

BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH



The politics of donor and government approaches to social protection and humanitarian policies for assistance during crises

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Summary

This paper examines social protection policy processes in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). It explores what the policies of donor governments, aid agencies, and crisis-affected governments reveal about the politics of assistance during crises, and how aid agencies are navigating tensions between humanitarian and development approaches to social assistance. It finds that social protection policies are prone to conflict blindness. Commitments to state-building often ignore dilemmas inherent in supporting states that are parties to ongoing conflicts and the political rather than technical challenges involved. Government social protection policies in FCAS often make little mention of the fact that war or conflict are taking place.

About the authors

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the politics of social protection and humanitarian assistance policy processes in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS).

We set out to examine the following questions:

- What do the policies and strategies of donor governments, aid agencies, and crisis-affected governments reveal about the politics of social and humanitarian assistance during crises?
- What do the literature, evaluations, and policy documents tell us about how aid agencies are navigating tensions between humanitarian principles and development approaches to social assistance during crises?

At the global policy level, there have been recent efforts to move towards social protection approaches in FCAS as part of renewed efforts to improve the links between humanitarian and development action using the language of the 'nexus'. There have also been growing efforts to make social assistance programmes more shock responsive, largely focused on climate risks and natural disasters.

For the purposes of this paper, social assistance programmes encompass social transfers, public works, fee waivers, and subsidies, and are often directed and coordinated by national governments. In areas of protracted crisis and conflict, social assistance also generally encompasses humanitarian assistance, which often uses the same modalities as state-driven social assistance programmes but usually with a greater emphasis on social transfers than other mechanisms (Slater and Sabates-Wheeler 2021). This paper uses the term 'shock-responsive social protection' (SRSP) as defined by Oxford Policy Management as: 'the adaptation of routine social protection programmes and systems to cope with changes in context and demand following large-scale shocks' (O'Brien, Holmes and Scott 2018a: 7).

These global policy initiatives are reflected in a growing body of literature, international conferences, policies, and guidelines being developed within aid agencies, alongside donor commitments and large-scale programmes that are starting to be rolled out nationally (CaLP 2020; Cherrier 2017; European Commission 2019; O'Brien *et al.* 2018a; Seyfert *et al.* 2019; TRANSFORM 2020; UNICEF 2019c).

The literature on the politics of policy processes suggests that policymaking is not clear, linear, and rational, but rather a complex, messy, and political process that involves overlapping and competing agendas. Decisions are not discrete and technical; facts and values are intertwined; and values, beliefs, and narratives play a major role (Keeley and Scoones 1999). As a 2006 report by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) notes, 'Analysis of the policy process highlights the complex interplay of narratives underpinning policies, actor networks promoting or resisting, and the political interests driving the process and opening up potential strategies and tactics' (Scoones *et al.* 2006). This paper looks at the extent to which existing literature can provide insights into policy processes around social protection during crises, and explores research gaps where further evidence could help to illuminate strategies and tactics for supporting better assistance in crises.

The Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme is focused on places where multiple dimensions of crisis and fragility overlap, and where shocks, including from climate change, compound existing vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the priority for BASIC is to improve understanding of how to strengthen social assistance in the most difficult settings and for the populations that are the hardest to reach. Thus, the research focuses on the possibilities for changes to social assistance in 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.

This paper identifies a number of competing and interlocking narratives and policy discourses around social protection in crises and examines how these play out in the formulation of policies and translation of policy into practice in FCAS. In the literature it is possible to identify different framings of social protection, including:

- as a contributor to state-building and as a key part of rebuilding social contracts;
- as an element of political and social stability and as an existing part of social contracts;
- as a key element of the humanitarian-development nexus and an opportunity to move away from humanitarian aid and towards more nationally led, sustainably financed social protection systems;
- as unaffordable, creating dependency, and not a priority for government expenditure – reflecting largely unspoken but strongly held beliefs in crises and social protection debates more broadly. Social protection has also been framed as a largely donor and internationally driven agenda to which policies (often written by external consultants, with little evidence of implementation) pay lip service (Devereux 2020).

In this paper we explore how these discourses are reflected in the policies of governments and international aid agencies providing assistance in FCAS. After briefly describing the methods and approach we employed (Section 2), Section 3 provides an overview of how the policies and approaches of key international actors tackle the challenges of working in conflicts and protracted crises. Section 4 looks at the extent to which crisis-affected governments are aligned with the broader international policy agenda, covering issues of scepticism and resistance. It also examines government social protection policies and how they deal with issues of conflict and the role of humanitarian actors.

2. Methods and approach

The paper reviewed published and grey literature on the politics of social protection and humanitarian action, the humanitarian-development nexus, and linkages between humanitarian cash and social protection in FCAS. The literature we reviewed is drawn from a set of literature searches using Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR and Google Scholar. It built on literature reviews carried out for a recent evaluation of UNICEF's approach to the nexus and snowballed from the recent research strand on the political economy of social protection within the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) research programme. The literature searches used combinations of search terms, including 'social protection policies', 'humanitarian response', 'humanitarian assistance', 'humanitarian policies', 'social protection humanitarian assistance nexus'. A further search was conducted using all of these terms and specific country names. More than 3,000 results were found on platforms such as JSTOR, which were reduced down after a thorough screening. Similarly, we searched the archives of various UN agencies (the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA) and other platforms assembling aid-related documents (such as ReliefWeb) to identify the most relevant humanitarian response plans. We also conducted a thorough web search and screening of results to gather the relevant social protection national policies/strategies of the countries in question.

The paper reviewed the social protection policies (where they existed) of governments in 21 crisis-affected countries that have been identified as the main focus of the BASIC Research programme, to examine how the policies dealt with issues of conflict and the role of humanitarian actors. It also reviewed, at the global level, the social protection policies and approaches of key international aid agencies and donors working at the social protection and humanitarian interface during crises. The paper also reviewed UN humanitarian response plans (where they were in place) in the 21 countries to examine whether they linked with social protection system and policies, and if so, how.

BASIC Research is intended to focus on contexts where there are overlapping challenges due to conflict, climate change, extreme and chronic poverty, humanitarian crisis, and fragility. For the purposes of this paper, we focused on a group of countries that face these overlapping challenges. They are: *Africa* – Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Central African Republic, and Libya; *Middle East* – Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq; *Asia* – Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan; *South America and the Caribbean* – Haiti, Colombia, and Venezuela; *Europe* – Ukraine.

The focus of this paper is therefore not on countries just facing crises related to natural hazards but on countries affected by overlapping risks relating to conflict, natural hazards, and climate change.

It was not possible within the scope of our research to undertake in-depth reviews of social protection programming and policy processes in all 21 countries. The paper reviewed social protection policies and UN humanitarian response plans where they are in place. Other BASIC Research thematic review papers – focused on climate resilience, gender, and inclusion – examine how these issues are dealt with in social protection policies and approaches, so those areas are not covered by this paper.

3. International actors' policies, approaches, and strategies for social assistance during crises

In this section we examine how some of the key international actors approach social assistance in crisis settings. As a study by Carter and colleagues explains, 'development partners – bilateral donors and multilateral agencies, including United Nations agencies and multilateral financial institutions – engage in social protection in different ways, applying different emphases that reflect their individual mandate' (2019: 9). As Devereux and Roelen note:

...the World Bank focuses on social protection as a means of reducing poverty and enhancing pro-poor economic growth, UNICEF sees it as a tool for achieving child wellbeing and children's rights, while the ILO emphasises extending social security coverage to all.
(Devereux and Roelen 2016: 1)

McCord (2013) talks about a conceptual duality between rights-based and residual approaches to social protection, and contrasts the more rights-based approaches of UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO) with the more poverty-targeted starting point of the World Bank (*ibid.*).

The growing impetus behind attempts to link humanitarian assistance with longer-term social protection means that international aid agencies and donors are increasingly applying these social protection concepts and approaches in contexts of fragility, with conflict, violence, and large-scale and often long-running humanitarian programmes creating an additional layer of complexity. The catch-22 of social protection – 'the greater the need for social protection, the lower the capacity of the state to provide it' – is particularly true in FCAS (Devereux 2000).

The impetus to extend social protection into FCAS is part of a broader policy debate about the roles of development, humanitarian, and peace actors. Most recently, the term 'nexus' has been used to describe the interlinkages between humanitarian, development, and peace actions. Stronger links between humanitarian cash and food assistance and social protection are presented by aid agencies and donors as a way of operationalising policy commitments to the nexus. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) defines the nexus as follows: 'Nexus refers to the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actions. A nexus approach refers to the aim to strengthen collaboration, coherence and complementarity between the three pillars of the nexus' (OECD 2019).

Social protection sits within these wider debates about the respective roles of humanitarian and development actors and financing, and how international aid agencies relate to states during crises. Within these debates, social protection has tended to be framed as a potential contributor to state-building and as an opportunity for linking relief and development by moving from provision of humanitarian assistance towards more nationally led and longer-term social assistance within social protection systems.

There has also been an increasing focus from development actors on adopting risk management approaches that systematically identify, assess, and reduce risks associated with hazards and human activities (Twigg 2015). A risk-informed approach to programming sees disasters not as one-off events to be responded to, but as deep-rooted and longer-term problems that must be planned for. Such an approach views disaster risk reduction not as a distinct sector, but as something that must be integrated into long-term

development planning to reduce underlying socioeconomic vulnerabilities, protect interventions against hazards, and ensure that development policies and programmes do not inadvertently increase or create risks (*ibid.*). Efforts to make social protection more shock responsive, and to make disaster financing more anticipatory, fit within this broader agenda.

However, research on uncertainty challenges some of these risk management approaches, with one study arguing that ‘a focus on uncertainty requires us to re-imagine the institutions surrounding preparedness planning, contingency measures and early warning systems’ and that ‘expert-led, technocratic impositions premised on risk do not work’ (Scoones and Stirling 2020). There is limited evidence on how uncertainty is being dealt with in social assistance, which suggests a need for further research to critically examine approaches to risk management and how uncertainty is being addressed.

Current approaches to the triple nexus between humanitarian assistance, development, and peace are also building on a set of international commitments and policies around state-building. The G7+ process, the New Deal and the OECD Fragile States Principles, which include a commitment to ‘focus on state building as the central objective’, have endeavoured to reposition states affected by conflict and fragility at the core of responses (OECD 2007). The Grand Bargain,¹ agreed in the run-up to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul in 2016, included a commitment to provide ‘more support and funding tools to local and national responders’ (UNICEF *et al.* 2016). Often abbreviated as ‘localisation’, this entails a commitment to channel funding more directly to national actors. Within these broader commitments, social protection and a shift from humanitarian aid towards more nationally led systems are presented as potential contributors to state-building and the development of social contracts (Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) 2015).

The idea that social assistance can contribute to nation-building and peace-building is appealing and often suggested (Andrews, Kryeziu and Seo 2014; IEG (Independent Evaluation Group) 2011; Ovadiya *et al.* 2015). For instance, Kidd (2020) argues that universal social security through pensions and child benefits ‘could be a game changer in building national social contracts’ in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen. Delgado and colleagues, in a review of the extent to which World Food Programme (WFP) programmes contribute to peace, find that: ‘Significant components of WFP’s programming in four countries do indeed contribute to improving the prospects for peace’ (Delgado *et al.* 2019). The 2011 *World Development Report* argued that strengthening legitimate institutions and the ability of a state to provide stability, justice, security, and jobs lessens the probability of conflict and fragility. It argued that, ‘Social protection thus plays an important role in restoring confidence; transforming the institutions that provide security, justice, and jobs; addressing external stresses; and mobilizing international support to overcome fragility, violence, and conflict’ (Andrews *et al.* 2014; Ovadiya *et al.* 2015; World Bank 2011).

In much of this literature, however, the contribution of social protection continues to be more often asserted than clearly evidenced. Nixon and Mallett, for example, cautioned that the idea that delivery of services can provide peace dividends and contribute to state-building ‘...is based more on received wisdom than empirical evidence’ and that ‘aspects of the way in which services are delivered and experienced can influence the way people think about government’. The literature on Do No Harm has also made clear that without careful sensitivity to conflict, humanitarian and development programming can exacerbate tensions (Nixon and Mallett 2017). Peace-building and peace dividends cannot therefore be assumed to flow neatly from service delivery; whether or not programming is contributing to peace – or indeed aggravating conflict – needs to be carefully assessed, monitored, and evaluated on a case-by-case basis (McLoughlin 2015).

Social protection has been positioned as an increasingly important part of the overall development agenda. Within its broad umbrella, there has been a particular focus on cash assistance and on making social protection systems more shock responsive in donor and aid agency policies and approaches (Carter *et al.*

¹ The Grand Bargain, launched during the WHS in Istanbul in May 2016, is an agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. The Grand Bargain now includes 25 Member States, 11 UN agencies, 5 inter-governmental organisations and Red Cross/Red Crescent Movements, and 22 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which represent around 84 per cent of all donor humanitarian contributions donated in 2019 and 69 per cent of aid received by agencies.

2019; ILO 2021; O'Brien *et al.* 2018a; UNICEF 2019b; WFP 2021). 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). This built on earlier impetus from the 'triple F' crisis (food, fuel and financial crisis), the World Humanitarian Summit, and work leading up to the summit from SPIAC-B (SPIAC-B 2020; World Humanitarian Summit 2016; GIZ and BMZ 2010).

Also driving greater convergence between humanitarian and social protection programming are digital approaches and new technologies that are being seen and used as tools to integrate functions such as targeting, registration, payments, and monitoring in approaches such as single registries and the use of biometrics for registration. These issues and the risks associated with them are explored in more detail in another BASIC Research paper (Faith *et al.* 2022).

From the humanitarian side, there has been a significant expansion in the use of cash as a modality for emergency response. Similarly, there are increasing calls for humanitarian cash programming to be more systematically linked to national social protection systems (CaLP 2020; Longhurst *et al.* 2020). The past five years have seen a significant increase in the proportion of humanitarian aid provided through cash and vouchers, partly driven by global commitments such as the Agenda for Humanity adopted by the WHS 2016,² and ambitious targets from key implementers (High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers 2015).³ In 2018, volumes of cash rose to a record level of \$4.7bn up from \$2.8bn in 2016 (Development Initiatives 2018; 2019). Cash is increasingly seen as being more flexible, cost-efficient, and suitable for beneficiary requirements than in-kind assistance given the right conditions.⁴ It is particularly appropriate for discussions of linking to social protection given that the social protection sector predominantly uses cash as its preferred transfer modality, especially for social assistance (Carter *et al.* 2019).

Key international aid agencies have been developing policies, guidance, and programming experience relating to social assistance during crises that aim to link humanitarian cash and social protection. For example, UNICEF has developed a body of guidance and policy commitments to linking humanitarian cash and social protection. In its Strategic Plan, its Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, and as part of the World Humanitarian Summit, UNICEF has made organisational commitments to prioritising shock-responsive social protection (SRSP). Programme guidance issued in 2019 on strengthening SRSP systems complements UNICEF's Global Social Protection Programme Framework and its Humanitarian Cash Transfers Programmatic Guide (UNICEF 2019b; 2019a). In 2020, UNICEF rolled out a tool to assess the readiness of social protection systems to respond better to shocks (UNICEF 2020).

As part of the Grand Bargain, UNICEF committed to systematically implementing cash programmes in ways that build on and form the basis for sustainable social protection systems. UNICEF is increasingly engaged in the role of social protection in contexts of migration and forced displacement. Cash transfer programmes in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, among other countries, are designed and implemented in ways that align with or influence the social protection system in those countries.

² The United Nations World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) was held in Istanbul, Turkey, on 23–24 May 2016. Its goal was to fundamentally reform the humanitarian aid industry to react more effectively to crises. As an outcome, the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, released a report with the results of the consultation process, which included five core responsibilities to improve humanitarian action: prevent and end conflict; uphold the norms that safeguard humanity; leave no one behind; working differently to end need; and invest in humanity. These principles form the core of the Agenda for Humanity. For more information, see the [Agenda for Humanity website](#).

³ WFP and UNHCR, the two largest humanitarian agencies, both delivered 50 per cent of their support in the form of cash in 2017 (Ramacciato 2017), and together accounted for about two-thirds of the total \$2.8bn spent on cash-based transfers (CBT) in 2016 (Smith *et al.* 2018). Several NGOs have made ambitious commitments as part of the Grand Bargain to increase their CBT provision, as well as key donors such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (now the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office) and the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission (ECHO).

⁴ The benefits, risks, and constraints of cash – mostly applicable to other modalities as well – have been noted elsewhere (ALNAP 2010; Harvey *et al.* 2010; Smith *et al.* 2018; The Sphere Project 2011; WFP 2014).

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the SRSP agenda and governments across the world are expanding and adjusting social protection responses, although it is not yet clear whether expansions in assistance will be one-off and temporary or more sustained. For example, UNICEF has responded by supporting SRSP in 114 countries in 2020, up from 40 countries in 2019. In Jordan, as part of the response to the pandemic, UNICEF is drafting an SRSP framework document that has been endorsed by the Cabinet and is supporting the government to resource and implement it.

The WFP has traditionally been seen as a humanitarian actor rather than a development actor, with emergency response being a large part of its portfolio and funding. In recent years, it has undertaken a huge strategic shift from delivering food aid to delivering food assistance, and providing food, vouchers, and cash assistance (Were Omamo, Gentilini and Sandström 2010). The agency is also increasingly engaged in social protection and has just published a social protection strategy. The new 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 structure its own programmes to 'set up the basic building blocks of a future system' (WFP 2021: 41).

In its 2017 social protection framework, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recognises that both humanitarian and development sectors face the challenge of how to respond to increased caseloads of people in need, not only to meet immediate needs but also to provide assistance that empowers people and increases their resilience (FAO 2017). The framework focuses on social protection as a critical strategy to reduce poverty, build resilience, and enable development by developing capacities and contributing to people's livelihoods and resilience, seeking to expand towards universal coverage. Winder Rossi and colleagues (2017) build on the FAO's framework and focus on the role of social protection systems in humanitarian contexts, looking in particular at protracted crises. They set out a range of scenarios that can be used to identify the appropriate social protection intervention strategy, depending on levels of system maturity based on state capacity, and flexibility and capacity to respond (Winder Rossi *et al.* 2017).

The ILO has traditionally been less engaged than some other UN agencies in humanitarian and conflict settings, but sees it as a growing priority. It has developed guidance on employment and decent work in situations of fragility, conflict and disaster (ILO 2016). As the UN agency with the mandate for social protection, it is an important thought leader and leads several initiatives, including the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (USP2030), the Social Protection Floors Initiative, the Social Protection Inter-agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B), and the Interagency Social Protection Assessment tools (ISPA tools).⁵ Through its World Social Protection Database, the ILO tracks country progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1.3, whereby countries committed to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all (Carter *et al.* 2019).

The World Bank's Social Protection and Labour Strategy (2012) highlights that the Bank 'sees social protection as performing instrumental functions... It should contribute to building resilience and generate opportunities to escape from poverty...' (Devereux 2020: 21). More recently, the World Bank (Bowen *et al.* 2020; Smith and Bowen 2020) has been developing the concept of 'adaptive social protection' (ASP), which aims for social protection 'to build the resilience of poor and vulnerable households by investing in their capacity to prepare for, cope with, and adapt to shocks'. For that purpose, a framework to guide the design and implementation of ASP has four key building blocks: programmes, data and information systems, finance, and institutional arrangements and partnerships. The focus of this framework is on strengthening existing social protection systems ahead of future shocks and crises (Smith and Bowen 2020). In the World Bank's 2020–2025 strategy for fragility, conflict, and violence, 'prioritizing social protection systems to enhance human capital and productivity, fight poverty, reduce inequalities and contribute to social peace' is an 'area of special emphasis' (World Bank 2020).

Donor governments have also had an increasing focus on social protection in policy approaches. For example, the United Kingdom (UK) Department for International Development (DFID) sees social protection as an 'essential aspect of an effective state. By tackling poverty, inequality and exclusion, and strengthening the social contract between state and society, SP helps build citizenship and social cohesion while reducing the likelihood of extremism, social unrest and conflict' (DFID 2006: 2). DFID's work on social protection helps

⁵ The ILO either co-leads or co-chairs several of these initiatives with the World Bank.

deliver strategic objectives to 'strengthen resilience and response to crises' (DFID 2019). DFID works with governments to build inclusive and sustainable social protection systems, with a primary focus on social assistance. Priorities are: investing in systems to increase their coverage, quality, and sustainability; building systems that strengthen resilience and can respond to crises; and building more inclusive systems, focusing particularly on girls and women, people with disabilities, and the poorest and most vulnerable people in protracted crises and in fragile states (Carter *et al.* 2019; DFID 2016).

Similarly, the European Union (EU) offers another example of a donor focused on social protection:

The EU promotes a basic level of social protection, as a right for all, and especially for children, vulnerable persons in active working age, and the elderly. The European Commission views social protection as helping reduce poverty and vulnerability and underpinning inclusive and sustainable development. The EU is committed to supporting nationally owned social protection policies, and to working with civil society and the private sector as well as the government in its partner countries. (Devereux and Roelen 2016, cited in Carter *et al.* 2019: 10)

In 2017, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions recognising the connections between sustainable development, humanitarian action, and conflict prevention and peace-building (Carter *et al.* 2019). The conclusions highlight the importance of coordinating humanitarian and development actions to 'address the underlying root causes of vulnerability, fragility and conflict while simultaneously meeting humanitarian needs and strengthening resilience' (Council of the EU 2017: 2).

Recognising gaps in research on how to bridge the humanitarian and development interventions in crisis contexts, the European Commission (EC), the DG NEAR (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations) and ECHO created a Guidance Package (GP) on Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (SPaN). There are also plans to publish a DG ECHO cash thematic policy on linking humanitarian cash and social protection (UNICEF, IFRC and FCDO 2021).

The official policies, strategies, and approaches of donors are therefore, as we have shown above, strongly supportive of social protection and increasingly focused on SRSP and efforts to shift delivery of routine social assistance from humanitarian to social protection systems. The growing focus on SRSP and efforts to link humanitarian cash and social protection have, to date, been more focused on how social protection could become more responsive to floods, droughts, and other natural hazards than on challenges posed by conflict and contexts where the authority and reach of government is contested or limited. To some extent, therefore, emerging policies and approaches around SRSP are focused on the challenges of climate change in the sense that they envisage social protection becoming more responsive to the increasing frequency and severity of natural hazards resulting from climate change. However, explicit links in social protection policies to climate change action and policies remain rare (Costella *et al.* 2021).⁶ Analysis that explores the interface between social protection, conflict, and climate change is even more rare (Peters *et al.* 2020). The huge expansion in (largely nationally led albeit temporary) social protection responses to Covid-19 has provided a new dimension to efforts to expand social protection and a greater focus on national systems given the need to respond at scale (Gentilini *et al.* 2020).

Politics are largely implicit rather than explicit in the policies and positioning of international agencies, but are certainly present. The focus on social protection floors and on more categorical and universal approaches to targeting in some organisations stems from a more welfare state-supporting and European tradition, and rights-based approaches; whereas the focus of other organisations, on poverty means testing and narrower benefits, stems from a more neoliberal starting point. These politics then play out in the policy advice given to Southern governments and can be seen in the processes of 'policy pollination' described by Devereux (2020). There is limited evidence around whether the same politics play out in positions and approaches taken by agencies in FCAS. These issues are discussed further in the next section.

What is not clearly articulated in policies is the extent to which donor and aid agency commitments across the humanitarian and development spheres are complementary or contradictory. A core problem with the long debate about relief, development, resilience, and the nexus has been that the literature largely fails to explain why it has been so difficult to make happen in practice, and tends to elide the fundamental differences in

⁶ More detailed analysis of this issue will form part of complementary thematic reviews for BASIC Research.

principle, approach, and ways of working that have made linkages difficult. At the heart of these differences are 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; yet, 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, complicit, or lacks control over its territory (Longhurst *et al.* 2020).

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 remain under-analysed (Harvey 2009; Harvey *et al.* 2007). Aid organisations with dual humanitarian and development mandates that are committed to humanitarian principles and to supporting and strengthening government systems have neglected analysis of tensions between developmental and humanitarian commitments in how they relate to states in FCAS, although UNICEF's 2018 framework for fragile contexts is an exception. In crisis settings, donors and aid agencies are simultaneously committed to overlapping sets of principles, commitments, and approaches spanning the humanitarian, fragility, and development spheres (UNICEF 2018). There are also tensions within humanitarian commitments between the acknowledgement of the primary responsibility of states to assist and protect, commitments to localisation, and a focus on independence and neutrality, leading to international agencies often substituting for the state (Harvey 2009). These tensions are particularly problematic in conflict settings where government has a responsibility to assist and protect, but is also party to the conflict and does not control parts of a country or have access to those most in need. The scope for nationally led social protection to be more shock responsive in conflict settings where government authority is limited remains an under-analysed challenge. Table 3.1 outlines some of these tensions in terms of commitments and principles.

Whether or not commitments to state-building as the central objective and to respecting the primary responsibility of the state to assist and protect are complementary or contradictory to commitments to the neutrality and independence of international humanitarian actors depends on how they are interpreted and acted upon in particular contexts. They certainly, however, create tensions that need to be carefully navigated in terms of how international actors engage with states, which makes the lack of guidance and lack of explicit acknowledgement of tensions in policy problematic.

Donor government commitments to national ownership, to supporting national social protection systems, and to more directly funding national and local actors are also battling against practical constraints in increasingly high levels of due diligence requirements, increasingly onerous reporting requirements, and concerns about counterterrorism – all of which make it more difficult for donors to fund national and local actors. In practice, therefore, in spite of policy commitments, donor support to social assistance in crises still largely flows through international aid agencies, and donors find it difficult to directly fund national and local actors (Metcalfe-Hough *et al.* 2020; Singh and Mollett 2019; Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) 2018).

As part of our examination of the approaches of international actors to social assistance in crises and to links between humanitarian action and social protection, we reviewed humanitarian response plans to see whether or not they mention links with longer-term social protection in their approaches to humanitarian cash and food assistance. Table 3.2 presents the results.

With the growing emphasis on nexus approaches and on renewed efforts to link humanitarian and development programming, there are consistent mentions of efforts to link to social protection. These are relatively recent, in line with the emerging policy commitments of key agencies. Growing levels of humanitarian need, coupled with donor fatigue and a desire to shrink humanitarian requirements, are partly behind this drive from the humanitarian side (Development Initiatives 2020).

Table 3.1: Competing or complementary principles

OECD principles for good international engagement in fragile states and situations	Take context as the starting point
	Do no harm
	Focus on state-building as the central objective
	Prioritise prevention
	Recognise the links between political, security, and development objectives
	Promote non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies
	Align with local priorities in different ways in different contexts
	Agree on practical coordination between international actors
	Act fast... but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance
	Avoid pockets of exclusion
Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative⁷	Humanitarian action should be guided by the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence
	Respect international humanitarian law, refugee law, and human rights
	Reaffirm the primary responsibility of states and strive to ensure flexible and timely funding
	Allocate funding in proportion to needs
	Involve beneficiaries in humanitarian response
	Strengthen the capacity of countries to prepare for, mitigate, and respond to humanitarian crises
Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD 2005)	Ownership – partner countries exercise effective leadership over their development strategies and coordinate development actions
	Alignment – donors base their overall support on partner countries' national development strategies, institutions, and procedures
	Harmonisation – donors' actions are more harmonised, transparent, and collectively effective
Social Protection Principles (ILO 2012)	SDG 1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable
	Adequacy and predictability of benefits
	A focus on coverage, inclusion, and attention to gender, age, disability, social difference, and effective targeting. (non-discrimination, gender equality, and responsiveness to special needs)
	A long-term approach focused on sustainability in terms of financing and delivery capacity (financial, fiscal, and economic sustainability)
	A focus on rights and addressing social inequalities within social protection programmes (respect for the rights and dignity of people)

Source: Authors' own. Adapted from Harvey et al. (2007). Other information sources cited.

⁷ The [Good Humanitarian Donorship \(GHD\) initiative](#) is an informal donor forum and network that facilitates collective advancement of GHD principles and good practices. It recognises that by working together, donors can more effectively encourage and stimulate principled donor behaviour and, by extension, improved humanitarian action.

Table 3.2: Humanitarian response plans and social protection

Humanitarian response plans (HRPs)	What they say about social protection
Iraq 2020 (OCHA 2020b)	Focuses on meeting the priority humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable, conflict-affected households. Durable solutions, such as large-scale investment in social protection and/ or infrastructure, lie outside of its scope. It envisages increased coordination and complementarity between social protection programmes and humanitarian assistance.
Nigeria (OCHA 2021c)	Notes that it is critical to create linkages between humanitarian and development assistance to address the underlying causes of the protracted crisis. For example, by improving disaster risk reduction/management, and reinforcing the government's social protection floors.
Somalia (OCHA 2020c)	Discusses working with development partners to explore synergies between humanitarian cash assistance and social protection systems, including safety nets to promote resilience and self-sufficiency.
Jordan (the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan 2020)	No clear mention of social protection in the HRP 2020–2021, jointly elaborated by OCHA and the Jordanian government. The focus was on mitigating the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis, and responding to immediate needs, and those of the most vulnerable categories of the host population (i.e. women at risk, children and people with disabilities).
Lebanon (the Government of Lebanon and the United Nations 2020)	One of the strategic objectives is the support of service provision through national systems. The plan aims to strengthen service delivery and access to vulnerable groups by establishing a partnership with the government-led National Poverty Targeting Programme (NPTP) through capacity building and training.
Niger (OCHA 2021d)	Notes that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it clear that it is necessary to integrate humanitarian cash transfers with social protection systems. In 2021, the link between social protection and humanitarian cash transfers will be consolidated through the efforts of the multi-sector cash working group. This group works to advance common targeting and intervention approaches based on national directives.
Mali (OCHA 2021g)	Notes challenges in the leadership and coordination of a cash working group. The government, under the leadership of the national social protection directorate, is trying to push coordination forward and there are reflections about embedding multi-purpose cash transfers in the framework of a nexus approach to linking humanitarian assistance and development. The HRP states that the priority for 2021 is to support and encourage pilot projects aiming to capitalise on opportunities for coordination and harmonisation.
Ethiopia (OCHA 2020a)	Ethiopia's 2020 HRP does not mention social protection. However, its strategic objectives emphasise creating a connection between humanitarian and development sectors, in order to operationalise a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach.
Myanmar (OCHA 2021a)	The HRP 2021 has two main priorities when it comes to cash and voucher assistance (CVA): expanding and improving the scope of use of CVA; and further leveraging CVA as a means of bridging humanitarian and development work, focusing on using cash as a flexible means to support internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, and durable livelihood solutions for the most vulnerable people. This will also include efforts for close coordination across humanitarian assistance and support for the government to expand its social protection programmes.
DRC (OCHA 2021b)	Includes a general discussion about developing a nexus approach, although this has been disrupted by Covid-19, but little specific analysis of any linkages with social protection.
Mozambique (OCHA 2020d)	The HRP makes no mention of social protection. It focuses on addressing the humanitarian needs of the conflict-affected populations in the country.
South Sudan (OCHA 2021e)	Notes that the cash working group will collaborate with the national social protection working group to create effective linkages between social protection and humanitarian cash assistance, while exploring the use of mobile money and other electronic payments mechanisms, where feasible.

Humanitarian response plans (HRPs)	What they say about social protection
Haiti (OCHA 2021f)	Haiti's 2021 HRP prioritises complementarity between humanitarian and development actions. It has a focus on creating a favourable environment for the implementation of the recently adopted national social protection policy 2020, which was developed in close collaboration between the Haitian government, various UN agencies, WFP and other donors such as the World Bank, EU, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The adoption of such a policy is seen as a major step for reducing poverty, inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion. It considers the elaboration of an action plan, prioritising the mechanisms mentioned in the national social protection policy document, as a priority for both development and humanitarian actors. The document also speaks about capacity building for the Haitian government, especially its ability for resource mobilisation to fund the social protection policy implementation nationally in future.

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

4. Social assistance in government policies, strategies, and approaches, and in the politics of crisis-affected countries

This section reviews the literature and state of evidence on the politics of social protection in crises with a particular focus on government social protection policies. Across selected countries affected by combinations of conflict, natural hazards, and climate change, the paper examined national social protection policies and related documents to look for evidence of how social protection was being framed and how questions of crisis, conflict, the role of humanitarian aid, and the role of social protection in peace-building and state-building were addressed. This review of social protection policies was complemented by a literature review of evidence on the politics of policymaking around social protection.

As Devereux (2020) notes, 'social protection is an indisputable success story of development policy and practice'. It was not mentioned at all in the Millennium Development Goals but features in three of the Sustainable Development Goals. In Africa, no country had a national social protection policy in 2000, but 35 out of 55 had produced a policy or strategy by 2019. Although coverage has remained limited, millions of people are now receiving regular social assistance (UNDP 2019; ILO 2021; United Nations 2000; 2015; Devereux 2020: 1).

However, recent literature on the politics of social protection has questioned the extent to which governments, particularly in Africa, have fully embraced social protection as a development priority in the face of competing priorities for scarce resources. The politics of social protection in Africa have been characterised as a supply-driven, global social policy agenda, with limited evidence of enthusiastic adoption on the part of crisis-affected governments and too much emphasis on tightly managed systems requiring significant top-down coordination and direction (Hickey *et al.* 2020: 12). Evidence of engagement by international actors with the uncertain and negotiated politics and governance of policy processes and implementation remains limited. By contrast, the emergence of large-scale social assistance programmes in Latin America in the late 1990s and 2000s was more nationally driven and 'their surge and evolution reflects both policy learning and strong civil society demand' (Barrientos and Hinojosa-Valencia 2009: 13; Ferreira and Robalino 2010; Barrientos 2019). Asia historically has low levels of social protection expenditure, partly as a result of prevailing development models that have prioritised economic growth over redistributive policies. There has, however, been recent significant progress 'in strengthening social protection systems and building social protection floors' in Asia (ILO 2016; Kidd *et al.* 2020; ILO 2021: 49).

In Africa, literature on social protection policy processes has found consistent resistance on the part of some governments to donor and aid agency efforts to promote expansion of social assistance, noting that there has often been genuine disagreement about whether the social assistance instruments that donors are advocating are the most effective for achieving national policy goals such as food security (Devereux 2020; Hickey *et al.* 2020; Schmitt 2020). The main arguments behind this resistance can be summarised as follows:

- *The unaffordability argument*: National governments argued that social protection was unaffordable, and would cause an unnecessary strain on the public budget, given other priorities for public spending (Seekings 2017).
- *Fears over dependency*: Governments fear that giving money to poor people could generate wasteful spending, discourage entrepreneurship and initiative, lead to dependence on transfers, and undermine community-based support systems (Devereux 2020; Harvey and Lind 2005; Shepherd, Wadugodapitiya and Evans 2011).
- *Reluctance to share the enthusiasm of aid agencies for cash transfers* resting on a combination of political calculations, genuine disagreements, and strongly held beliefs (Devereux 2020; Hickey *et al.* 2020; Schmitt 2020).

Government scepticism about cash transfers and reluctance to invest scarce national resources appears to rest on perceptions and beliefs about poverty, particularly the idea of dependency. This concept – that giving money to poor people will encourage laziness, generate wasteful spending, and discourage entrepreneurship and initiative – is remarkably persistent in the face of research and advocacy efforts to show that it is not supported by evidence (Harvey and Lind 2005; Shepherd *et al.* 2011). In Uganda’s social protection response to Covid-19, the government only accepted a cash transfer programme in urban areas if it had a public works component due to concerns about dependency. One study found:

There was not political support to implement a temporary unconditional cash transfer, due to the perceived difficulties of rolling back support and concerns about whether it could lead to laziness among recipients, resulting in a late change in design to a public works programme.
(Doyle, Hudda and Marzi 2021: 2)

The degree of state ownership in the process of adopting national social protection policies therefore remains open to question. Devereux (2020) notes the explosion of producing national social protection policies in Africa over the past two decades in a process of what he characterises as ‘policy pollination’. Processes of policy development are often donor and aid agency driven, with the logo of agencies appearing on the covers alongside national coats of arms. In processes of policy development, there is a degree of what Andrews and colleagues call ‘isomorphic mimicry’ (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2017); where countries adopt the surface appearances of globally recommended best practice without underlying changes in actual performance or practices. They discuss how this can restrict space for decision makers and front-line implementers to enhance state capabilities and to innovate. By contrast, successful reforms in policymaking generally and in social protection specifically can derive from governments having space to construct problems themselves and respond with reforms in politically supportable and practically implementable ways (Khandan and Pritchett 2017).

Over the past 20 years there has also been an expansion in the number and scale of social protection policies and systems that need to be recognised at the same time as assessing limitations in terms of national ownership. In Africa, the number of non-contributory schemes tripled between 2000 and 2015 (United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC) 2020). The ILO (2021: 49) notes significant progress but that in Africa ‘only 17.4 per cent of the population are effectively covered by at least one social protection cash benefit, with significant variation across countries’. Processes of ‘policy pollination’ and donor financing and advocacy with governments to expand social assistance have led to the development of policies and expansion of programmes, but questions remain about how far policies and programmes are securely embedded in national political processes and the degree of national ownership and commitment to expanding domestic financing of social protection.

The literature on the broader politics of social protection suggests that the nature of domestic politics – including how national political leaders relate with transnational policy actors and networks – determines the adoption and timing of social protection programmes as well as the specific type of programming that is pursued and the degree to which these are expanded. So while the development of social protection policies in some contexts may be donor driven, how social assistance is delivered in practice depends on national- and local-level politics (Alik-Lagrange *et al.* 2021; Lind 2021; Rudra 2015). However, the evidence base is patchier concerning the mechanisms through which this works, including insights into how social assistance relates to social contracts and taxation, particularly in situations of conflict and protracted crises.

The hope that social protection can contribute to a social contract and to social stability is one that implies a contract between a state and its citizens. That, in turn, implies the need to know more about how people and civil society in places affected by crises are able to influence or participate in the formulation of policies and how they view and navigate access to social assistance. While some literature has examined this in some FCAS – for example, Godamunne (2017), in Sri Lanka – this remains a research gap. The local-level politics of social protection are the focus of another BASIC Research thematic paper, which examines these issues in more detail (Lind 2022).

The social protection policies of international actors and governments have commitments to gender equity and inclusion. However, there is very little literature on the gender and inclusion implications of the politics of social protection – for example, the gender implications of political choices around targeting approaches and whether to opt for means-tested or more categorical approaches. Smith notes the continued exclusion of local actors and actors working on gender and inclusion from shock responses linked with social protection: ‘Gender and inclusion actors have not been well represented in inter-governmental structures or forums bringing together government and partners’ (Smith 2021a: 15). Analysis of the gender make-up of those making and shaping key policy decisions around social assistance in crises, and what that means for who receives what sort of assistance, is a research gap.⁸

Questions over the degree of government ownership and commitment to normative commitments and policies around social protection are particularly pressing and pertinent in FCAS, where assistance to meet basic needs in the face of widespread suffering is acutely needed. Evidence and analysis on the political calculations and beliefs of government actors such as that produced by the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID⁹) programme for eastern and southern Africa remains limited (Hickey *et al.* 2020). One study found that ‘though interest exists in building systems, most social protection interventions in fragile and conflict-affected countries remain somewhat ad hoc and opportunistic’ and ‘serious challenges at the policy level to strategic visioning, often entailing a lack of coordination mechanisms and high dependency on donor funding’ (Ovadiya *et al.* 2015: 12). In addition, the majority of programmes are fragmented by design, with poor administrative linkages between them (*ibid.*). While much of social protection globally is funded domestically through taxation, deficit financing, and through large-scale contributory social insurance schemes, low-income countries are particularly dependent on external official development assistance (ODA) and other donor funding for systems development and implementation, due to their limited domestic resource mobilisation capacity (McCord *et al.* 2021; Longhurst and Slater 2022).

There are also particular features of conflict settings that need to be taken into account. A key feature is the fact of conflict itself. Governments are busy fighting wars and needing to invest in military spending to do so, reducing resources available for other purposes. This also creates strong constituencies and political incentives to prioritise groups that do not match the priorities of donors and aid agencies, notably soldiers and ex-soldiers. In many conflicts, governments also do not have effective control over all parts of the country and so, even if they wanted to provide social assistance at a national level, they are not able to reach some of the population.

Limits to state control and authority can allow non-state armed groups or other informal groups to step in, sometimes prioritising groups that do not match the priorities of aid agencies, such as their supporters or a specific religious or sectarian group. There is little work specifically on local faith-based communities in social assistance in crises (El Nakib and Agar 2015; Türk, Riera and Poirier 2014). Evidence on social assistance provided by non-state armed groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon is also limited. Research by El Nakib and Agar (2015) in Jordan, on assistance to Syrian refugees by faith-based actors, finds that concerns about being labelled as ‘Islamists’ or accused of providing funds for terrorist groups present constraints. In Lebanon, political organisations linked to ethnic and sectarian communities play a key role in basic service and welfare provision, but assistance can be problematically linked to political support and sectarian alignments (Cammatt 2011; Jawad 2009; Kukrety 2016). Both the Hariri Foundation and Hezbollah are examples of the intertwining of political and charitable roles (Karaki 2013). Hezbollah’s martyrs programme provides assistance (health care, schooling, and material benefits) to the families of ‘martyrs’, those core

⁸ Gender and inclusion issues will be explored in more depth in a specific thematic paper for BASIC Research.

⁹ The [Effective States and Inclusive Development \(ESID\) Research Centre](#) is a global partnership that has investigated the kinds of politics that promote development.

activists or members of the Hezbollah militia who were killed in action. The Hariri Foundation, the Sunni Future Movement’s welfare organisation, provides high-quality medical services and educational aid to all communities, but its core supporters receive subsidised and free care (Cammett 2011).

The long-term importance of international humanitarian aid is another key feature of protracted conflict settings. In many protracted crises, humanitarian aid has been, in practice, the main form of international assistance for many years. This is both internationally financed and largely delivered by international actors. Table 4.1 shows how UN humanitarian appeals in South Sudan have been well over \$1bn a year since the upsurge of renewed conflict in 2013.

Table 4.1: UN Humanitarian Response Plan for South Sudan (2013–2021)

Response since the start of the crisis					
Year of appeal	People in need	People targeted	Requirements (US\$)	Funding received	% Funded
2013	4.6M	3.3M	1.1B	772M	72%
2014	7.3M	3.8M	1.8B	1.6B	88%
2015	6.4M	4.1M	1.6B	1.1B	66%
2016	6.1M	5.1M	1.3B	1.2B	92%
2017	7.5M	5.8M	1.6B	1.2B	71%
2018	7.0M	6.0M	1.7B	1.2B	70%
2019	7.1M	5.7M	1.5B	1.0B	67%
2020	7.5M	5.6M	1.9B	1.2B	65%
2021	8.3M	6.6M	1.7B	–	–

Source: Authors’ own. Created using data from OCHA (2021e), [CC BY 4.0](#).

This can create disincentives for governments to invest their own resources in social assistance if it appears that donors will be willing to continue funding and providing assistance through humanitarian means. However, evidence is largely lacking about how government officials view humanitarian aid and the effects it has on willingness to develop national systems for social protection. Kenya and Ethiopia, for example, have seen shifts from large-scale recurrent humanitarian financing to social protection instruments – the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia and the Hunger Safety Net Programme in Kenya – although with differences and limitations in terms of government willingness to assume greater responsibilities for financing (Álvarez and Van Nieuwenhuyzen 2016; Lavers 2020).

The political calculations behind support for social protection (or scepticism towards it) are clearly highly context-specific and depend on local histories and trajectories. For instance, Ovadiya and colleagues found that Yemen ‘has used social protection to maintain social and political stability. The government has been reluctant to abolish the financially unsustainable petroleum subsidies, because any indication of doing so triggers protests’ (Ovadiya *et al.* 2015: 14). Subsidies in Nigeria and Libya and the public distribution system of food vouchers in Iraq are other examples of politically popular forms of social protection in crises that governments have been reluctant to move away from. Ovadiya and colleagues note the importance of political leadership ‘that is willing to bear the financial, social, and institutional costs and to mobilize public opinion’ (*ibid.*: 38). They found that the West Bank and Gaza and the Republic of Yemen had moved forward in reforming targeting mechanisms and cash transfer programmes, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Timor-Leste had resisted rethinking categorical benefits for war veterans and their families (*ibid.*). There are often disconnects between what donors and aid agencies see as the most effective forms of assistance and what crisis-affected governments see as politically feasible and necessary to maintain stability and create important constituencies of support (Hickey *et al.* 2020).

We examined national social protection policies (or national development strategies in countries where there is currently no social protection policy) (see Table 4.2). Our objective was to find out whether or not there was any mention of conflict and/or international humanitarian aid and their relation to national social protection systems.

While some policies did make reference to conflict and the role of humanitarian aid, it is the level of disconnect that is most striking. Both current conflicts and the legacies of previous conflicts are often ignored or downplayed. The presence of non-state armed groups, the fact that governments do not control all of their territory, and those people that are beyond the reach of government-led assistance are little mentioned. The table also shows that, while international policy discourses on SRSP are increasingly premised around the idea of transitions from humanitarian aid to social protection, social protection policies often largely ignore the presence of large-scale and long-term humanitarian aid.

Table 4.2: National social protection policies and strategies and what they say about conflict and humanitarian aid

National social protection policies	Policy date/type	What they say about conflict	What they say about humanitarian aid
Nigeria	National Social Protection Policy (2016) (Ministry of Budget and National Planning 2016)	Does not mention conflict, in spite of the growing Boko Haram conflict in the north-east of the country that started in 2016, and violence in the Niger delta and elsewhere.	Humanitarian action not mentioned.
Somalia	Social Protection Policy (2019) (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2020)	Recognises maintaining peace and stability as a precondition for development. Social protection is perceived as support to peace and security efforts by addressing all the unmet needs of vulnerable people, especially youth.	Goal of the policy is to 'move towards a nationally owned and coherent social protection system, and reduce reliance on short term humanitarian aid, given the frequency of disasters affecting the country'.
Jordan	National Social Protection strategy (2019–2025) (Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan 2019)	Makes no mention of conflict and/or crisis situation.	No mention in the policy document of any humanitarian assistance.
Lebanon	National Social Development Strategy (2011) (Ministry of Social Affairs 2011)	Predates the Syrian refugee crisis but does not mention conflict or post-conflict arrangements at all, despite repetitive conflicts.	No mention of humanitarian assistance, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)
Niger	National Social Protection Policy (2011) (Ministère de la Population, de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Protection de l'Enfant, République du Niger 2011)	Recognises armed conflicts and other crises (environmental, economic, and/or political) as the main causes for vulnerability, which need programmes to address the specific needs of conflict-affected populations as well as risk management programmes.	Recognises that there is no official social protection system in Niger outside of informal safety nets, and mechanisms of social assistance put in place by NGOs and technical and financial partners, which remain limited in scope and reach.
Mali	National Social Protection Policy (2015) (Ministère de la Solidarité, de l'Action Humanitaire et de la Reconstruction du Nord and République du Mali 2015)	Mentions the social and political crisis of 2012 as the main driver for introducing new social safety nets in order to strengthen the resilience of households affected by the crisis. No mention of armed conflict, or other security threats as causes of vulnerability.	Considers international partners as key actors in implementation of the policy, not only by bringing technical expertise but also by resource mobilisation. Describes assistance programmes implemented by international agencies.

National social protection policies	Policy date/type	What they say about conflict	What they say about humanitarian aid
Ethiopia	National Social Protection Strategy (2016) (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2016)	Makes no mention of armed or violent conflict.	Acknowledges the role of development partners, with considerable experience of social protection provision in the country, in the strategy development process.
Myanmar	National Social Protection Strategic Plan (2014) (Republic of Myanmar 2014)	Makes no mention of conflict or violence.	UN agencies are noted as partners for government in developing the social protection system. UN agencies and donors are noted as implementing relief programmes for disaster-affected people.
DRC	National Strategy for Social Protection (2016) (Ministre de l'Emploi, du Travail et de la Prévoyance Sociale 2016)	Highlights the immediate needs of a post-conflict phase. General acknowledgment that the war in DRC, and reduction of revenues, have had a disastrous effect on wellbeing. Social protection is seen as an important tool for rebuilding social cohesion and stability. Yet the document speaks as if all conflicts have ceased in the country.	UN agencies and donors are noted as supporting the government. Describes assistance programmes put in place by various actors such as WFP, CARITAS and UNICEF to households affected by conflict and/or natural disasters.
Mozambique	National Basic Social Security Strategy (2016–2024) (Republic of Mozambique 2016)	No mention of armed conflict, natural disaster or any other kind of shock.	No mention of any kind of international aid, or any technical or financial assistance received from UN agencies.
South Sudan	South Sudan Development Plan (2011–2013) (Government of the Republic of South Sudan 2011)	Includes an extensive diagnostic of the security situation in the country since independence in 2005. Includes governance reform, peace-building, justice and reconciliation, along with the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction as central priorities.	Notes that international assistance has been a central source of government financing. Highlights a need for national ownership and linking humanitarian and development assistance.
Haiti	National Social Protection Policy 2020 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour 2020)	Notes Haiti's vulnerability to natural disasters, history of social and economic crises, and fragile public institutions. Includes four strategic axes of intervention, one of which is shock-responsive social protection, which seeks to address vulnerability of the country and its population to climate, economic and socio-political shocks.	Considers the participation of technical and financial partners, especially the cash protection working group, as key stakeholders in its institutional and financial arrangements for implementation and in the development of the policy.
Iraq	Strategy for the Reduction of Poverty in Iraq (PRSP) (2018–2022) (Ministry of Planning <i>et al.</i> 2018)	Notes security as the major challenge facing social protection poverty reduction in the country.	Includes a call to harmonise social assistance policies with humanitarian aid.

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

For example, Nigeria's social protection policy, written in 2016, does not mention conflict or humanitarian action at all. That is in spite of the growing Boko Haram conflict in the north-east of the country, which started in 2016, and violence in the Niger delta and elsewhere (Ministry of Budget and National Planning 2016). The Humanitarian Needs Overview conducted in November 2014 found that close to 15.5 million people in Nigeria were living in areas affected by conflict, food insecurity, malnutrition, and epidemics. Faced with resource limitations and based on the prioritisation framework, humanitarian actors planned to target around

2.8 million people for relief assistance (OCHA 2015). By contrast, the Iraq 2018 poverty reduction strategy is much more explicit about the challenges of conflict and displacement (Ministry of Planning *et al.* 2018).

More analysis of policy processes and the dynamics and types of conflict in particular places would be needed to start to unpick why conflict features in some policies and not others. It would be useful to know more about how policies were developed and who they were written by. For instance, does conflict blindness in some policies reflect policies largely written by international social protection consultants with limited experience of conflict and fragility, or a government reluctance to acknowledge internal conflicts due to sovereignty concerns? More research into the specifics of policy processes in FCAS building on work by Hickey *et al.* (2020) in eastern and southern Africa would be needed to answer this and other questions.

The dynamics and types of conflict are clearly relevant to whether and how conflict is addressed within policies. In some countries, such as Jordan, the people most affected by conflict and crisis are not considered citizens (Syrian refugees) and so are deliberately excluded from a national social protection policy focused on citizens. There are also questions over the extent to which governments are willing to publicly acknowledge the facts of internal conflicts in official policies. The current conflict in Tigray, for example, is officially labelled as a 'law enforcement' operation by the Ethiopian government, and the conflict in north-east Nigeria is described as anti-terrorism with a reluctance to acknowledge the presence of citizens in areas controlled by non-state armed groups (Stoddard *et al.* 2020; 2021). Governments' concerns about sovereignty and a reluctance to be labelled as fragile, conflict-affected or in crisis also mitigate against clear analysis of the challenges of conflict within official policies.

This means that social protection policy discourses are often characterised by a large degree of conflict blindness, ignoring why humanitarian aid was needed in the first place and explaining why, in many places, it has been needed for decades. Conflict blindness is also seen in approaches to resilience and graduation. Strategies assume that packages of support to livelihoods will enable people to graduate from assistance programmes but ignore the cycles of violence and displacement that make graduation unlikely. The contributions of social assistance to strengthening livelihoods and building resilience are examined in greater detail in a linked thematic paper (Lind, Sabates-Wheeler and Szyp 2022).

It is worth noting that the content of official policy documents often does not reflect active coordination, cooperation, and policy discussions that is going on in practice in different countries. And it is also important to note that the policy landscape around linkages between humanitarian cash, social protection and social assistance during crises is a fast-moving one, which has been given additional impetus by the expanded social protection responses to Covid-19. Smith, for instance, notes the development of a shared roadmap for aligning humanitarian action and social protection programmes in Iraq (Smith 2021).

A focus on policies also risks emphasising what Barrientos, in a more in-depth study of institutions, cautions against – namely, 'short-term, perhaps fleeting, government decision-making' and neglecting attention to 'longer-term redistributive patterns and commitments embedded in norms and practices and consistent with economic, social and political conditions' (Barrientos 2020: 340). A deeper study of institutions is a gap in the literature, particularly for conflicts and protracted crises. There is a clear research agenda for more in-depth study of how policy processes interact with emerging processes of practice, coordination, and implementation during crises, and what that means for the role of conflict-affected governments in social assistance.

A more in-depth analysis of the politics of social protection in FCAS would also need to look at issues of accountability, and whether and how citizens are able to hold governments to account in relation to social assistance. A linked thematic paper for BASIC Research is examining accountability questions, exploring how the accountability approaches of humanitarian and social protection actors differ from and relate to each other (Seferis and Harvey 2021).

5. Conclusions

This paper set out to review literature on the policies and strategies of donor governments, aid agencies and crisis-affected governments to explore what they reveal about the politics of social and humanitarian

assistance during crises, and how aid agencies are navigating tensions between humanitarian principles and development approaches to social assistance during crises. In protracted crises, there is often limited access to social protection, and humanitarian assistance has become an inadequate and problematically financed tool for trying to meet the basic needs of highly vulnerable populations.

Across the policy discourses and narratives identified in the introduction (social protection as a contributor to state-building; as an existing part of social contracts and a contributor to stability; as a key element of the nexus; and scepticism over the affordability and priority given to social protection), the paper has identified critical evidence gaps. At the international policy level, donors and aid agencies are trying to improve links between humanitarian cash and social protection, and to strengthen national systems as part of commitments around the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. At the national level, social protection policies are increasingly in place, but their implementation is mediated by politics, resource constraints, and the attitudes and beliefs of those responsible for shaping policy. Normative policy commitments at international level to link humanitarian aid and social protection more effectively and expand social assistance during crises are therefore in place, but face considerable political challenges for being put into practice. The political constraints and enabling factors in protracted crises that could allow more effective linkages between humanitarian, development, and climate actors, and enable more sustained financing and strengthening of national systems, need to be better understood. There are clear evidence gaps in terms of whether and how social protection can contribute to state-building, and how to overcome scepticism on the part of national actors around affordability and spending priorities.

This paper also finds that the social assistance policies of crisis-affected governments and aid agencies are prone to conflict blindness. Commitments to state-building, national ownership and building national systems too often ignore the dilemmas inherent in supporting states that are parties to ongoing conflicts and the political rather than technical challenges involved. Government social protection policies in conflict-affected countries often make little or no mention of the fact that there is war going on. Furthermore, aid agency and donor programmes and strategies for transitions from humanitarian aid to social protection often gloss over the challenges posed by the fact that states sometimes do not control parts of the country and cannot reach significant proportions of the population.

Particularly in Africa, evidence from relatively stable contexts suggests an element of resistance and scepticism on the part of crisis-affected governments around the policy narrative pushing more investment in social assistance, largely due to concerns about dependency and affordability. Governments remain to be fully convinced that concerns around dependency are being addressed and that investing their own resources in long-term social assistance is affordable given competing priorities. More research is needed on the politics of social protection policies in protracted crises and conflict contexts.

Policy narratives that assume an unproblematic, technical challenge of linking humanitarian cash and social protection in crises also gloss over the political challenges and constraints facing donor governments. Donor diligence, reporting, and counter-terrorism requirements, driven by domestic politics, are often pushing in different directions from policy rhetoric and commitments to greater national ownership and support for local actors.

Given the extent to which ideas, policies, and practices around social protection are contested, it is vital to engage with the politics of social assistance. More attention is needed to how social protection is conceptualised and how policies are developed to better understand how social assistance systems work in crises. The literature needs to move from assertions of the desirability of transitions from humanitarian aid to more nationally owned social protection, to analysis of the political barriers to more effective social assistance in crises and how these can be overcome. This remains a striking gap in both the academic and grey literature of aid agency guidelines and policies.

BASIC Research should also focus on how efforts to support social assistance during crises could be less conflict blind, and what that would mean for processes of analysis, programme design, engagement with the political challenges of assistance, and the appropriate mix of development and humanitarian tools, approaches, capacities, and financing. This matters for the further introduction and extension of social assistance in crises, because there is a risk that donor and aid agency policies are pushing an approach that is poorly rooted in the national political contexts of conflict-affected countries, and hence likely to fail.

Key research gaps identified in the review are as follows:

- Social protection policies and strategies are often blind to conflict dynamics and actors; while some humanitarian strategies point to an interest to engage with social protection actors, there is limited understanding of the policy spaces and processes behind social protection systems. There is very little research or evidence that examines the conflict sensitivity of social protection policies in FCAS.
- Prevailing perspectives on the politics of social protection (incorporating social assistance) are largely limited to settings that are not characterised by protracted crisis and conflict; moreover, they do not consider relationships with humanitarian channels and providers of cash assistance. While existing research is useful, to an extent, to assess the politics of social assistance in settings of protracted crisis, more dedicated analysis of political dynamics is needed specifically in places that are characterised by contested public authority, protracted displacement and uneven claims and rights to citizenship, threats and use of violence, and significant humanitarian provision. Within efforts to widen the reach of social assistance systems, research is needed on the political or policy processes explaining how to address the problems posed by non-state and/or non-recognised public authorities.
- Research indicates that the nature of domestic politics – including how national political leaders relate with transnational policy actors and networks – determines the adoption and timing of social protection programmes as well as the specific type of programming that is pursued and the degree to which these are expanded. Yet, the evidence base is far patchier concerning the precise mechanisms through which this works, including insights into how social assistance relates to social contracts and taxation. This is true for more stable and peaceful settings as well as for situations of protracted crisis, where domestic politics are inseparable from conflict and displacement. Understanding how social assistance is differentially allocated, or not, is thus crucial to understanding its implications for citizenship (i.e. to the potential for rebuilding 'the social').

This leads to an agenda for BASIC Research that aims to:

- describe and analyse the dynamics and processes affecting the allocation of social assistance, including the roles and relationships between global, national, and sub-national actors that influence patterns of allocation;
- advance new applied thinking around the relationship between 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 for effectively engaging with and strengthening systems at national and sub-national levels.

The overall research questions informed by this review paper and a complementary paper examining local-level politics are as follows:

1. What are the politics of social assistance in crises?
2. How can international actors navigate political dynamics at national and sub-national levels to strengthen commitments and support for more effective and sustainable support to those in need?

More specifically, to generate evidence and critical analysis to help answer these questions, we propose the following sub-questions:

- Is social assistance allocated uniformly across the societies being studied, or is it instead captured and allocated disproportionately to some groups or regions, to the exclusion of others? What policy or political processes underpin these patterns?
- What is the relationship between these patterns of social assistance allocation, and patterns of taxation?
- How is social assistance allocated and distributed differently between areas with different public authority mixes, including non-recognised authorities exerting control over certain sub-national areas and populations? What are the roles of both international and sub-national actors therein?
- Based on the above, how does social assistance within protracted crises contribute to building or eroding conceptions of and attitudes to citizenship?

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