

**BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH**



# **Strengthening responses at the nexus of social protection, humanitarian aid and climate shocks in protracted crises: BASIC Research framing paper**

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BASIC Research

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Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research (funded by UKAid) aims to inform policy and programming on how to help poor and vulnerable people cope better with crises and meet their basic needs through more effective social assistance. All costs related to BASIC Research are covered by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

# Summary

The Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme seeks to better understand how to strengthen routine social assistance in the most difficult protracted crises – places where compounding shocks such as climate change, conflict and displacement complicate the delivery, sustainability and outcomes of programming. This paper reviews the contours of global and national debates, and the concepts that are key to informing research on social assistance in contexts of protracted crises. It focuses on three fields: social protection, humanitarian assistance, and climate adaptation and responsiveness. It then introduces the specific policy and programming areas and countries that BASIC Research will focus on, based on the identification of knowledge gaps in the inception phase of the research. The paper then develops a research framework for BASIC Research, identifying priority research questions and thematic areas. In line with the aspiration of global donors that any social assistance – including that delivered by humanitarian actors – should build longer-term policies and systems that are increasingly embedded in state-led and state-funded provision, BASIC Research will: examine the complementarities, tensions and linkages between social assistance various actors provide to tackle the multiple and intersecting challenges of climate shocks, conflict and displacement; assess existing capacities, systems and approaches for delivering social assistance; and explore how social assistance is intertwined with politics and economies.

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## List of acronyms and abbreviations

ASP	adaptive social protection
BASIC	Better Assistance in Crises
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SPIAC-B	Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board
SRSP	shock-responsive social protection
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Mapping the terrain: social protection, humanitarian assistance and climate change in protracted crises</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1. Social protection and social assistance	6
2.2. Humanitarian response and assistance	9
2.3. Climate adaptation and social protection	10
<b>3. Policy framings of social assistance in protracted crises</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4. Towards a conceptual framework for researching social assistance in protracted crises</b>	<b>13</b>
4.1. The four elements of the framework	13
<b>5. Programme framework for BASIC Research</b>	<b>21</b>
5.1. Politics and financing of social assistance	22
5.2. Climate and livelihood resilience	23
5.3. Systems for design and delivery	23
5.4. Inclusion and participation	24
<b>6. Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Annexe</b>	<b>32</b>

# 1. Introduction

More than half the world's extreme poor live in countries classified as fragile. By 2030 this concentration will be even more pronounced, with 80 per cent of the extreme poor projected to be living in fragile states. Where international humanitarian action is required, countries face complex crises with multiple causes, but conflict is estimated to partly cause 80 per cent of humanitarian needs (World Bank 2019). By 2030, climate risks could push an extra 100 million people into poverty, often overlapping with areas most affected by conflict (*ibid.*). Crises are also increasingly protracted; close to 60 per cent of people targeted in humanitarian responses now receive assistance for five years or more; and appeals for crises lasting five years or longer command 80 per cent of funding requested and received (OCHA 2017).

Interest is blossoming in the potential for social assistance, or non-contributory support to vulnerable or destitute households or specific individuals (often referred to as 'social safety nets'), and social protection more broadly, to address poverty and vulnerability in protracted crises. On paper, social assistance programmes, and social protection systems more broadly, are well placed to be part of a more effective approach to addressing vulnerability in these settings, primarily because they can mitigate shocks and stresses. Shocks – be they economic, political or otherwise – do not always turn into crises: a crisis occurs when the original event is compounded by existing vulnerabilities (Levine and Sharp 2015).

By reducing people's vulnerability to poverty and the adverse consequences of shocks, through protective, preventive and promotive measures, social protection interventions can reduce the overall impact of a crisis – which has been recognised as part of the adaptive social protection agenda (Bowen *et al.* 2020; Davies *et al.* 2008). In addition, when a crisis does arise, social protection can be part of a shock response when flexibility and adaptation are built into design and operations to accommodate some of the additional demand for assistance from acutely vulnerable populations – now part of a burgeoning field of thinking and programming around shock-responsive social protection (SRSP).

However, the current evidence base on delivering social assistance in protracted crises is patchy in both geographical and thematic coverage. Globally, experience is concentrated in responding to climate-related shocks – and more recently to the impacts of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic – rather than to situations of protracted conflict and/or displacement. The emphasis on meeting needs during an acute and what is often assumed to be relatively short period of distress dominates both research and operational agendas. This is at the expense of understanding how to design and deliver social assistance in response to the needs of chronically poor populations living in places affected by protracted crises. Essentially, the question of how and at what costs social assistance can be delivered routinely in contexts characterised by protracted conflict, displacement and recurring climate shocks remains unanswered.

Ultimately, Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research aims to better understand how to strengthen routine social assistance in the most difficult protracted crises and for the populations that are the hardest to reach. By protracted crises, we refer to settings where both the nature of vulnerability, as well as the space for responses, are shaped by conflict-related processes and the existence of displaced populations. We are also interested in how recurring climate shocks compound these other fundamental drivers of vulnerability.

Conflict-related processes refer to more than armed violence, displacement, the destruction of infrastructure and collapse of basic services. They also encompass the distortion or erosion of markets through border closures and the collapse of supply chains; impediments to movements that limit access to resources and services; occupation of land and critical key resource areas; militarisation of livelihoods and the turn to survival work that is inseparable from the dynamics of conflict; more rigid social relations and the intensification of local politics; and the introduction of discriminatory new governance regimes.

These various processes and dynamics are profoundly important for thinking about what approaches are feasible and appropriate for delivering better social assistance. For example, a national government could be party to a conflict and unwilling or unable to deliver assistance in certain areas or to particular populations. There might be a lack of decentralised state services that have collapsed during periods of intense fighting, and/or other unofficial or unrecognised public authorities are instead providing services and mediating targeting of assistance at local level.

The continuation of violence, or the presence of armed non-state actors hostile to the state and foreign actors, may make it impossible to access some places. The existence of refugees or other categories of displaced people can create difficulties where existing national social protection programmes are inflexible in covering these groups. These are some of the challenges that make protracted crisis settings different from peaceful settings where social protection has proved effective and useful at addressing chronic poverty and vulnerability.

This paper aims to review debates and concepts that are key to informing research on social assistance in contexts of protracted crises. It is based on an extensive review of literature and evidence relating to the interface of social protection, humanitarian assistance and responses to climate shocks, including reviews of the existing evidence base during the inception phase (Table A1). The purpose is to identify the most relevant strands of thinking for building a research framework for the BASIC Research programme. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 offers a brief overview of three fields and relevant definitional discussion: social protection, humanitarian assistance, and climate adaptation and responsiveness. Section 3 introduces the policy and programming areas that are of interest in the programme. Section 4 turns to the elements of a conceptual framework that can be usefully applied to the overlapping agendas of social protection and humanitarian aid responses in protracted crisis settings. Section 5 outlines the main research questions, themes and knowledge gaps that are addressed by BASIC Research; and section 6 offers conclusions and recommendations for future research.

The research framework outlined here is primarily intended for the BASIC Research team, to guide, organise and coordinate the various streams of work that will take place, covering numerous countries and thematic areas. However, it is hoped that it will also be useful to other research and policy analysis activities focused on social protection and humanitarian assistance in varied protracted crisis situations.

## 2. Mapping the terrain: social protection, humanitarian assistance and climate change in protracted crises

As explained in section 1, the focus of BASIC Research is on protracted crisis settings characterised by protracted conflict, displacement and recurring climate shocks, and where social protection and humanitarian assistance responses often co-exist in various amalgams. Thus, this section provides a brief overview of three key fields of thinking and practice that inform the BASIC Research agenda: social protection and social assistance; humanitarian response and assistance; and climate adaptation and social protection.

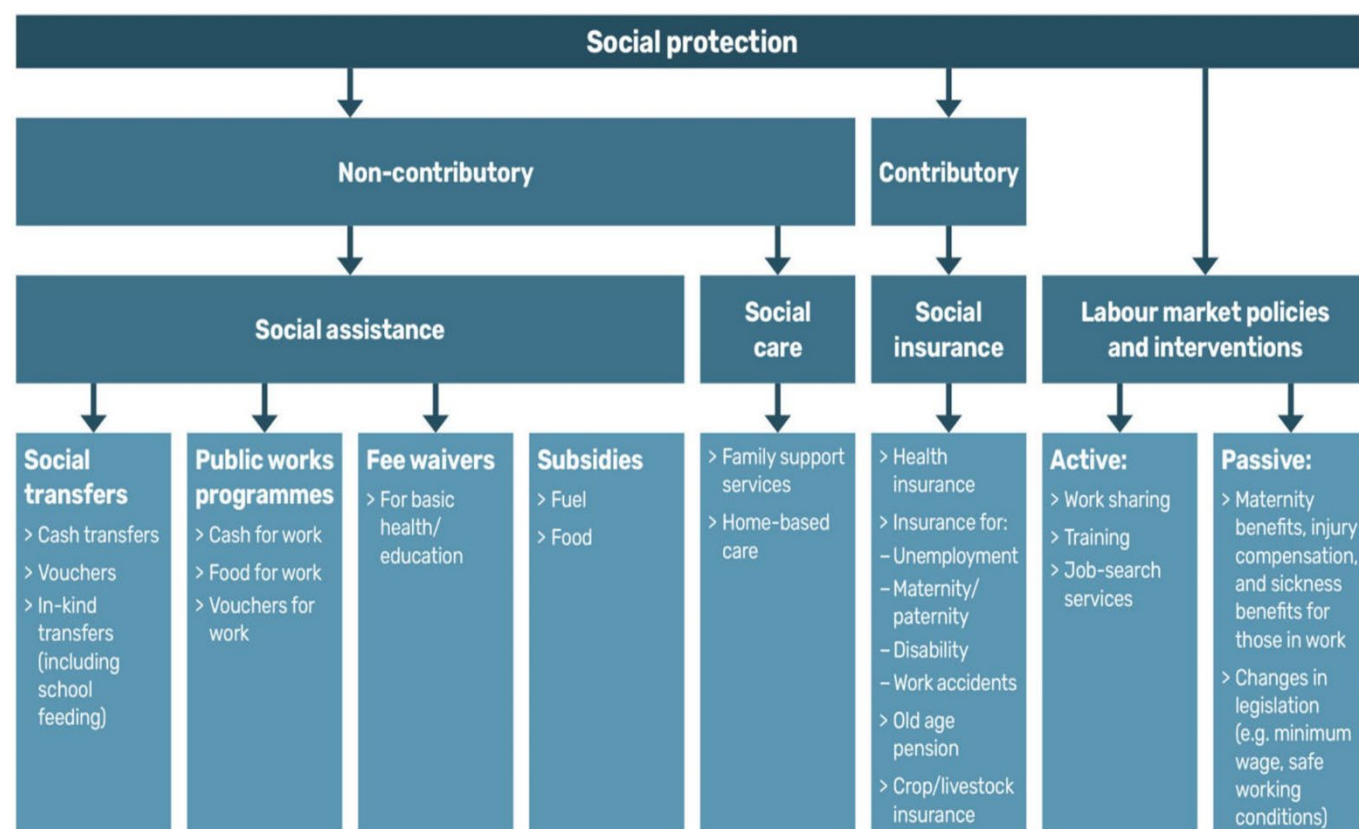
### 2.1. Social protection and social assistance

While there are differing views on what exactly constitutes social protection and how wide a remit to give to its ambitions, there is general consensus that its purpose is to prevent and protect all people against poverty and vulnerability throughout their lifecycles, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux 2008; Gentilini and Omamo 2011; SPIAC-B 2019). Furthermore, there are secondary objectives to do with supporting productive and resilient livelihoods that can be met through careful design and delivery of social protection. In other words, through the promotion of (1) pro-poor and inclusive development; (2) climate-sensitive and -resilient livelihoods (Handa *et al.* 2022); and (3) economic growth (Davis *et al.* 2016). In situations of conflict and fragility, there is also considerable interest in objectives to do with social contracts, social cohesion and state legitimacy, though the evidence base on whether and how social protection achieves these objectives is still nascent (Loewe, Trautner and Zintyl 2019; Slater and Mallet 2017).

Programmatically, social protection is commonly described as comprising three elements: social assistance (most frequently equated with a cash, food or asset transfer); social insurance; and labour market programmes. Social services are increasingly accepted as a further element. A useful schematic of these component parts is shown in Figure 2.1, itself adapted and extended from O'Brien *et al.* (2018). Social assistance comprises four elements: social transfers (e.g. cash, vouchers or in-kind); public works programmes (a wage transfer in return for labour); fee waivers (e.g. for education or health); and subsidies (e.g. those implemented by the state, targeted and focused on supporting the poorest households to meet

their basic consumption needs). For the purposes of BASIC Research, we primarily focus on social transfers as a form of social assistance.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 2.1: Taxonomy of social protection instruments**



Notes: (1) 'non-contributory' schemes are defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as those that, 'normally require no direct (financial) contribution from beneficiaries or their employers as a condition of entitlement to receive benefits' (ILO 2017) – public works programmes are usually counted as 'non-contributory' even though the recipient contributes labour; (2) social transfers may be conditional or unconditional – a conditional transfer requires the recipient to display certain behaviours (such as ensuring school attendance) to receive the benefit.

Source: Carter et al. (2019). [OGLv3.0](#).

Social transfers consist mainly of cash, vouchers or supplementary food, though sometimes they may include productive assets (such as seeds, fertiliser and tools) or health and education assets (bednets, food for severe, acute malnutrition and school books). They are designed to be non-contributory (from the point of view of the beneficiary), regular (mostly monthly or bi-monthly) and predictable payments. They tend to be provided by governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations agencies or financial service providers, and are usually funded through taxation or donors (Roelen, Longhurst and Sabates-Wheeler 2018). Social transfers can be unconditional cash transfers; or conditional cash transfers that require specific behaviours and actions on the part of recipients in return for a receipt – common conditions include school enrolment and attendance, and uptake of pre-, post-natal and infant care at health clinics.

While social assistance is the central focus of our research, at times we widen this focus to include instruments that might not be defined as social assistance (such as insurance, labour market policies or social services) but could be described as 'socially protecting'. Good examples include: vaccinations against communicable diseases; and strategic grain reserves that regulate prices and keep food affordable. Similarly, work on climate resilience may generate findings about social or index-based insurance that have implications for how social assistance might be used to respond to climate shocks.

Moreover, there is a need to recognise the linkages between social assistance and other elements of the social protection system. If social assistance – in the form of a food or cash transfer – is augmented by

<sup>1</sup> In most countries where BASIC Research will operate, 'social safety nets' is commonly used terminology. It overlaps with the social assistance element of social protection. In sub-Saharan African countries, 'social safety nets' generally refers to transfers and public works. In the Middle East, subsidies, particularly public distribution schemes, are a key part of the social safety nets landscape.

training or education and health provision, or a livelihoods package, then this sits within the remit of social protection. For instance, it is well known that cash transfers are not a magic bullet for longer-term poverty reduction but may need to be combined with other complementary initiatives (training, nutrition, microcredit, health, etc.). These types of programmes are variously referred to as ‘cash+’ (cash plus), graduation or productive inclusion programmes.

Furthermore, the lines between formal and informal social assistance are also difficult to define. There is a tendency to focus on formal social assistance provided by governments, aid organisations or combinations of governments and international actors. However, people receive support from informal and non-state actors in many other ways. These range from the semi-formal, such as *zakat* in some countries,<sup>2</sup> to much more community-based informal mechanisms, such as rotating savings clubs and burial societies, or sharing and support among neighbours. Extended families also support each other through remittances. Again, while this is not the main focus of BASIC Research, it forms part of the overall ecosystem of how people attempt to cope with crisis, so we are interested in the intersections between formal and less formal social assistance.

Social protection has largely focused on contexts of relative stability, where provision is ideally provided through national-led (state) institutions, but often provided and funded with the support of international agencies and development partners. Yet, humanitarian assistance uses the same modalities (cash, vouchers and/or in-kind transfers) but has different and often narrower objectives, usually framed around saving lives and alleviating suffering. These differences are less stark in protracted crises; for example, where cash for asset programmes seek to support livelihoods rather than simply providing life-saving cash or food transfers. Humanitarian assistance is also guided by core humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality, which can mean it substitutes for states where they are unable to support their citizens, particularly during conflicts (Slater and Sabates-Wheeler 2021, unpublished).

There is a definitional debate about whether or not humanitarian assistance should be seen as part of social assistance or separate from it. In contexts such as Yemen and Somalia, where international agencies provide humanitarian assistance while supporting governments to provide social assistance, it is difficult to make clear distinctions between them. For instance, in emergency situations social transfers may include basic domestic goods (e.g. cooking implements and utensils, stoves) and shelter (e.g. tents, blankets). In the humanitarian sector they are referred to as non-food items, but they fulfil the criteria of social transfers made under situations of relative stability.

Humanitarian assistance can be a short-term response to a particular shock where state capacities are overwhelmed and can include one-off or (short-term) multi-month transfers. Increasingly, humanitarian responses are protracted or recurrent, delivering transfers for years or even decades, rather than weeks or months. In these situations, the distinction between humanitarian and social assistance becomes fuzzy. What matters most is the extent to which assistance is long term, regular and predictable:

- By ‘long term’ we mean lasting years rather than months or days; or, in the case of recurrent seasonal shocks, access to a programme that provides support during the most challenging months over multiple years.
- By ‘regular’ or ‘routine’ we mean that transfers are distributed at regularly occurring intervals.
- By ‘predictable’ we mean that people are able to forward plan and know that they are covered over a longer run. In protracted crises, humanitarian assistance may be long term but not predictable – recipients may not know from one month to the next if they will receive support.

However, we recognise that social protection is embedded in a rights-based framework, in which governments can be held to account for obligations to fulfil rights to social protection, and that humanitarian action often has a more needs-based approach. Tensions and complementarities between social protection and humanitarian approaches to delivering assistance, and what social assistance means when attempts are being made to link humanitarian and social protection, are a central part of the BASIC Research agenda.

Our research will focus on both humanitarian and social protection approaches and instruments, examine how they relate to each other and explore what that means for policy, practice and definitions. The aim is to

<sup>2</sup> *Zakat* is an annual alms tax or poor rate that each Muslim is expected to pay as a religious duty and that is used for charitable and religious purposes.



lay out what the social protection agenda looks like as it expands into fragile and conflict-affected settings. This will include an emphasis on helping states to develop policies, systems and programmes. A related emphasis will be on the challenges that arise from the normative emphasis of social protection on working through states as the key provider of assistance. This is problematic in protracted crises where all sorts of other arrangements exist (including state-led emergency assistance, internationally supported emergency assistance, remittances, charity-based assistance provided by community-based organisations and NGOs, and mutual aid within communities).

## 2.2. Humanitarian response and assistance

The objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of human-made crises and disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations. Humanitarian action has two inextricably linked dimensions, protecting people and providing assistance; and it is rooted in humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence (Sphere 2019).

Although international aid agencies often provide both development and humanitarian assistance, humanitarian action has maintained a distinctive approach, set of principles and financing mechanisms. The need to maintain a principled neutral, impartial and independent approach is seen as necessary to enable aid to reach people on all sides of conflicts on the basis of negotiated access with all parties to a conflict (Stoddard *et al.* 2020; ICRC 2014). Where states do not control all of a territory and do not have access to populations in areas held by non-state armed groups, humanitarian actors negotiate with both states and non-state groups on the basis of core humanitarian principles to reach all those in need (McHugh and Bessler 2006). There has always been a tension, therefore, between calls to link relief and development, promote resilience and work more effectively across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus, and the need for humanitarian actors to negotiate with all parties to a conflict and maintain perceptions of neutrality and independence.

International humanitarian aid is premised on the idea of supporting people with life-saving assistance when national and local capacities have been overwhelmed. The underpinnings and operational modalities are therefore premised on the idea of substituting for states when they are not able to act to alleviate suffering (IASC 2006; Harvey 2009). At the same time, international humanitarian actors are committed to respecting the primary responsibility of states to assist and protect their own citizens and substituting for states in the provision of assistance and services is intended to be a last resort. Except for a small number of purely humanitarian organisations (e.g. the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières), most large humanitarian organisations also have development roles, mandates and programming that focus more on supporting states.

BASIC Research focuses on the intersections between social protection and humanitarian approaches to providing assistance in protracted crises – a topic that is part of a broader policy debate about the roles of development, humanitarian and peace actors (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019; VOICE 2020). Most recently the term ‘nexus’ has gained currency when referring to the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actions (OECD 2019). Aid agencies and donors present stronger links between humanitarian cash and food assistance and social protection as one way of operationalising policy commitments to the nexus. Social assistance sits within these wider debates about the respective roles of humanitarian and development actors and financing, and how international aid agencies relate to states in crises.

Social protection has been framed as a potential contributor to state-building (Andrews *et al.* 2014; IEG World Bank 2011; Ovadiya *et al.* 2015; Kidd 2020; McLoughlin 2015) and as an opportunity to link relief and development by moving from the provision of humanitarian assistance towards more nationally led and longer-term social assistance within social protection systems (Carter *et al.* 2019). Yet, the tensions between development commitments to national ownership and state-building, and humanitarian commitments to neutrality and independence, are often ignored in policy declarations and rarely analysed (recent sources: Longhurst *et al.* 2020; UNICEF 2018; Harvey 2009; Harvey *et al.* 2007). Moreover, the evidence base behind this framing of social protection is weak in terms of whether and how transitions can be supported, and where and when supporting such transitions is appropriate.

### 2.3. Climate adaptation and social protection

Over the past 10–15 years, there has been considerable attention to linkages between social protection and climate change. Social protection has been seen as a way of reducing the impacts of climate-related shocks and stressors, and of increasing the resilience of recipient households and communities. It has also been seen as a mechanism for the delivery of adaptation funding, showing promise in tackling short-term shocks as well as longer-term adaptation to climate change. This interest has been accompanied by the development of concepts such as ASP (Davies *et al.* 2008; Arnall *et al.* 2010; Bowen *et al.* 2020), climate-responsive social protection (Kuriakose *et al.* 2012, 2013) and most recently SRSP (O'Brien *et al.* 2018; Beazley *et al.* 2019).

First mooted more than a decade ago, the innovation of ASP was its aim of integrating and combining interventions in the fields of social protection, climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. It offered a framework for supporting those targeted for social protection to become more resilient to disasters and climate change (ex-ante risk management capacity), while also finding ways to buffer them from the impacts of climate change (ex-post absorptive capacity) (Davies *et al.* 2008). More recent thinking around SRSP has deepened thinking on leveraging social protection programmes to respond to shocks ex-post, climate related or otherwise.

Discussion of the linkages between social assistance and climate change has in many ways mirrored discussions over the potential role of social assistance in strengthening resilience as a way to bridge the gap between humanitarian emergency interventions and long-term development. Reflecting this, these linkages have commonly been understood through the so-called '3A framework' – aiming to enhance anticipatory, absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities – building on the work of Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux (2004). Part of this discussion entails a call for stronger integration between humanitarian cash and voucher assistance and social protection programmes (Longhurst *et al.* 2020).

In programmatic terms, the role of social assistance to strengthen resilience may be in either introducing specific new types of social assistance to address shocks and longer-term resilience-strengthening; or adjusting existing social assistance programmes to incorporate climate change considerations, notably making them more flexible, agile and robust in the face of a possible range of future climates (e.g. Lemos *et al.* 2016; Ulrichs, Slater and Costella 2019). However, despite interest in connecting social protection with efforts to strengthen climate adaptation and resilience, most social protection policies and programmes are still not explicitly linked to national climate change strategies or plans, and often do not strategically integrate climate risk management (Costella *et al.* 2021: 11).

Further, when connections between climate change and social protection programming are made, the emphasis is on supporting particular populations to cope in the aftermath of climate-related shocks, with less attention on how social protection responses might support longer-term adaptation. This points to the limitations of social protection and climate adaptation frameworks for detailing responses and programming for situations of conflict-related emergencies and protracted crisis. Rather, the agenda has typically been blind to conflict and political fragility as a shocks that compound climate-related risks and uncertainties.

From earlier reviews (e.g. Béné, Cornelius and Howland 2018; Tenzing 2020) it is clear that most work linking social assistance (and social protection more broadly) and climate resilience has been on anticipatory and absorptive capacities (i.e. short-term, shock-responsive concerns). Less attention has been given to longer-term concerns about adaptive capacity and, in particular, transformative capacities, which remain the most challenging element and also those of direct relevance to supporting crisis-affected populations to overcome structural vulnerabilities relating to conflict-related processes and legacies. Existing research on the intersection of social protection and climate change lacks a needed focus on the longer-term implications of climate vulnerability. Longer-term trends, the implications of these for livelihoods pathways or needs for adaptation receive less attention than short-term shocks and stressors (Costella *et al.* 2021; Naess Selby and Daoust 2022).

There is insufficient focus on how to ensure that social assistance promotes flexibility and robustness amid uncertainty, and how to design and implement it to avoid the risk of maladaptation. Responses to short-term shocks will not automatically lead to long-term resilience. On the contrary, decisions taken in the short term will affect the prospects of longer-term transformative change. Yet, most programmes aim to strengthen

coping and adaptive capacities within prevailing structural contexts, without addressing the underlying conditions that make people vulnerable, including conflict, violence and displacement (*ibid.*).

In summary, this section has reviewed thinking and trends at the interface of social protection, humanitarian assistance, and climate adaptation and responsiveness. By assessing each of these in turn, the section has highlighted the ways in which policy and programming in protracted crises increasingly emphasise an approach that integrates and combines responses in the hope of providing more sustained support to the poorest and most vulnerable populations. In the next section, we review policy framings of social assistance in protracted crises, homing in on efforts to move from humanitarian assistance delivered outside state systems to assistance that attempts to link with national systems.

### 3. Policy framings of social assistance in protracted crises

The intersection of protracted conflict and displacement with recurring climate shocks, alongside the shifting nature of humanitarian responses, presents multiple challenges to how to effectively address the needs of populations who may experience chronic poverty as well as acute shocks. In protracted crises, humanitarian aid is increasingly viewed as being an inadequate and inefficient mechanism for supporting the basic needs of populations who have chronic needs. As part of policy commitments to strengthening the humanitarian, development and peace nexus there has been a growing focus in donor and aid agency policies and approaches on supporting transitions from humanitarian aid to nationally led social protection systems, on making social protection systems more shock responsive, and complementing humanitarian aid with greater development and domestic financing (Carter *et al.* 2019; ILO 2021; O'Brien *et al.*, 2018; OECD 2019; UNICEF 2019b; WFP 2021). This section briefly presents this growing area of policy, with more detail provided in Harvey and Mohamed (2022).

Key international aid agencies have been developing a growing set of policies, guidance and programming experience relating to social assistance in crises that aim to link humanitarian cash and social protection. For example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has developed a body of guidance on and policy commitments to linking humanitarian cash and social protection. In its strategic plan, its core commitments to children and as part of the World Humanitarian Summit 2016, UNICEF has made organisational commitments to prioritising SRSP (UNICEF 2019a; 2019b; 2020).

Meanwhile, the World Food Programme (WFP) has undertaken a strategic shift from being a food aid to a food assistance agency, providing food, vouchers and cash assistance (Were Omamo, Gentilini and Sandström 2010). A new social protection strategy positions WFP as both assisting nationally led programmes through technical advice and service provision, and delivering programmes directly where national systems are absent or disrupted. The strategy commits WFP to '[paying] increased attention to prospects for transition to government systems' and to structure its own programmes to 'set up the basic building blocks of a future system' (WFP 2021).

Donors, crisis-affected governments and aid agencies are therefore all committed to finding ways to support more effective social assistance in crises that leads to stronger, nationally led social protection systems. Policy commitments to increase the use of social protection instruments in protracted crisis settings have been made on both the humanitarian side (Grand Bargain, Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, localisation) and the development side (Sustainable Development Goals, social protection floors).

At the World Humanitarian Summit 2016, humanitarian actors agreed to increase the proportion of funding going directly to local actors, as well as the use of humanitarian cash transfers in humanitarian response. The resulting Grand Bargain cash workstream includes a sub-group working on the linkages between humanitarian cash and social protection led by UNICEF, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). At the same time, the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) called for an incremental transition of 'chronic' humanitarian caseloads into social protection systems and schemes, where appropriate (SPIACB 2019; World Humanitarian Summit 2016).

In May 2021, through the famine prevention and humanitarian crises compact, the G7 countries committed to working with the World Bank to 'support shock-responsive and social protection systems in more of the most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries, and enhance support to existing systems, including through strengthening linkages between humanitarian assistance and national systems' (G7 2021). The Department for International Development (now FCDO) supported this agenda for many years. It was an early champion of cash transfers in stable settings in Africa, with a focus on financing and rigorously evaluating transfers. More recently, FCDO has supported the development of shock-responsive approaches to social protection, largely to respond to predictable annual droughts in countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya. The growing importance of social protection has been given extra impetus by the huge expansion of temporary, government-led social assistance programmes in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Gentilini *et al.*, 2020).

SRSP, 'focuses on the adaptation of social protection programmes and systems to address large scale shocks, and/or connecting more coherently with other sectors to do so' (O'Brien *et al.* 2018: 7). In other words, it aims to strengthen social protection systems, as well as its linkages with disaster risk management and other relevant sectors, to jointly improve the coverage, comprehensiveness and adequacy of support provided to the most vulnerable before, during and after a shock occurs – and pre-empt the needs imposed by potential future shocks (TRANSFORM 2020).

SRSP has been broadly welcomed as an attempt to institutionalise more coherent approaches to risk management through government. Yet, little has been said or written about the implications of such approaches in areas where government control, legitimacy or influence are limited or non-existent; and in places where other actors, including non-state armed actors, take on various roles otherwise provided by the state (e.g. operational delivery of assistance; see Longhurst and Slater 2022). Furthermore, there have been few discussions around when linking humanitarian to social protection as part of SRSP is not suitable for a variety of ethical, political, financial and operational reasons.

The reality of weak social protection provision in countries experiencing protracted crises requires a realistic assessment of how far humanitarian responses can and should work through established government systems and programmes, and what investments in domestic capacities are required to ensure that rudimentary social protection systems can function. In protracted crises, there are evidence gaps in how this can be achieved and the degree to which it will lead to more effective support for those who need it most. One set of gaps is in political economy considerations including: the real and perceived threat of political and social violence; the legitimacy of the state in conflict-affected contexts and the existence of sharp political divisions (raising issues such as under what conditions and how to engage with governments – or unrecognised authorities – that may have a role in initiating or sustaining violence); political will at national level – and how to encourage a state to (better) assist national and non-national populations; the influence of global aid architecture on how assistance is provided, as well as the complexities of relations between local states and international actors; and the vested interests, values and priorities of global, national and subnational actors. A second set of gaps concerns how capacities can be built and national systems sustained, rebuilt or strengthened in situations of long-running crisis. The right mix of humanitarian and development instruments, and the scope for new forms of financing to expand the levels of support available, are additional areas where evidence is lacking and more research is needed.

BASIC Research will interrogate this normative policy agenda and start to fill in some of the gaps in the evidence. In doing so it will seek to contribute to evidence about how policy objectives can be met (e.g. by strengthening systems to transition to longer-term delivery of routine social assistance), but also critically examine some of the implicit assumptions or received wisdom that underpin the current policy agenda. Examples of assumptions include that social protection should be state led and coordinated; that relief-oriented cash transfers constitute social protection; or the view that targeting should be based on 'conflict-affectedness' (i.e. the extent to which conflict affects loss of land, livelihoods, assets, etc.) rather than other social and identity markers. However, the state may not necessarily be the most appropriate actor to focus on in terms of strengthening the social assistance delivery chain, for reasons that relate to the unique political economy challenges that exist in protracted crises.

Moreover, given that the impacts of conflict in protracted crises fall disproportionately on specific vulnerable individuals and groups, more multi-dimensional approaches to needs assessment and targeting of social protection may be required. Also, closer attention is required on the potential trade-offs to be made when

determining the appropriateness of various design and implementation features of social assistance. For instance, questions relating to how to sustain assistance for the worst-off and expand caseloads in response to new crises; and trade-offs in whether to provide more comprehensive assistance (with larger transfer values) to a small number or expand coverage (with lower transfer value) at the expense of adequacy.

Evidence is needed not just on how the current policy agenda can be delivered, but on whether it is the right agenda. Critically, our research will examine the need for modesty about what assistance – whether humanitarian or social protection – can achieve without a political solution to long-running conflicts, and the need for assistance in supporting transitions to be able to cope with uncertainty, setbacks and renewals of conflict, as recent experience from Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Yemen show. The research will examine: the right mix of development and humanitarian instruments, considering the significance of contextual specificities on what is both feasible and appropriate; how approaches to supporting systems can be more climate and conflict sensitive; how to better tackle exclusion; and how to better navigate the complex politics of social assistance in crisis settings.

In summary, conventional framings, approaches, policies, procedures, systems and programmes of social assistance in developing countries cannot be transplanted unchanged to protracted crisis settings. Ensuring that research delivers policy and operational evidence on why, how and when to use social protection approaches in protracted crises requires thinking differently about existing concepts and frameworks. Applying elements of existing frameworks can provide a more thoughtful lens for BASIC Research, as detailed below. The next section introduces elements of a conceptual framework to inform research on social assistance in protracted crises.

## 4. Towards a conceptual framework for researching social assistance in protracted crises

### 4.1. The four elements of the framework

BASIC Research is concerned with how to strengthen the effective, efficient and sustainable provision of social assistance at the intersection of social protection and food and cash-based humanitarian assistance in protracted crises, where social assistance ultimately aims to protect and promote the wellbeing of those most vulnerable and in need. To that end, this section explains 'this section explains the four elements that provide a conceptual framework for our research:

1. Social protection systems;
2. Protracted crisis contexts;
3. Humanitarian substitution and the transition to strengthening domestic systems;
4. Livelihoods and resilience.

#### 4.1.1. Social protection systems

Work from the SPIAC-B group as well as Winder-Rossi *et al.* (2017)<sup>3</sup> usefully distinguishes different social protection scenarios in relation to state (national government) involvement in social protection provision and country context. These scenarios are illustrated in Table 4.1. They range from a case in which the provision of social protection is completely absent because it has not yet been developed or due to conflict or war; to a situation in which the social protection system is flexible (or fully shock responsive) and able to respond in an appropriate and efficient manner after a shock. Category one ('no system') and category five ('highly shock-responsive system') should be considered as 'reference scenarios'. The three intermediate categories range from a situation in which a coherent social protection system has not yet been developed to a case in which the national social protection system exists but is only partially able to adapt and respond to shocks.

<sup>3</sup> Also see SPACE document on linking social protection and humanitarian assistance:

<https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/space-deciding-when-and-how-link-humanitarian-assistance-and-social-protection>.

**Table 4.1: Maturity of social protection system/function of humanitarian response**

No.	Type of social protection context/scenario*	Description	Remit for humanitarian/emergency response
1	<b>No system or severely weakened system</b>	Context where there is no formal provision of social assistance and/or existing structures (formal and non-formal) have been shattered or severely weakened by crises or conflict.	Humanitarian assistance is largely substituting for state-led social protection, with limited scope for linking to national systems.
2	<b>Nascent social protection system</b>	Initial components of a social protection system are being put in place, providing short- to medium-term support mostly in relation to acute risks, threats or crises. Yet, a coherent system has not developed.	Humanitarian assistance is likely to retain a significant role, but efforts to link to national systems are possible if feasible and appropriate.
3	<b>National (state-led) social protection system unable to respond to repeated crises</b>	A social protection programme or system exists and is institutionalised within the state structure, yet it is rigid and inflexible or too overloaded; and unable to adapt to increasing burden of need in the event of a covariate shock or crisis.	International humanitarian assistance may still be needed, but it possible to link more closely with national systems if appropriate.
4	<b>Limited shock-responsive national social protection system</b>	A social protection programme or system exists that includes committed state involvement (even if it is donor funded). The system is partially able to respond to predictable shocks and increase coverage for households affected by the shock and eligible to receive social protection.	Efforts are likely to focus on increasing the shock-responsiveness of national systems and making financing more sustainable and domestically led. Any humanitarian role is more limited, with the important exception of refugee situations, in which case the international community helps to shoulder the financing burden.
5	<b>Highly shock-responsive national social protection system</b>	An ideal scenario where a social protection system is institutionalised within state structures and is prepared to respond nimbly and flexibly to predictable and unpredictable shocks and stresses.	States can lead both routine social protection and response to shocks through responsive social protection and domestic emergency management.

\* These reference-only categories were developed based on the Core Diagnostic Instrument (CODI), one of the tools developed as part of the SPIAC-B set of diagnostic inter-agency tools.<sup>4</sup>

Source: adapted from Winder-Rossi et al. (2017).

The scenarios in Table 4.1 help to illustrate the different providers, types of interventions and methods of delivery that are most appropriate in the different contexts. For instance, where a system is shattered or severely weakened, the most appropriate provider of cash assistance is likely to be the international humanitarian system. Where the state system exists but is weak, the international system can provide support, where feasible and appropriate, to strengthen state-led social protection and deliver humanitarian resources through the system. Ideally, in a stable context social assistance is provided through the state social protection system. In different contexts, the provision and providers of social assistance may have very different objectives. In contexts such as 1 and 2, the protective and preventive functions take precedence as relief against destitution and deprivation. Other functions, specific to crisis settings, such as recovery and rebuilding efforts, also come into play in scenarios 1, 2 and 3. The emphasis in scenarios 4 and 5 might be more on social assistance for asset accumulation, education and livelihood support. In other words, these are the contexts where the promotive function of social protection is most likely to bear results.

In BASIC Research we are interested in what happens to social assistance provision in protracted crises, where provision is fragmented and some aspects of the social protection delivery system (e.g. targeting, funding, coordination, appeals) are non-existent or barely function; in other words, the contexts outlined in scenarios 1–3 (and perhaps 4) in Table 4.1. Seyfert *et al.* (2019) argue for an ‘unbundled’ approach to the social assistance delivery chain, offering a perspective on the challenges of shifting to a social protection

<sup>4</sup> <http://ispatools.org/core-diagnostic-instrument/>.

approach in places where institutional capacities are weak.<sup>5</sup> Building systems raises tough questions about capacity and priorities (both humanitarian and domestic policy), in addition to the political will of domestic governments.

For example, social registries may be useful for obtaining 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 (beyond concerns that might exist about the quality, accuracy and coverage of a social registry to begin with). 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 (*ibid.*) – from policy and financing to targeting, payments and monitoring – analysing which actors have strengths and weaknesses, where linkage is most feasible and where further investment is needed.

#### 4.1.2. Protracted crises

While BASIC Research focuses on protracted crisis settings, this terminology needs unpacking as it conceals a variety of settings and situations whose dimensions, as well as drivers of insecurity, levels of conflict and violence, and scope and options to assist, vary enormously. Generally, protracted crises refer to places where authority is often contested, war is ongoing, governments are parties to conflicts and may not have effective control over their territory, and/or non-state armed groups are present. In addition, we are interested in protracted crises as a result of, or intensified by, recurrent climate shocks and stresses.

Three points frame our consideration of protracted crises. First, it must be stressed that these contexts are ‘fragile and conflict-affected’ due to political and often also politico-economic reasons. Political grievances, ethnic divisions, ideological projects, elite resource capture, and weak state legitimacy and administrative capacity, often exacerbated or even structured by cross-border and geopolitical dynamics, as well as social and economic inequalities and poverty, are well established as the main causes of protracted instability. While it is sometimes implied that ‘climate’ and ‘conflict’ are parallel sources of vulnerability within protracted crises (e.g. Vivekananda *et al.* 2019; ICRC 2020), this is misleading; there is no equivalence between the two. Climatic factors can, without doubt, exacerbate vulnerabilities within protracted crises, acting as ‘risk multipliers’ (Butler and Kefford 2018). But there are no reasonable grounds for understanding fragility and conflict as essentially products of climatic hazards, or thinking of these hazards as more than secondary, if compounding, sources of vulnerability and instability.

Second, although we are concerned here with ‘protracted crisis’ settings, it should not be assumed they are a unitary type that are all alike and wholly unlike all other non-crisis settings. Each setting has its own specific history and dynamics of conflict, fragility and displacement. In most cases, moreover, patterns of conflict and fragility are internally heterogeneous, varying hugely from one province to another, or between core regions and particular borderlands, peripheries, or environmental and developmental frontiers (Naess *et al.* 2022). Some current crises were not fragile or conflict-affected ten years ago, and fewer still 15 years ago. Equally, some contexts that are currently categorised as ‘stable’ include at least elements, or particular geographical zones, of conflict and fragility. While we use ‘protracted crisis’ as our main analytical category and suggest a framework for analysing social assistance within it, we recognise the difficulties and dangers inherent in generalising across this category.

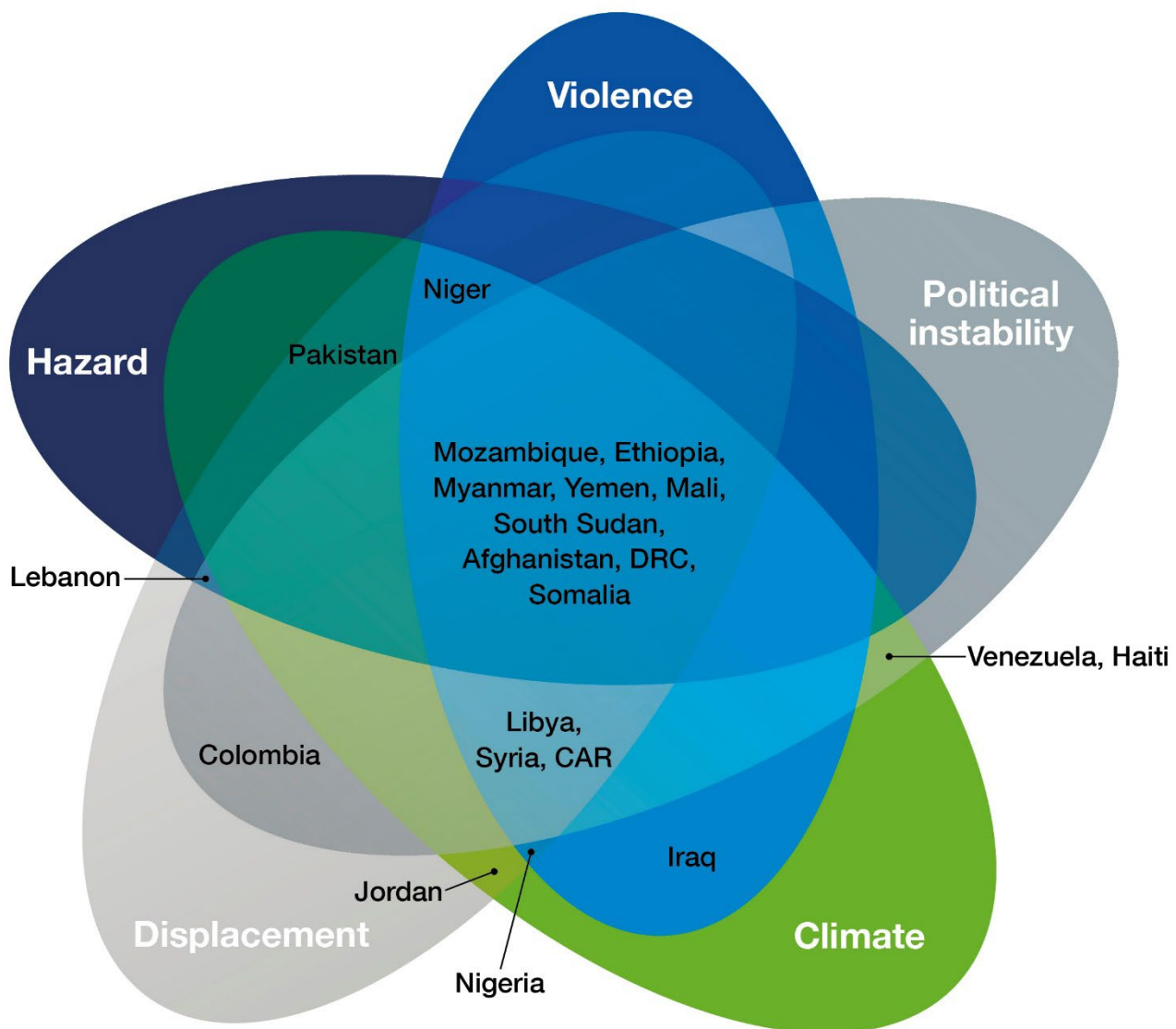
Third, conflict and fragility have two types of implication for social assistance. On the one hand, they have implications for its design, targeting and delivery: weak administrative capacities, highly politicised decision-making, armed conflict, the association of social assistance itself with one party in a conflict, and more can pose huge challenges for social assistance programmes, whether these are framed as being about ‘climate’, ‘shock responsiveness’, ‘resilience’ or otherwise. And yet, on the other hand, conflict and fragility can also have significant impacts on the nature and causes of vulnerabilities that social assistance programmes seek to address.

Thus, BASIC Research will focus on places where multiple dimensions of crisis and fragility overlap, and where covariate shocks compound existing vulnerabilities. Drawing inspiration from the Organisation for

<sup>5</sup> We understand ‘social protection approach’ in Seyfert *et al.* (2019) to mean social protection systems and programmes led by government and provided in a routine and sustained manner.

Economic Cooperation and Development's States of Fragility schematic diagram of dimensions of fragility, Figure 4.1 shows how different dimensions of crisis and fragility – 'violence', 'political instability', 'hazard', 'climate' and 'displacement' – intersect in the countries where BASIC Research will focus.<sup>6,7</sup>

**Figure 4.1: Dimensions of crisis in various countries, including those of interest to BASIC Research<sup>8</sup>**



Note: DRC = Democratic Republic of Congo.  
Source: Authors' own.

<sup>6</sup> Countries facing a 'high' or 'very high' exposure to natural events and phenomena according to the WorldRiskIndex (Aleksandrova *et al.* 2021) are incorporated in the 'hazard' dimension. Countries scoring 40.0 or below in the Notre Dame [GAIN Vulnerability and Readiness Index](#) are incorporated in the 'climate dimension'. Countries generating and/or hosting large displaced populations – either internally displaced persons or refugees – are incorporated in the 'displacement' dimension.

<sup>7</sup> Initially, determinations about where to place countries within the spheres of 'violence' and 'political instability' were based on the country knowledge of BASIC Research team members. However, in the future this could be refined using data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's [States of Fragility](#) framework (which scores and ranks countries on a 'political' dimension), as well as the [Armed Conflict Location Event Database](#) (ACLED), which tracks 'political violence' and 'civilian targeting' (referring to all violence that targets unarmed civilians).

<sup>8</sup> The four countries of BASIC Research focus are: Lebanon, Niger, Nigeria and Yemen. Beyond these four, BASIC Research will focus on a limited set of countries that face the overlapping challenges described above and indicated in the diagram.

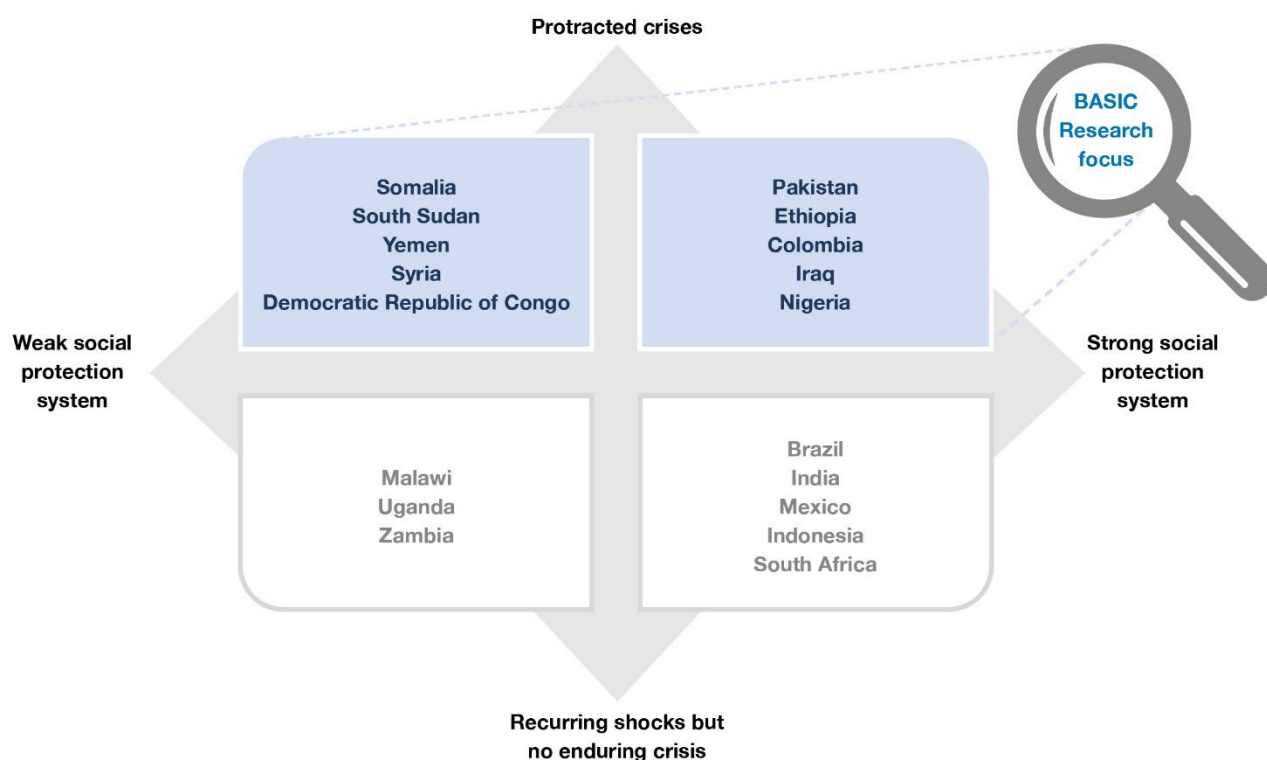


### Social protection system maturity and protracted crises

Patterns of vulnerability and resilience are typically a function of a range of social, political, economic and environmental factors. Within protracted crises, specifically, vulnerabilities are often structured to a significant degree both by conflict, violence and instability, and by the various, and mostly political, factors underpinning them (such as political grievances or ethnic divisions). Conflict contexts range from high-intensity conflicts, as in Syria and Yemen; to long-term, moderate conflicts marked by episodic periods of higher levels of violence such as in Darfur, Mali and Somalia; to areas with protracted but lower-intensity conflicts such as in Colombia, Haiti and Pakistan. Other areas, such as Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon and Uganda do not experience widespread armed conflict but host large conflict-displaced refugee populations from neighbouring countries. These categories conceal considerable variation in conflict and the far greater complexity and nuance that characterises particular protracted crisis settings.

The nature of crises (in terms of duration and intensity) can be considered alongside the maturity of state-led social protection systems, as described in the previous section, to develop broad categories describing contexts for social assistance provision (Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.2: Fragility and maturity of social protection system**



Source: Lind, Sabates-Wheeler and Szyp (2022).

In settings that are ‘peaceful’ (i.e. they experience no or low incidence of protracted crises) but which have existing social protection programmes and systems (the bottom right-hand quadrant), such as in many areas of Brazil, India, Mexico, Indonesia and South Africa, the assumption would be that it is possible to provide the full range of services and support in parallel to the state-led system to protect lives and support improvements. In settings that are peaceful or experience minimal levels of conflict-related violence and displacement, and have weak social protection systems and programmes (the bottom left-hand quadrant), such as in Malawi, Zambia and southern Uganda, the situation is different.

While security conditions do not restrict provision of social assistance, delivery may be constrained by lack of coordination and direction by state policy and decision-making; lack of political will or interest in domestic policy processes; insufficient finances (whether international or domestic); the capacity of public sector officials to design and implement a routine social assistance programme on a day-to-day basis; and the maturity of the social protection system in terms of identification, registration, enrolment, payment, grievance redress and monitoring. Therefore, a proliferation of small-scale programmes by NGOs and other aid actors may be evident.

In the top quadrants, which include countries that are the focus of BASIC Research, protracted crises (characterised by conflict, displacement and recurrent climate shocks) both shape the setting in which people make a living – and thus compromise the pursuit of building a livelihood that is ‘sustainable’ – and define the space for programming and operations. Some contexts, such as Pakistan, Ethiopia, Colombia, and Iraq, have elements of social protection systems and programmes, but these may function poorly, if at all, in subnational pockets and areas that experience more intense conflict, and/or during periods when levels of conflict are acutely high. In these areas, although there may be structures in place to deliver social assistance, these are often not sustainable in times and places experiencing high levels of conflict or insecurity. The challenges for providing social assistance are greatest in countries in the top left-hand quadrant, which are conflict-affected and have weak, non-existent or shattered social protection systems and programmes, such as in Somalia, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria and South Sudan.

#### **4.1.3. Humanitarian substitution and transition to domestic systems**

This subsection looks at the role of humanitarian action, how it relates to social protection, and tensions that arise in attempts to link and transition between approaches in protracted crises. Where social protection systems have been weakened by conflict and crisis or are nascent (i.e. categories 1 and 2 of the typology presented in Table 4.1), internationally led humanitarian action is often important. As noted above, humanitarian action has a distinctive approach, set of principles and financing mechanisms. At their heart, social protection and humanitarian action have divergent ways of thinking about the role of the state. Social protection has a strong focus on supporting states to provide social assistance and other forms of support to their citizens as part of a wider social contract; but humanitarian action has tended to require some critical distance from states to preserve humanitarian principles and act as a provider of last resort in a crisis when the state is overwhelmed, party to a conflict or lacks control over its territory (Longhurst *et al.* 2020).

Since the use of social protection approaches in protracted crises can be limited, with people often receiving assistance primarily through aid funded by annual humanitarian appeals, the respective roles, capacities and interests of government, humanitarian and development actors is key to developing a fuller understanding of the landscape of assistance. A feature of assistance in countries facing recurrent shocks, protracted conflict and forced displacement is the likely need to transition support from one set of actors to another, often accompanied by a transition in funding arrangements. This might be a transition from international humanitarian assistance to government-led assistance (with or without longer-term development funding); from a government's disaster management authority to its ministry for social assistance; or from government assistance back to humanitarian assistance (as is happening now in Afghanistan and happened in 2013 in South Sudan).

Such transitions entail challenges. For instance, disaster management authorities are often confined to immediate rescue in the aftermath of a shock such as a flood, while social protection programmes may support the chronically poor; there may be a vacuum in the designation of state responsibility for support in a post-disaster recovery phase. International humanitarian agencies, meanwhile, may find it problematic to hand over their caseloads to development partners that operate under different principles and resource constraints. Further, agencies with dual humanitarian and development mandates that are committed to humanitarian principles, and to supporting and strengthening government systems, have overlooked the tensions between developmental and humanitarian commitments in how they relate to states in protracted crises. In these settings, donors and aid agencies are simultaneously committed to overlapping sets of principles, commitments and approaches spanning humanitarian response, settings of fragility and development (UNICEF 2018). There are also tensions within humanitarian commitments between acknowledgement that states bear the primary responsibility for assisting and protecting their citizens, commitments to localisation and a focus on independence and neutrality, leading to international agencies often substituting for states.

#### 4.1.4. Livelihoods and resilience<sup>9</sup>

Our assumption is that stronger livelihoods help reduce vulnerability. Therefore, approaches to social protection, as well as food and cash-based humanitarian assistance, need to go beyond saving lives; they must also promote people's resilience and increase adaptive capacities as the basis for strengthening livelihoods over the longer term. It is largely accepted that crises that threaten the wellbeing of vulnerable populations have become more frequent and more pronounced, while systems (e.g. climate, political, economic) that define critical features of everyday life have become less stable (Foresight 2011; Stocker *et al.* 2013; IPCC 2014). Findings from earlier research on chronic poverty and vulnerability in relatively peaceful contexts have provided evidence on coping mechanisms, livelihood improvements and behavioural change, the results of which have often provided useful operational guidance in social protection programming (review in Townsend 1995; Barrientos, Hulme and Shepherd 2005).

However, limited work exists on the options for social assistance response that are appropriate and tailored to protracted crisis settings (Carpenter, Slater and Mallet 2012; Mallet and Slater 2012). In these places, conditions of a 'slow-burning crisis' last many years; there are multiple stressors and pressures on people's productive activities; mechanisms for intervention are constrained; there is a disproportionate dependence on humanitarian agencies to jumpstart 'development'; and the capacity of local government to deliver development – both social and economic services, as well as supporting stable governance – is weakened, as (Maxwell, Russo and Alinovi 2011).

Little is known about how vulnerable groups, and those who receive no support from official actors, endure the hardship of protracted crises; mobilise collective action to govern access to basic services and social assistance; and use (scarce) political, social and economic resources, including those at the margin of the rule of law, to make a living and survive. They often face direct and structural violence on a daily basis, while also lacking the quality and substance of citizenship. The general tendency of research on conflict or protracted displacement has been to view affected populations as mostly victims, with limited attention paid to the role played by their choices and preferences, including the type and effectiveness of adaptation strategies they employ to protect lives and livelihoods. They navigate their insecurity and access to livelihoods, services and assistance in ways that are rarely reflected – if at all – in the dominant state security narratives, or indeed in more universal conceptions of an operational 'social contract' (Bates 1983; Olson 1993). These dynamics pose considerable challenges for 'formal', programmed types of social assistance that target and seek to uplift the livelihoods of vulnerable populations.

Within poverty programming, one can think of any household or context as being on a poverty-vulnerability continuum (see Figure 4.3). Poverty is typically measured by income or assets, or lack of food, and vulnerability is measured according to the probability associated with risk. In contexts where the risk of hazards and shocks occurring is low and the likelihood of their occurrence is well known, vulnerability to harm and destitution is considered low. In contexts where there are high levels of uncertainty and a high likelihood of a shock occurring, vulnerability to harm is high, all other things being equal. While poverty and vulnerability are often associated, this is not always the case. Poor people are usually more vulnerable to certain shocks and hazards simply because they have fewer 'fall-back' options (insurance, assets, networks, etc.). Non-poor people can be equally vulnerable, and sometimes more so, to certain shocks – health, financial, unemployment – but their vulnerability to destitution will usually be less. Simply because there may be high levels of poverty does not imply there is also a high level of vulnerability. In other words, it is possible for stable contexts to be characterised by high levels of poverty; similarly, high levels of risk and uncertainty may characterise places with low poverty.

So why does this matter for social assistance provision? First, in the main, humanitarian responses to needs in crises are not designed to address chronic poverty, thus providing a justification for linkages and learning from social protection. On the contrary, social protection systems are typically designed for dealing with chronic poverty and have only recently begun building responses to covariate shocks that cause acute needs. Second, sudden fast-onset shocks can push a substantial proportion of those who are above a

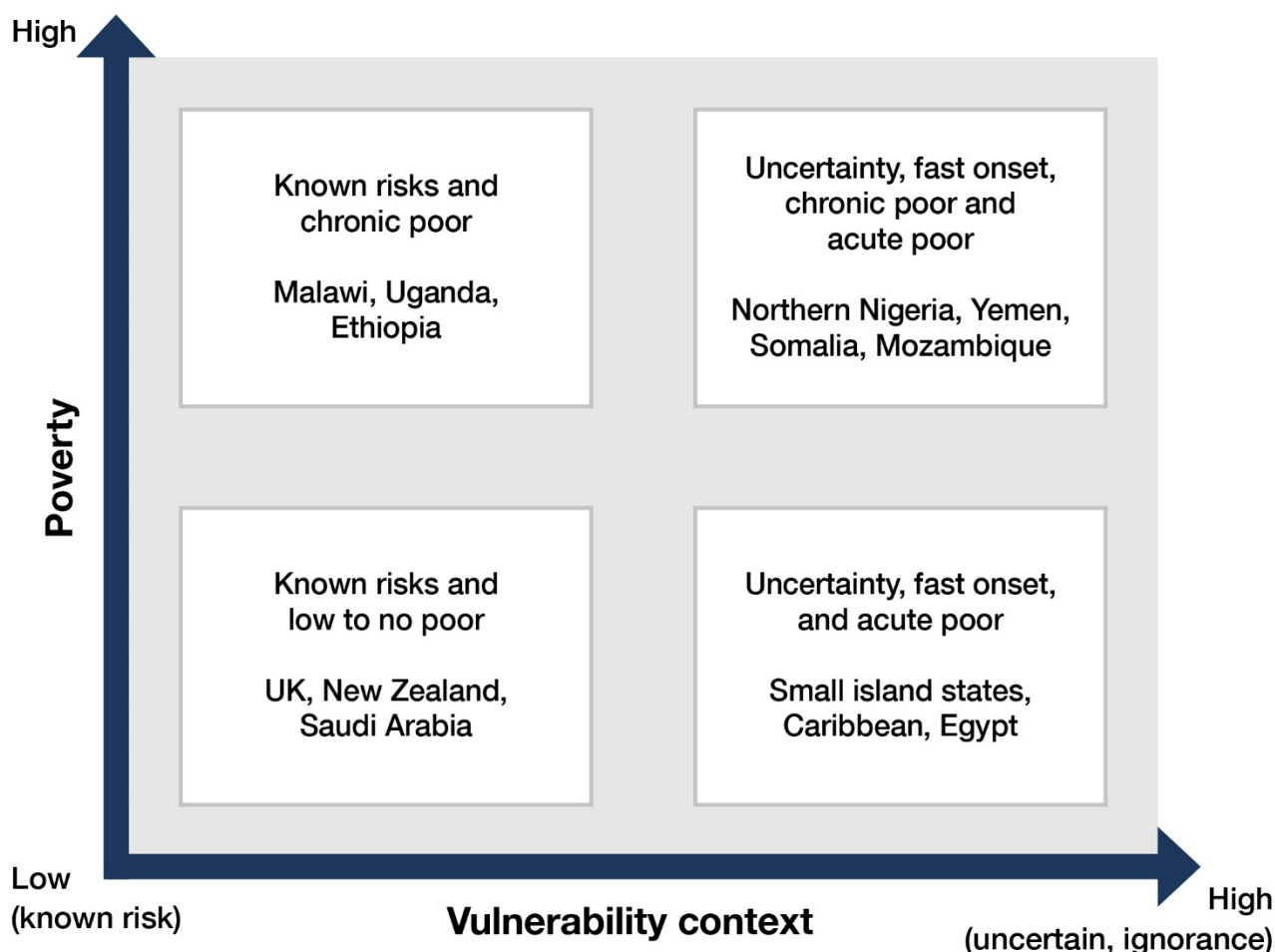
<sup>9</sup> A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base (Chambers and Conway 1991).

poverty threshold below the poverty line. So, even in situations where social protection systems might be well established and provide routine, regular support to households facing chronic poverty and vulnerability, strong disaster response is also needed. In other words, a continuum of response needs to be on offer in different variations, across the range of poverty-vulnerability contexts. Third, limited human and technical capacities and difficult operating environments make trade-offs between delivering basic social assistance versus concentrating resources on more comprehensive resilience-building packages particularly acute in protracted crises. This, in turn, means that evidence on when and how to proceed with efforts to move beyond saving lives is of central importance.

Furthermore, programming and delivery of social assistance is – or should be – very different in these distinct contexts, reflecting the variable levels of risk and uncertainty (Caravani *et al.* 2021). In stable settings, social assistance aims to stabilise consumption and protect assets. When augmented with other types of support, the objective will be to promote resilient livelihoods through asset accumulation and support to human development (through education, health, nutrition and training). In settings of protracted crises, cash assistance primarily focuses on protecting lives by providing relief and rehabilitation, with exceptions in places such as Somalia, Mali and Niger where there are efforts (often led by humanitarian donors) to provide comprehensive packages to build the resilience of poor or vulnerable populations. Programmes that include components for livelihood support might not make sense within certain protracted conflict situations, but they can be appropriate in some situations of protracted displacement and/or recurrent climate shock.

Through better understanding of the political economy and operational delivery of social assistance in settings of protracted crisis, BASIC Research will show how social assistance can better serve the poorest and most vulnerable. Below, we turn to our programme framework: the research questions, gaps in evidence and/or understanding, and thematic areas for BASIC Research.

**Figure 4.3: Risk and uncertainty across domains of poverty and vulnerability**



Source: Authors' own.

## 5. Programme framework for BASIC Research

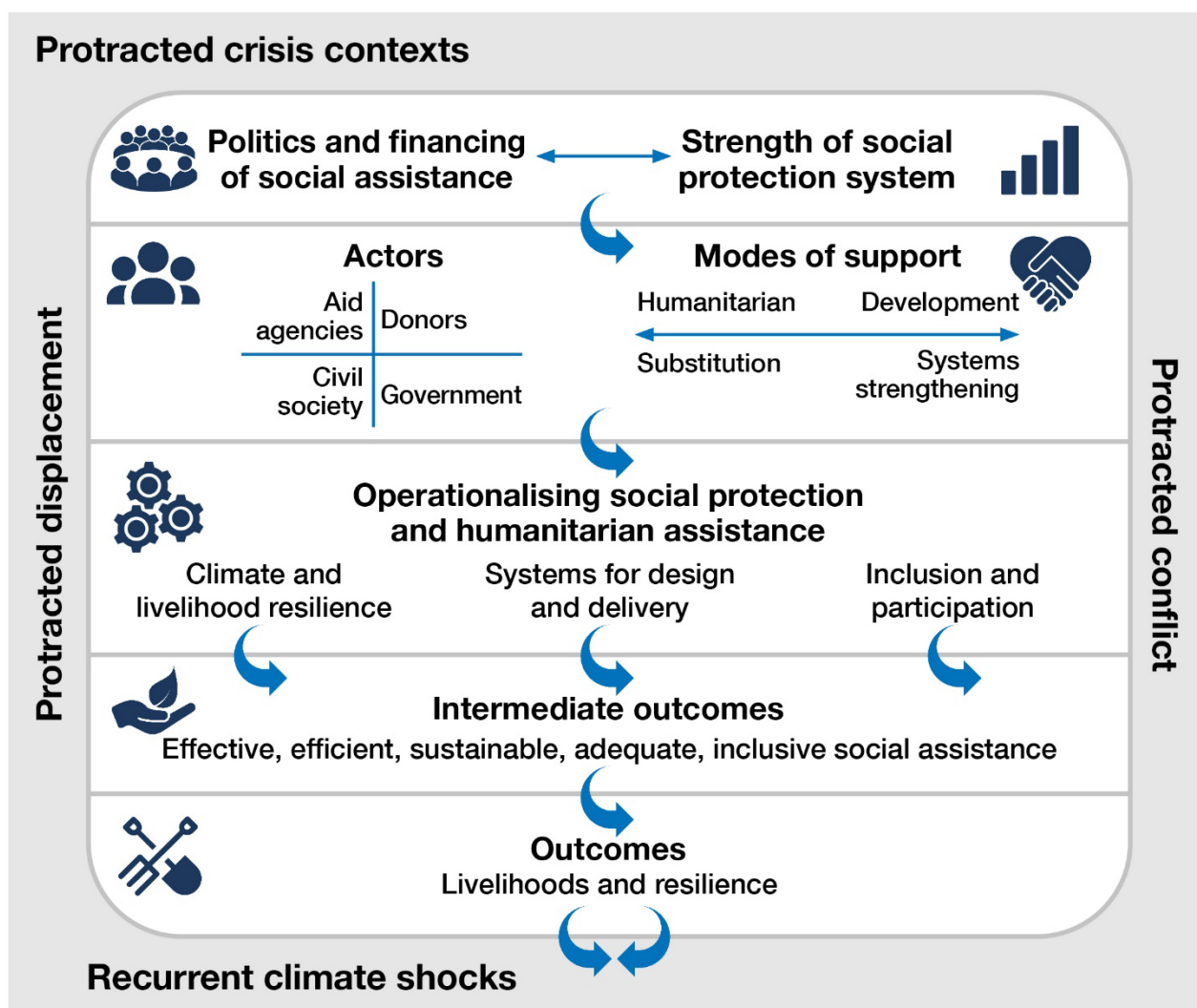
The preceding sections have defined social assistance (section 2); reviewed policy framings of the interface of social protection, humanitarian assistance and climate adaptation (section 3); and considered the concepts applied within four elements of a conceptual framework for researching social assistance in protracted crises (section 4). This section introduces the BASIC Research programme and explains the global themes it covers. For each of these, we summarise prevailing perspectives, evidence gaps and research questions that the programme will examine. The programme was developed building on the analysis presented in preceding sections of this paper, and a comprehensive literature review and stakeholder consultations that were carried out during the programme’s inception phase.<sup>10</sup>

The overall question for BASIC Research is:

*In protracted crises, how can international, national and local actors work together to strengthen commitments and effectively, efficiently and sustainably provide social assistance to those in need?*

To answer this question and bring together the debates and concepts introduced in the preceding sections, Figure 5.1 introduces a programme framework for BASIC Research.

**Figure 5.1: Programme framework for BASIC Research**



Source: Authors' own.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on BASIC Research, including links to the programme’s working papers and thematic research briefs, see [www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/better-assistance-in-crisis-basic-research/](http://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/better-assistance-in-crisis-basic-research/).

The figure is meant to be read from the top down and we describe it here in this way. As stated previously, BASIC Research is concerned with protracted crisis settings; more specifically, three overlapping dimensions of these: conflict, displacement and recurrent climate shocks. Beginning at the top of the figure, our research starts from an understanding of both the politics and financing of social assistance and the strength of the social protection system as constituting the conditioning context for possible reforms and changes to existing systems, programmes and delivery arrangements for social assistance. These are governed by multiple actors, consisting of but not limited to aid agencies, donors, civil society and government. These stakeholders combine in a variety of public authority mixes and around particular modes of support, ranging from humanitarian assistance (substituting for lack of government-provided or directed systems and programmes) to developmental investments and political commitments for strengthening state social protection systems.

BASIC Research narrows into three domains where improvements are possible in implementing responses at the nexus of social protection and humanitarian assistance: climate and livelihood resilience, systems for design and delivery, and inclusion and participation (a more detailed discussion of each of these domains, or themes, follows below). Within each of these areas, BASIC Research will aim to generate both critical reflection as well as practical perspectives that contribute to understanding how to strengthen the effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, adequacy and inclusiveness of social assistance, recognising that not all of these intermediate outcomes might align and that there could be important trade-offs. Ultimately, the motivation for BASIC Research, and thematic and country-level research into why, where, how and for whom social assistance can be more reliably delivered, is to strengthen the livelihoods and resilience of people living in protracted crises.

To further elaborate the research questions and agenda for BASIC Research, the remainder of this section describes gaps in evidence and sub-questions around four global themes. These themes emerged from the identification of knowledge gaps during the BASIC Research inception phase. Although all of the themes draw on the elements identified in the conceptual framework in section 4, they do not seek to apply them in a singular way. Rather, they draw on concepts that provide entry points to articulating and answering the research questions under each theme.

## 5.1. Politics and financing of social assistance

### *BASIC Research question*

*What are the politics of social assistance, including the role of international actors in domestic politics and policy processes? Based on an understanding of these dynamics and processes, how can international actors engage sensitively and appropriately to support sustainable financing and effective coordination of social assistance in protracted crises?*

This theme draws on the working papers produced during the inception phase for BASIC Research (Lind 2022; Harvey and Mohamed 2022; Zaman *et al.* 2022).

Prevailing perspectives on the politics of social protection are largely limited to stable settings and do not consider relations with humanitarian channels and providers of cash assistance, especially at the subnational level. More dedicated analysis is needed of places characterised by contested public authority (and often non-recognised authorities), protracted displacement, uneven claims and rights to citizenship, threats and use of violence, and the significance of humanitarian provision. Attention is needed on patterns of differential incorporation and exclusion; and on regional, ethnic and other differences in social assistance provision, including the political processes underpinning them. Efforts to expand social assistance systems must address the problems that non-state and/or non-recognised authorities pose for policy processes.

Further, existing research shows that the nature of domestic politics, including relations with transnational policy actors and networks, determines which social protection programmes are adopted, when and at what scale. However, the evidence base is patchy concerning the precise mechanisms governing these processes, such as social contracts and fiscal contracts that govern domestic resource allocations and taxation. This is true for both stable settings and protracted crises where domestic politics (of resource allocation in particular) are inseparable from conflict and displacement. Understanding how social assistance is differentially allocated, or not, is thus crucial to understanding its implications for citizenship. So, too, is the relationship between taxation and social assistance provision within specific regions or particular groups.

More granular understanding of the political economy of social – and- food and cash-based humanitarian – assistance would illuminate what enables or constrains reforms that would produce more effective, efficient and sustainable social assistance. Research needs to:

- Analyse the dynamics and processes affecting the allocation of social assistance, including roles and relations between global, national and subnational actors that influence patterns of allocation.
- Advance new applied thinking around patterns of social assistance allocation, taxation and social contracts, across contexts with different public authority mixes, including non-recognised groups.
- Contribute towards the development of practical strategies and approaches for international actors to effectively engage with and strengthen systems at national and subnational levels.

## 5.2. Climate and livelihood resilience

### *BASIC Research question*

*In what ways can social assistance in the most challenging protracted crises effectively contribute to climate change adaptation and resilient livelihoods?*

This theme draws on the working papers produced during the inception phase for BASIC Research (Lind *et al.* 2022; Naess *et al.* 2022).

While there is sparse evidence that social assistance can build long-term resilience to climate change, multiple efforts are experimenting with various cash-plus approaches in protracted crises, indicating the desire to link social assistance policy and programming with efforts to strengthen adaptive capacities and stronger livelihoods. Yet, evaluation of cash-plus programmes in protracted crises is patchy and mostly focuses on assessing their short-term impacts. Some programmes refer to the number of community assets that are constructed (outputs), with vague references to their impacts or cost-effectiveness. Most impact assessments occur at the conclusion of programmes or shortly thereafter (typically within two years). A further hindrance is that performance evaluations rely heavily on the statements of implementing agencies and the donors that fund them (Lind *et al.* 2022). Rigorous and impartial evidence is limited. Research needs to:

- Assess the political economy of how vulnerabilities arise, and are experienced and negotiated by different social groups living in conditions of protracted conflict and displacement, as well as the role of social assistance programmes in building and strengthening resilience to a range of possible, albeit uncertain, future climates.
- More comprehensively assess the design and implementation features of cash-plus programmes in protracted crises, and generate evidence of the relative effectiveness of different approaches. Research could assess which modifications, if any, are most likely to increase programme effectiveness and are achievable in situations of limited capacities.
- Critically reflect on ways of linking cash-plus programmes implemented by humanitarian actors with state social protection systems and programmes, to expand the scale and reach of interventions that demonstrate effectiveness and support decision-making about appropriate mixes of cash-plus versus more basic transfers in specific contexts.

## 5.3. Systems for design and delivery

### *BASIC Research question*

*With a focus on targeting and capacity, how can the design and delivery of social assistance be more resilient, sensitive and responsive in crises?*

This theme draws on the working papers produced during the inception phase for BASIC Research (Longhurst 2022; Slater 2022a; Slater, Haruna and Baur 2022; Wylde 2022).

Building or strengthening systems for delivery is widely recognised as a key element of routine, effective and efficient provision of social assistance, but the particular elements, approaches and systems tools that work best are poorly understood in situations of protracted crisis. Attention has focused on making social assistance more responsive, specifically to climate- and weather-related shocks. At the same time, the generation of evidence to support the design and delivery of social assistance has focused on directly tackling the outcomes and impacts of shocks (e.g. by providing support to people affected by shocks) rather

than understanding the implications of context – whether situations of climate change, violent conflict and instability or pandemics, or a combination of all three – for how social assistance is delivered.

While there is a substantial and growing body of knowledge about responding to shocks, there are significant knowledge gaps in relation to:

- How existing social assistance can be sustained during crises and what international agencies can do to support this; and
- The implications of specific and dynamic features of contexts (i.e. those affected by combinations of environmental, conflict and fragility, and health shocks and stresses) for how social assistance programmes are designed and delivered.

This imbalance in evidence results in a confused situation where it is assumed that governments cannot provide social assistance in situations of protracted crisis because they lack capacity or legitimacy; and yet a range of actors continues to translate approaches and mechanisms to social assistance systems in situations of protracted crisis from highly different contexts, often inappropriately and with little adaptation.

Therefore, the BASIC Research systems global theme will assess: the resilience of social assistance programmes and systems in the face of crises (especially climate-related, conflict and Covid-19-related ones); the sensitivity of systems, programmes and their composite parts and features; and (to a lesser extent) the responsiveness to crises of systems, programmes and their composite parts and features. Under resilience, we will focus on how capacities (comprising competency, capability and performance) are built, applied and sustained to ensure crisis-resilient programme delivery. Under sensitivity, we will focus on how targeting approaches and tools can be better attuned to the broad and dynamic range of contexts (such as those of protracted displacement and refugees) in countries affected by climate, conflict and other shocks.

## 5.4. Inclusion and participation

### *BASIC Research question*

*How can social assistance in crises be more accountable and responsive to gender, age, disability, displacement and other intersecting vulnerabilities?*

This theme draws on the working papers produced during the inception phase for BASIC Research (Collyer *et al.* 2021; Faith, Roberts and Hernandez 2021; Oosterhoff and Yunus 2021; Rohwerder and Szyg 2021; Seferis and Harvey 2021; Slater 2022a).

Evidence shows that many barriers prevent social assistance from meeting the needs of excluded and vulnerable people during and due to crises. These blocks to provision can relate to administrative procedures, technology, language, physical security, political exclusion and self-exclusion, among other things. At the same time, accessing social assistance can entail risks to safety, such as violence, theft, bribery, and intra-household and community tensions. Transformative approaches to social protection that do not just focus on assistance but include areas such as participation and accountability, the right to work, access to technology, freedom of movement and protection from violence are therefore crucial. But they are challenging to put in place in highly insecure and fluid contexts characterised by fragility. This theme brings together findings and insights from multiple BASIC Research thematic review papers on inclusion, digital technology, displacement and accountability.

The literature review identified that research needs to:

- Explore and detail appropriate and achievable ways for both the humanitarian and social protection sectors to include marginalised and vulnerable groups in the design and coverage of social assistance. Humanitarian and social protection actors and sectors take a deeply sceptical view of the extent to which national governments can and do meet the needs of vulnerable and excluded groups. Limited evidence exists on whether this is a valid concern in protracted crisis settings.
- Better understand the potential of digitised systems to reduce transaction costs, enable real-time analysis and deliver affordances of scale and efficiency for humanitarian actors and governments, alongside the risks for those people whose data are shared and those who may be excluded from digital technology. These include the potential to serve communities in hard-to-reach areas through electronic cash transfers and 'remote' programming, which reduce security risks for donors and recipients.



- Ensure that ‘displacement’ – which is rarely absent from humanitarian contexts – is understood in all its complexities in the design and implementation of social and humanitarian assistance. Displacement is usually accompanied by massive loss of livelihoods and often raises new barriers to accessing social assistance. It is therefore a factor of marginalisation in itself, which intersects with other forms of inclusion and exclusion. Where displacement is international, the presence of non-citizens adds an additional complication, though internally displaced persons are very often in similar situations.
- Investigate how normative commitments to accountability can systematically translate into more effective practice. Accountability is often conflated with participation, both in humanitarian responses and social protection programming in fragile contexts. There can be a misplaced technocratic emphasis on reactive accountability mechanisms to foster participation, such as hotlines or community meetings; however, these do not lead to the desired ‘citizenship empowerment’. Such engagement does not empower people to make their own decisions, as citizen engagement and participatory action stipulate. Furthermore, the engagement is often insufficient to hold service providers to account.

A sub-question that must be addressed in pursuit of an answer to the primary research question is: *How do people experience and navigate access to social assistance in crises?* This question highlights the attention that this theme will give to people’s lived experiences as they encounter, make claims to, are excluded from or deliberately avoid social and humanitarian assistance.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The preceding sections outline the contours of global debates as well as conceptual approaches for understanding how to strengthen the provision of social assistance in protracted crises. Drawing these debates and approaches together, the thematic review work carried out during the inception phase (Table A1) provides a framework through which BASIC Research will document and explore how governments and other national and local actors, as well as international actors, are trying to break out of the problematic status quo by developing new mechanisms and approaches for social assistance in crises. It remains the aspiration of global donors – both development and humanitarian – that any social assistance provision, whether delivered through government-led programmes or by humanitarian actors, is made with a view to building longer-term policies and systems that will increasingly become embedded in state-led and -funded provision.

Working towards this aspiration, BASIC Research will examine the complementarities, tensions and linkages between humanitarian, state-led and informal social assistance. National governments and subnational and local level public authorities, as well as the experiences of the people who receive assistance, are the starting point. More specifically, BASIC Research will assess existing capacities, systems and approaches for providing social assistance through states whenever feasible and appropriate, the impacts and influences of fragility and conflict on these, and the responses of international actors. Relatedly, it will explore how social assistance provision entwines with national and local politics and economies, as well as peoples’ views about fairness, adequacy, effectiveness and inclusion.

Overall, BASIC Research is interested not only in state-led and coordinated social assistance programmes, but also in how international agencies and other non-governmental actors – ranging from communities to local and international NGOs, and non-state political or armed groups – support these, either by funding them, by providing operational and implementation support, or by running complementary or substitute programmes where government authority is absent. This could be true anywhere, but the reason for its emphasis here is that protracted crisis situations will exhibit, and indeed probably require, much more ‘hybridity’ in actors designing and delivering social assistance. This is because of (1) limited (financial and operational) capacity; and/or (2) governments being predatory or absent in some parts of the country in question. Even where actors agree on the need for hybridity in theory, its application in practice is far more limited.

Thus, while the BASIC Research agenda will focus on constraints to and opportunities for state-led provision – considering the feasibility and appropriateness of doing so, and recognising that non-state actors might be best placed to provide better social assistance – this does not mean ignoring the humanitarian sector or only considering its work when done with and through governments. Rather, it will look particularly at when and

how humanitarian assistance can build or strengthen state-led social assistance and when it cannot or should not. Indeed, given overall recognition that linking social protection and humanitarian cash is not unequivocally a good thing that should be universally applied, it is important to emphasise and increase the focus on the varied ways in which linkages can be made in practice.

States affected by crises, and organisations trying to help them, navigate persistent trade-offs that require nuanced decisions about whether, where and how to link social protection and cash-based humanitarian assistance. In some places, the transition from humanitarian to state-led social assistance may be decades away. Therefore, research must also generate lessons for humanitarian responses, to capture how non-governmental agencies can deliver effective programming in the immediate and medium term, albeit in ways that contribute to establishing nascent systems that could evolve into robust, state-led provision.

The implications for delivering effective and sustainable social assistance highlighted here suggest, above all, the need to think differently about social assistance. BASIC Research will move beyond researching the shortcomings of current systems (identified in the literature covered during the inception phase; see Table A1) to explore how social assistance can be done differently. There are multiple overall goals of more effective social assistance in crises that are important (e.g. timeliness, cost-efficiency, sustainability, etc). For situations of protracted crises, BASIC Research, based on the evidence from the inception phase will focus on adequacy (whether assistance is sufficient to alleviate suffering, prevent destitution and to support more resilient livelihoods), fairness and accountability (whether it is delivered with respect to dignity, not diverted, captured or fuelling conflict) and inclusivity (whether it is reaching the right people). Furthermore, assistance should be sustainable, so that it carries on reaching people who need it even if crises persist.

Although social protection has the potential to address crises in different ways, the evidence base is thematically and geographically patchy. BASIC Research will close evidence gaps to deliver an improved, evidence-based understanding of why, how and when to use social protection approaches in different crisis contexts, to deliver more effective social assistance so that vulnerable people cope better with crises and meet their basic needs.

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# Annexe

**Table A1: List of BASIC inception phase working papers**

<b>Working Paper 1 (Framing Paper)</b>	<b>Strengthening Responses at the Nexus of Social Protection, Humanitarian Aid and Climate Shocks in Protracted Crises: BASIC Research Framing Paper</b>
<b>Working Paper 2</b>	<b>Climate Resilience and Social Assistance in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings</b>
<b>Working Paper 3</b>	<b>Risks, Accountability and Technology Thematic Working Paper</b>
<b>Working Paper 4</b>	<b>Politics and Governance of Social Assistance in Crises From the Bottom Up</b>
<b>Working Paper 5</b>	<b>Shock-Responsive Social Protection: What is Known About What Works in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations?</b>
<b>Working Paper 6</b>	<b>Beyond Rights-Based Social Protection for Forcibly Displaced People</b>
<b>Working Paper 7</b>	<b>The Risks and Outcomes of Getting Help for Marginalised People: Navigating Access to Social Assistance in Crises</b>
<b>Working Paper 8</b>	<b>Cash and Livelihoods in Contexts of Conflict and Fragility: Implications for Social Assistance Programming</b>
<b>Working Paper 9</b>	<b>Value for Money of Social Assistance in Fragile Contexts: Considerations, Evidence, and Research Priorities</b>
<b>Working Paper 10</b>	<b>The Politics of Donor and Government Approaches to Social Protection and Humanitarian Policies for Assistance During Crises</b>
<b>Working Paper 11</b>	<b>The Effects of Social Assistance Interventions on Gender, Familial, and Household Relations Among Refugees and Displaced Populations: A Review of the Literature on Interventions in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon</b>
<b>Working Paper 12</b>	<b>Key Considerations for Targeting Social Assistance in Situations of Protracted Crises</b>
<b>Working Paper 13</b>	<b>Accountability in Crises: Connecting Evidence from Humanitarian and Social Protection Approaches to Social Assistance</b>
<b>Working Paper 14</b>	<b>Sustaining Existing Social Protection Programmes During Crises: What Do We Know? How Can We Know More?</b>
<b>Working Paper 15</b>	<b>Financing in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations for Basic Assistance: What is Known, and What are the Opportunities and Barriers to Improving Financing?</b>
<b>Working Paper 16</b>	<b>Humanitarian and Social Protection Approaches to Inclusion: Knowledge Gaps and Implications for Working in the Humanitarian–Social Protection Nexus</b>
<b>Working Paper 17</b>	<b>Moving Targets: Social Protection as a Link Between Humanitarianism, Development and Displacement</b>
<b>Working Paper 18</b>	<b>What is Known About Capacity and Coordination of Social Assistance Programmes in Crisis Situations?</b>



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