BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

Research Briefing

Issue 01 | March 2024

Researching capacities to sustain social protection in protracted crises Part 1: The Capacity Cube

This research briefing introduces the Capacity Cube framework – a new tool for thinking about how capacity to deliver national social protection programmes and systems might be sustained in times of crisis. Its three-dimensional approach is specifically designed to analyse the particular capacities needed to deliver resilient programmes in protracted crises and to identify strategies to address any deficits. This briefing explains the Cube framework and its development and application. An accompanying briefing (Slater 2024) presents early findings using the Cube in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

Rachel Slater Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT)

Key messages

The Capacity Cube approach:

- Enables a more nuanced and granular view of capacities that allows
 policymakers and practitioners to identify not only deficits in technical
 competencies but also shortcomings in functional (or 'real world') capabilities
 and performance. This in turn allows improved understanding of what is
 driving any deficits and the investments and improvements that might
 overcome them.
- Builds on the (1) orthodox distinction between individual, organisational, and institutional levels of capacity, (2) to include a temporal element that explores how approaches to sustaining capacity change processes over time, plus (3) a third dimension which explores how crises affect capacity in terms of what people can do in principle, what they can do in practice, and what they actually do.

Box 1: BASIC Research questions for crisis-resilient social protection

Q: How can existing national social protection systems be sustained in conflict-affected situations, and how can international agencies support them to be more resilient?

- What capacities are most important for enabling business continuity and overcoming capacity deficits? What are the gender dimensions of staff capacity?
- What coordination features and roles of external agencies support continuity?
- What are the political economy dimensions of programme continuity and the incentives to sustain delivery?
- Where, when and why are some instruments more resilient than others? For example, subsidies versus social transfers. What are the financial, administrative, and political dimensions of sustaining different programming types?

Why is BASIC researching capacity?

At the heart of the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research agenda is an attempt to plug a knowledge gap about existing social protection programmes. Our inception phase scoping work demonstrated that, in the midst of massive interest in shock-responsive social protection (Longhurst and Slater 2022), little attention is paid to what happens to existing social protection in situations of protracted crisis (Slater, Haruna and Baur 2022; Slater 2022). By placing substantial emphasis on how to flex and expand programmes vertically and horizontally, the shock-responsive social protection agenda has tended to take attention away from if and how existing programmes are able to sustain delivery to existing beneficiaries in situations of climate and/or conflict crisis.

To address this knowledge gap, BASIC Research is delivering a programme of work on **crisis-resilient social protection** that asks:

- If and how national social protection programmes and systems that pre-exist a specific crisis can be sustained and used to maintain business continuity during or after said crisis.
- How external actors can support the resilience of those systems and programmes (Box 1).

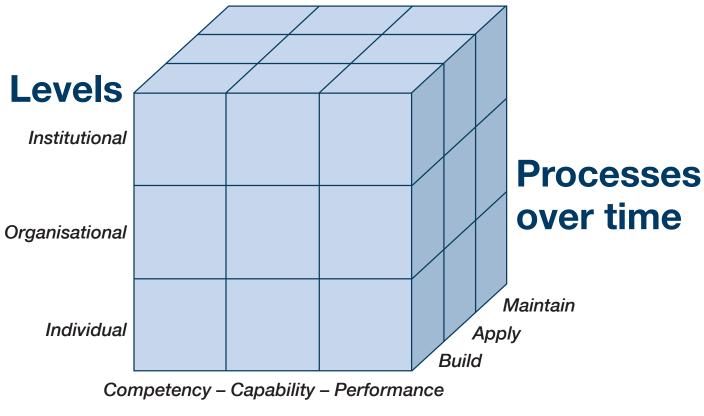
The programme's inception phase work found that although it is rare to read a report on social protection without reading the word capacity, very limited serious attention is paid to capacity in the literature on social assistance in crisis situations. Furthermore, stakeholders in international development and humanitarian agencies regularly make assumptions about capacity – notably, that there is not any in situations of protracted crisis, in either national governments or in sub-national departments.

If policymakers and practitioners want to improve capacity, a more nuanced and granular perspective is needed that takes us beyond assumptions that there is no government capacity to sustain programme delivery in situations of protracted crisis, especially at the local level. It is important to break down capacity in the social protection sector into different elements, ones that capture the varied and often challenging environments in which social protection is designed and delivered, and to include a stronger temporal dimension.

How is BASIC researching capacity?

Addressing the lack of understanding of prevailing capacities and the threats to sustaining them requires a combination of two things: (1) a clear analytical framing for researching capacity in situations of protracted crisis, and (2) the collection of empirical data to analyse and assess. BASIC Research has developed a 'Capacity Cube' – a three-dimensional approach to investigating capacity to deliver social protection that is specifically designed to capture the particular requirements to deliver programmes in protracted crises.

Figure 1: The Capacity Cube



Capacities

Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

The Capacity Cube (see Figure 1) draws on John Gaventa's view of power (2006) across three dimensions to allow a more systematic and structured analysis of where we find capacity and capacity deficits. This briefing explains the Cube in more detail and its further refinement and application. An accompanying briefing (Slater 2024) presents early findings using the Cube in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

1. The first dimension in the Cube is the orthodox distinction between individual, organisational, and institutional capacity. The individual level is about people, specifically staff, in organisations and their capacity as individuals to deliver their roles. The organisational level is focused on processes and systems, including elements of system architecture and assets, such as management information systems (MIS), registries or payment systems, or the existence of an algorithm to support targeting. The institutional level switches the focus to the values and norms that underpin what organisations and individuals do. These

- are often, but not always, articulated in laws and regulations, mandates and obligations, and policies and strategies.
- 2. The second dimension is temporal and differentiates between building capacity, applying it, and maintaining it. As TRANSFORM highlights: 'To gain a complete picture it is necessary to look not only at an entity's ability to create or acquire capacity (for example, through training, recruitment or the introduction of new systems), but also its ability to utilise this newly developed capacity, and finally to ensure it is retained' (2017: 7). Mismatches between building, applying, and maintaining capacity include, for example, where new equipment goes unused because staff do not know how to use it, or where targeting effectiveness declines because data about poverty and vulnerability are not routinely updated, or where staff turnover is high.

- 3. The third dimension brings something different: a focus on what people can do in principle, what they can do in practice, and what they actually do. Drawing on analysis from the health sector (Holsbeeke et al. 2009), this dimension breaks down capacity into competency, capability and performance, as follows:
 - Competency what a person can do in a standardised, controlled environment;
 - Capability what a person can do in their daily environment; and
 - Performance what a person actually does in their daily environment.

In a protracted crisis setting, staff delivering social assistance might be competent but not capable because, for example, they experience such frequent power and communications outages that although they know how to do their task, they cannot send monitoring reports to head office, or complete paperwork to expedite transfers of funds. During the Covid-19 pandemic, staff with children found themselves juggling work and childcare. Similarly, a climate shock or violent conflict might also affect staff's capability to work. Finally, especially in situations of protracted crisis, competent and capable staff may lose motivation and enthusiasm, becoming fatigued in a difficult environment, so they do not perform well.

The three dimensions are captured in the wider capacity development literature. The hierarchy of capacities that differentiates between individuals, organisations, and institutions is common. David Watson describes capacity as the 'emergent combination of attributes, capabilities and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt and perform' (2006: vi).

The first and second dimensions have been used in capacity assessments in relation to the social protection sector (for example, see Kardan *et al.* 2017).

The principle of the third dimension can be discerned in some research outputs. For example, Caravani *et al.* (2021) argue for a focus on capacities on the ground where all manner of complications arise that must be navigated, which are not simply technical. They also argue for a focus on uncertainty and

flexibility, rather than assuming predictability and stability. However, there is no guidance on how to capture these elements in capacity assessment, or any serious, explicit treatment of them in research to date. Moreover, these three dimensions have not been explicitly applied, together, to the social protection sector.

Why is the Capacity Cube helpful?

The Cube helps us identify what to look for when seeking to understand capacity deficits, and what might be done about them in situations of protracted crisis. There are a number of further advantages to using the dimensions articulated in the Cube to research how we sustain existing programmes. The Cube:

- Helps to move beyond the predominant focus on individual competencies and technical skills (which tend to narrow down or limit capacity strengthening options to individual technical training) to focus on what drives capability and performance deficits, and the functional and soft skills – and systems investments – that might overcome them.
- Provides more scope to understand how gender and other social norms and values underpin capacities; for example, by identifying if men's and women's capabilities and performance are substantially different because of the differentiated impacts of violent conflict, domestic work at home, or travel safety and access to remote communities.
- Enables a more granular view of capacity deficits so it is possible to understand whether, for example, staff know how to do something in theory, whether they know how to do it in practice, and whether they actually do it.

The Capacity Cube provides a visual, heuristic tool explaining one approach to thinking about capacity that draws on a wider set of different but intersecting elements. Beyond this it also provides a tool for researching or assessing capacity in situations of protracted crisis. In the real world, the lines between the dimensions of the Cube, and between individual elements of the Cube are not straight and solid but uneven and fuzzy. Nevertheless, breaking the Cube down into 27 individual cubes allows a research framework for exploring capacity to emerge.

Applying the Capacity Cube in research – questions to ask

A range of questions for researching capacities, broken down by capacity dimensions, is provided in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

Figure 2: The Capacity Cube – Build

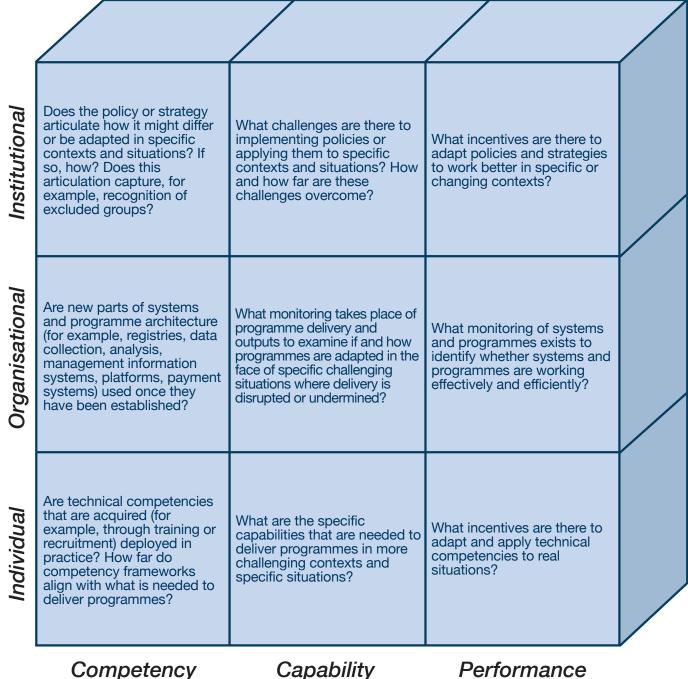
Build

Institutional	Is there a policy framework or strategy, or legal framework for social protection? What ideology or values are discernible from these? Are steps being taken to develop the legal and policy basis for social protection? Are those steps inclusive? For example, do they include or represent excluded or marginalised groups?	During policy and strategy development, is attention paid to the practical realities of delivering programmes in specific settings and situations? How is the enabling environment, or architecture outside social protection programmes articulated within policy development processes?	What appears to be driving attempts to improve to policy, strategy, and legal frameworks? Are there incentives to improve inclusivity? Or to take a more rights-based approach to social protection? What values underpin efforts to improve policy, strategy, and legal frameworks? Is there political and institutional support for improving social protection?	
Organisational	Has an appraisal of the social protection systems architecture been undertaken? What gaps in architecture have been identified? How are they being filled?	Has an appraisal of the wider enabling environment (wider policies, intra- and interorganisational coordination, cross-government systems and procedures, funding streams and pathways, materials and equipment such as buildings and information technology) been undertaken? What features in the wider environment have been identified that are critical gaps for delivering social protection?	Is there support for improving overall social protection systems and delivery? Has the overall performance of the existing social protection system been appraised? What drives organisational support for investments in systems?	
Individual	Does a competency framework exist that captures specific technical requirements for social protection programmes? Are competency strengthening activities aligned with that framework?	Does a competency framework exist that captures the capabilities important to programme delivery? These might include capabilities that are not specific to social protection.	What appears to be driving improvements to staff capacity? What are the incentives for staff to improve competencies and capabilities?	
'	Competency	Capability	Performance	

Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

Figure 3: The Capacity Cube – Apply

Apply



Capability

Performance

Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

Figure 4: The Capacity Cube – Maintain

Maintain

Institutional	Is there a mechanism for updating the policy, strategy, or legal framework? Does it adequately capture changes in circumstances and challenges to delivering social protection?	What examples are there of policy, strategy, or legal frameworks being explicitly adapted to particular contexts or situations (conflict, displacement, climate-related shocks)?	What incentives are there, for example, in the wider political marketplace, to deliver social protection effectively?	
Organisational	To what extent are the existing portfolio of programmes, and the building blocks (equipment and resources such as data, computers, payment systems, etc.) able to withstand disruptions that occur because of fragility, conflict, or because of economic, political and climate/environmental shocks?	What further mechanisms/ resources/arrangements are available to ensure that programmes continue operating in a crisis situation? For example, alternative data collection or disbursement arrangements.	Do we know which parts of the system function well under stress and which do not? Do we use grievance mechanisms to understand which parts of the delivery chain are not working, or have been diverted away from eligible beneficiaries?	
Individual	Do staff have the required technical competencies to deliver social protection tasks over the longer term? For example, do they know how to update targeting or reappraise benefit levels?	Do staff have functional skills that enable them to navigate shifting circumstances? For example, can staff safely negotiate their way through a checkpoint? Or use their relationships with another part of government to line up an energy loadshedding schedule with their requirements?	What incentives or drivers keep staff delivering in challenging or difficult environments? What can undermine or block staff competency and capabilities? For example, how does the safety and security of individual staff influence performance?	

Capability

Performance

Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

Competency

References

Caravani, M.; Lind, J.; Sabates-Wheeler, R. and Scoones, I. (2021) 'Providing Social Assistance and Humanitarian Relief: The Case for Embracing Uncertainty', Development Policy Review 40.5: e12613, DOI: 10.1111/dpr.12613 (accessed 14 December 2023)

Gaventa, J. (2006) 'Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis', IDS Bulletin 37.6: 23–33, DOI: 10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006. tb00320.x (accessed 14 December 2023)

Holsbeeke, L.; Ketelaar, M.; Schoemaker, M.M. and Gorter, J.W. (2009) 'Capacity, Capability, and Performance: Different Constructs or Three of a Kind?', Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation 90.5: 849–55, DOI: 10.1016/j.apmr.2008.11.015 (accessed 14 December 2023)

Kardan, A.; Wyatt, A.; Attah, R. and Quarles van Ufford, P. (2017) <u>Assessing the Capacity of Local Administration and Community Structures to Deliver Social Protection Programmes</u>, OPM Working Paper, Oxford: Oxford Policy Management (accessed 14 December 2023)

Longhurst, D. and Slater, R. (2022) <u>Shock-Responsive Social Protection: What is Known About What Works in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations?</u>, BASIC Research Working Paper 5, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: <u>10.19088/BASIC.2022.005</u> (accessed 14 December 2023)

Slater, R. (2024) 'Researching Capacities to Sustain Social Protection in Protracted Crises. Part 2: Early Findings', *BASIC Research Briefing* 2, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2024.002

Slater, R. (2022) <u>Sustaining Existing Social</u>
<u>Protection Programmes During Crises: What</u>
<u>Do We Know? How Can We Know More?</u>,

BASIC Research Working Paper 14, Brighton:
Institute of Development Studies,

DOI: <u>10.19088/BASIC.2022.014</u> (accessed

14 December 2023)

Slater, S.; Haruna, E. and Baur, D. (2022)

What is Known About Capacity and

Coordination of Social Assistance Programmes
in Crisis Situations?, BASIC Research Working
Paper 18, Brighton: Institute of Development
Studies, DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2022.018
(accessed 14 December 2023)

TRANSFORM (2017) Governance of
Social Protection Systems: Institutions,
Organizational Structure and Capacity –
Manual for a Leadership and Transformation
Curriculum On Building and Managing Social
Protection Floors in Africa, TRANSFORM
(accessed 13 February 2024)

Watson, D. (2006) *Monitoring and Evaluation of Capacity and Capacity Development*,
Discussion Paper No 58B, Maastricht:
European Centre for Development Policy
Management

Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton, BN1 9RE, United Kingdom +44 (0)1273 606261 ids.ac.uk IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England. Charity Registration Number 306371. Charitable Company Number 877338.

This Research Briefing was written by **Rachel Slater**. It was developed by the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme. BASIC is implemented by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and funded by UK International Development from the UK government. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

© Institute of Development Studies 2024.

This is an Open Access briefing distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons

Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use or distribution in any medium, provided the original authors and sources are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2024.001





