between programmes.** Currently, procedures and criteria for targeting relief beneficiaries and social protection beneficiaries are different. Ethiopia's PSNP relief targeting principles are not always followed in emergency situations, when local-level disaster risk management committees take over. However, working towards the alignment of targeting criteria for regular and acute need helps define how complementary support can be provided from different programmes, when and how to scale up a programme, and when beneficiaries could be transitioned off programmes.

2. Build systems, not individual programmes

While there is a growing number of innovative SRSP programmes being developed worldwide, they require underlying support systems. These include interoperable management information systems, registration and enrolment processes, payment and delivery infrastructure (such as mobile money), financing, and monitoring and evaluation. The case studies revealed both innovation and challenges:

- **Different countries are advancing elements of SRSP systems.** In Ethiopia, the PSNP is delivering at scale for both regular and shock-responsive need, including through the use of disaster risk finance. Malawi is trialling the vertical expansion of the principal social assistance programme through the same financial service provider, and the use of the social registry for shock-based targeting. In Uganda, the social safety net programmes for national citizens and refugees use disaster risk finance to scale support in times of shock, and donors are supporting the government to create a social registry.

- **Disconnect exists between policy goals and investment in delivery systems.** In Malawi and Uganda, social protection programmes (and therefore their delivery systems) still only cover relatively small proportions of the population, limiting their ability to flex for shocks. The preference in all three countries for the use of cash for social protection conflicts with large in kind emergency operations and a lack of mobile money architecture and digital literacy. Early warning systems are often fragmented, dysfunctional or lack clear links to funding and programmes, meaning each country is some way from achieving objective, automated, scalable safety nets.

- **Enhancing data management forms the backbone of response.** Following a global trend to improve information management, each country is working towards creating or extending a social registry, which captures large amounts of demographic and socioeconomic data on vulnerable households using a commonly agreed questionnaire or through database interoperability. However, in the three countries, as elsewhere, a lack of coverage of national biometric identification, or common data collection tools and data protection protocols, limit the potential of these systems to work together, and therefore connect actors and programmes to achieve flexible scale and reach.

Building systems also raises tough questions about capacity and priorities. For example,

as highlighted in Uganda and Malawi, social registries are useful to obtain rich socioeconomic and demographic data on the poorest cohort of the population, but the information is expensive to update, so it risks quickly becoming obsolete for addressing certain shocks. Likewise without sufficient delivery infrastructure, the potential of these systems cannot be fully realised. However, while these challenges may seem considerable when viewed in total, it can be useful to assess strategic entry points for systems-strengthening along the delivery chain, analysing which actors have strengths and weaknesses, where linkage is most feasible and where further investment is needed. Figure 1 illustrates a theoretical example of national delivery chain analysis.

3. Build capacity and understanding down to local levels

In order for social protection systems to respond quickly to acute need, coordination and capacity must be strong along the length of the delivery chain (Figure 1). In real terms, this means that institutional capacity (logistics, knowledge and technical skills) must be sufficiently developed at national, regional and local levels. This is frequently overlooked in the set-up of shock-responsive systems, leading to fragmentation at best and at worst, leakage and non-delivery to those most in need. Findings from the three countries showed:

- **Learning is crucial at local levels.** Understanding of SRSP may be well-developed within national policy forums, but at district and local levels, where point of contact implementation happens, knowledge is insufficient. This results in fragmented and parallel response plans leading to a lack of coordination and joint action. Initiatives to institutionalise learning, such as Malawi's two-year SRSP Learning Task Force, are welcome.

- **Programme coordination is often disjointed at lower-administrative levels.** Efforts to coordinate data collection, fund disbursement and delivery are impressive in the capital cities and sometimes at a regional level – however, coordination becomes disjointed at lower-administrative levels. In Ethiopia, the PSNP is managed

Figure 1 Assessing humanitarian and social protection linkage potential along the delivery chain in a theoretical country

HUMANITARIAN/EMERGENCY					SOCIAL PROTECTION			
'WEAK'		'STRONG'			'WEAK'		'STRONG'	
Policy								
		x		Financing		x		
	x			Legal & Policy Frameworks			x	
x				Governance & Coordination		x		
			x	Capacity	x			
Programme design								
		x		Vulnerability Assessment	x			
	x			Targeting			x	
		x		Transfer Value, Frequency, Modality		x		
x				Conditionality		x		
Administration/Implementation								
x				Information Systems				x
		x		Price & Market Analysis	x			
		x		Outreach & Communications	x			
x				Registration & Enrolment			x	
	x			Payments & Service Delivery				x
	x			Do No Harm, Protection & Grievance		x		
		x		Monitoring & Evaluation		x		

Source: Longhurst *et al.* (2020a), adapted from Seyfert *et al.* (2019), reproduced with permission.

by different administrations in different places. In some regions the Food Security Directorate falls under the Disaster Response Commission, while in others it is under the regional Bureau of Agriculture. This difference replicates itself at the *woreda* level. This fragmentation causes inefficiencies and confusion at lower-administrative levels, affecting information sharing and joined-up action between managing entities.

– **Insufficient national budgets for SRSP put pressure on local systems.** While cash provision can increase in the national budget in response to shocks (such as in the Ethiopia 2017–18 crisis), mostly governments are not budgeting for SRSP, or are focusing on ensuring fiscal space for their regular social assistance, as seen in Uganda. This means that the infrastructure for delivering extra cash at local levels can be inadequate and local actors are overwhelmed.

There will be clear payoffs to investing in capacity development. Actions can include earmarking administrative funds for spikes in the accountancy, targeting and delivery capacity at regional and local levels; ensuring availability of translated programme implementation procedures for local staff; facilitating institutional coordination through training and cross-sectoral committees; and preparing national plans with regional and local involvement. These investments encourage harmonisation between institutions along the chain of delivery and enable social protection systems to more quickly and efficiently respond to the injection of humanitarian assistance.

Pay attention to political economy factors

Some of the challenges around SRSP are not amenable to technical fixes. They also require an understanding of political factors that drive structural divisions, part of a long-running discussion about ways to link relief and development. A core problem with the politics of this debate has been the assumption that stronger linkages are both right and achievable amongst different parties, assuming effective conceptual and technical solutions can be devised. But if

this is the case, then research largely fails to explain why it has been so difficult to make happen in practice, and tends to avoid interrogating the fundamental differences in principle, approach and ways of working that have made linkages difficult. The case studies identified several political economy issues:

– **Resourcing for scalable systems and programmes remains controversial.** For example, should humanitarian donors pay for vertical expansion top-ups, or should regular social protection donors create contingency funds? While this is not an either/or discussion, in contexts of limited resources and political scope, the risk of over-stretch remains at the forefront of concerns for many. Solutions can be found through a mixture of financing mechanisms, which require political commitment to establish.

– **Beyond finance, SRSP poses questions of ethics.** For example, whether and how humanitarian and development actors can maintain commitments to humanitarian principles whilst working with government-run social safety nets.

– **SRSP also creates tensions around efficiency.** This includes whether there is a perverse incentive *not* to coordinate and collaborate, if it would lead to the loss of influence and visibility for one actor over another, or a reduction in overall budgets.

The case studies show that different actors can lead or act in concert based on context, capacity and shock type. Fundamentally, trust needs to be built across ministries and partners with different structures and mandates who are sometimes in direct competition for resources. Policy and programme specialists should also be equipped with the right ethical frameworks, policy acumen and analytical skills to make informed choices about how and whether to engage in the SRSP agenda. This process should be complemented in turn by increased technical investment in the areas mentioned above, all enshrined in clear guidelines and ideally backed by legislation.

Policy recommendations

To effectively integrate humanitarian response with social protection systems, policymakers in humanitarian assistance, disaster risk management and social protection departments should:

1. **Invest in coordination across different sectors and actors.** Aligning activities across key organisations and sectors ensures harmonisation, which leads to efficient and effective delivery of resources to those in need. Solutions here are both technocratic and linked to an understanding of political economy. The focus should remain on improving the overall adequacy, comprehensiveness and coverage of assistance to the most vulnerable over the longer term, through coordinating social protection with other programmes.

2. **Adopt a systems approach to programming.** *Ad hoc* programmes lead to further fragmentation, inefficiencies in funding, and inequities in distribution and delivery. Where possible, policymakers should instead take a systems approach to leverage humanitarian and social protection programmes to respond to different types of need. Investment in key technical areas such as needs assessment, operational guidance, management information systems, delivery infrastructure and monitoring and evaluation is needed to realise the value addition of SRSP. Policymakers should identify linkage potential along the delivery chain in all country contexts, and define realistic time frames for building institutions and systems.

3. **Decentralise support for SRSP.** Investment in the delivery chain must flow from national to community-level, and policy, operational guidance, capacity building and funding for SRSP must be carefully decentralised.

4. **Consider the political economy of each context.** The political economy of the provision of assistance influences all contexts, yet it is often not examined. SRSP raises political questions about resourcing, ethics and efficiency. Navigating the political space will help inform policy and programming efforts aimed at building SRSP. ■

Further reading

Longhurst, D. with Barca, V.; Little, S.; McLean, C.; Pongracz, S. and SPACE (2020a) *Identifying Practical Options for Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection in the COVID-19 Response*, London: UK Department for International Development and Bonn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (accessed 24 July 2020)

Longhurst, D.; Harvey, P.; Sabates-Wheeler, R. and Slater, R. (2020b) *High-Level Briefing Paper – Linking Social Protection and Humanitarian Cash and Voucher Assistance*, Amman: The Cash Learning Partnership

O'Brien, C. *et al.* (2018) *Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems Research: Synthesis Report*, Oxford: Oxford Policy Management

Seyfert, K.; Barca, V.; Gentilini, U.; Luthria, M. and Abbady, S. (2019) *Unbundled: A Framework for Connecting Safety Nets and Humanitarian Assistance in Refugee Settings*, Social Protection and Jobs Discussion Paper 1935, Washington DC: World Bank

institute of development studies

Irish Aid
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland