

Research Briefing

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Researching capacities to sustain social protection in protracted crises

Part 2: Early findings

Despite significant attention and interest in shock-responsive social protection, a knowledge gap exists when it comes to our understanding of how to sustain capacity to deliver existing social programmes and systems in situations of climate and/or conflict crisis. BASIC Research is using a new tool that we have developed – the Capacity Cube – to explore this question and identify ways in which external actors might support the resilience of those systems and programmes. An explanation of the Capacity Cube framework is provided in an accompanying briefing (Slater 2024). The current briefing focuses on early findings emerging from research using the tool in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

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Key messages

- Capacity investments in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria have been focused on the individual and organisational (or systems) levels, with attention paid to building technical competencies and social protection systems and architecture. Far less attention is paid to functional capabilities (the ability of social protection staff to navigate and solve problems in their actual environment), or to ensuring that skills learned in training are applied in practice and maintained over time.
- Assessment drawing on the cube framework highlights the importance of capacity investments that move beyond individual technical competencies, towards individual and organisational functional competencies, and solutions that tackle behavioural, structural, and environmental impediments to social assistance delivery.

BASIC Research on capacities to sustain existing social protection programmes in protracted crises

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.

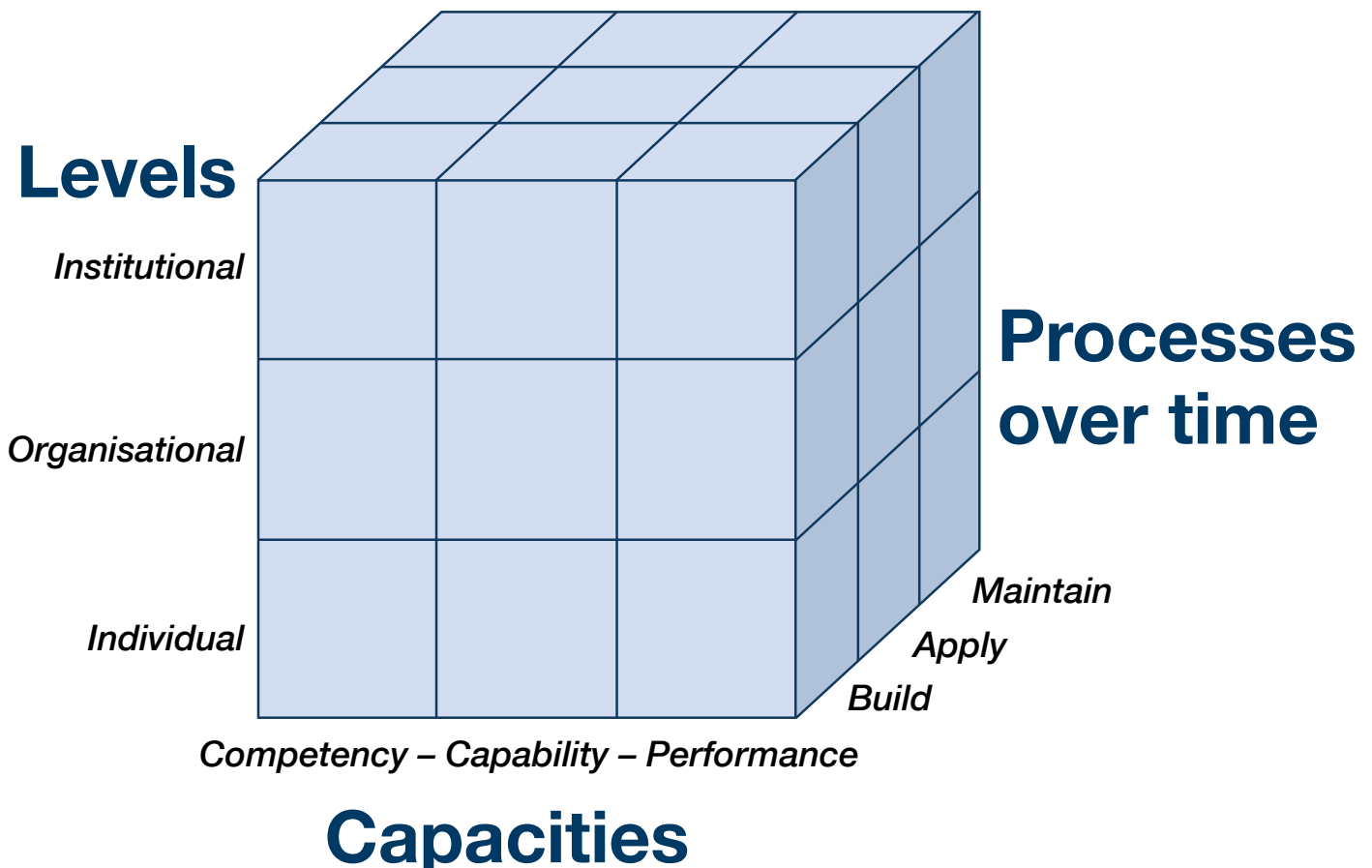
An explanation of the framework that BASIC Research is using to explore capacities (the Capacity Cube, see Figure 1) is provided in an accompanying briefing (Slater 2024). The current briefing focuses on early findings emerging in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

What have we learned so far?

Nigeria

In Nigeria (see Baur, forthcoming), existing capacity initiatives are focused mainly on building competency, predominantly at an individual level and increasingly at an organisational level. Furthermore, although many of the hallmarks of a thoughtful,

Figure 1: The Capacity Cube



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

risk-informed policy are present in Nigeria, and some of the tools and processes are in place, overall the systems infrastructure remains somewhat hollow. This focus on competencies to build and apply popular social protection architecture (for example, registries) suggests three main challenges to capacity investments in Nigeria:

- 1. Projectised, technical solutions to support shock-responsive social protection are prioritised at the expense of a more holistic view of the wider capabilities that are important for social protection delivery.** Many impediments to social protection delivery are not specific to the social protection sector, but require a wider, cross-government approach. Examples include: having clear funding flows articulated and approved at federal and state level; having reliable internet access for states to be operational; having mobile money infrastructure; ensuring local liquidity in banks, shops, and service providers following the Naira bank note crisis of March 2023 (OCHA 2023); and physical access to locations that are disrupted by shocks or instability. Capacity initiatives in the social protection sector rarely consider the need to concurrently build other sectors so conditional cash transfers require capacity investments in the health and/or education sectors. However, even where these are articulated, there are few cross-sectoral plans. This implies that organisational or systems capacities need be **intersectoral**, but realism is required (see Box 1).
- 2. Projectised approaches to building capacity may fail to capture the variation in different localities.** Even if there is recognition of diversity of capacities, there is a common assumption that the solutions to limited capacity are uniform or homogenous (for example, the development of blueprints in one state, for transfer to other states). In practice, the lack of distinction between competencies and capabilities makes it difficult to capture what is needed in the most difficult operating environments. Whilst the competencies may be similar, the capabilities in fragile and conflict-affected settings may be remarkably different, not least in dealing with the threat of violence. Focusing on organisational competencies

rather than the distinct capabilities that are required in specific contexts can also lead to isomorphic mimicry – where the form of capacity solution is copied, even though a different function is required.

- 3. There is little attention paid to the sustainability of capacity initiatives beyond the lifetime of projects themselves.** The attention given to building organisational capacity is not mirrored by the attention given to maintaining capacity. Therefore, the question about how and how often the National Social Register (NSR) will be updated is yet to be resolved and resourced despite being frequently flagged as important. Concerns about maintaining and sustaining social protection architecture and programmes are anchored in concerns about financing. For example, the draft National Social Protection Policy is concerned with interruptions to international resourcing of social protection rather than external risks and shocks that may undermine programme delivery (such as a sharp uptick in people in need of support, or a substantial change in exposure to risks that requires a registry update).

Additionally, there is no explicit discussion about how various capacity initiatives could contribute to inclusion. Lessons from the implementation of Nigeria's National Social Protection Policy between 2017 and 2020 highlight that social protection reflects the gender exclusion present across Nigerian society. Coverage among vulnerable groups, especially women and children, the chronically ill, people with disabilities, and older persons is notably low. The draft 2021 policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2021) makes provision for this with policy objectives that explicitly seek to reach vulnerable groups. Furthermore, there are marked efforts by international actors to integrate gender equality and social inclusion considerations into design, including through tailored, internationally funded programmes. However, attention to inclusion issues is scant in approaches to capacity building, risking that exclusion becomes hardwired into programming.

Iraq

Iraq has made several attempts to reform its social protection systems and build capacities

Box 1: Sectoral vs cross-sectoral investments

There are trade-offs for any sector between making sectoral vs cross-sectoral investments. Acknowledging these trade-offs is a first step, as is international agencies articulating how they balance minimising sector-based fiduciary risks and supporting whole-of-government capacity investments or minimum standards. International actors can also, collectively, consider or monitor investments across sectors and assess the extent to which their investments are building cross-government and functional capabilities and not solely sectoral technical competencies.

in cooperation with international aid agencies. The Public Distribution System (PDS) began in the 1990s and was originally designed as a measure to temporarily buffer households against the hardships that resulted from international sanctions. Little is known about if and how the PDS and the emerging Social Safety Net (SSN) fared during the occupation of parts of Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), especially in situations of protracted internal displacement. Furthermore, it has been recognised since around 2006 that, despite the long history of some of the main programmes, Iraq has lacked an overarching strategy for social protection and clear mechanisms for coordination and cooperation, both between national programmes such as the PDS and SSN, and between government and humanitarian actors. The political context is also highly influential for the commitment to specific programmes, with the PDS and SSN viewed as having a key social integration function for the country as a whole. However, both ISIL's presence in parts of the country and declining oil prices in the mid-2010s have undermined social protection and driven an agenda for reform.

Reforms to social protection policies have depended heavily on new technical approaches supported by a number of international actors, such as the attempted introduction of data-driven poverty targeting of the SSN.

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Investments have focused predominantly on technical assistance to build information systems and have been heavily projectised, with investments routed through project implementation or management units (PIUs, PMUs) and prioritising information technology systems and processes. Other priorities have been staff skills and competencies with, for example, the International Labour Organization (ILO) training actuaries to ensure the sustainability of social security funds and establish a training centre for staff as inspectors of labour standards and social security delivery.

Reporting on investments between 2007 and 2013 (such as the World Bank's Implementation Status Reports) highlights the establishment of a management information system (MIS) for the SSN. It also evidences the enhanced capacity of Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA) staff to conduct targeting using both categorical and geographical targeting, registering of beneficiaries, and applying eligibility checks. The extent to which these competencies were sustained in ISIL-occupied areas, or locations receiving internally displaced persons (IDPs), is not well understood. It has not been robustly assessed whether staff had capabilities to function in difficult situations that allowed them to deliver areas of competency.

Investments in Iraq remain heavily focused on organisational systems and individual competencies. A key question is how much capacities (competencies, capabilities, performance) of national- and local-level institutions may have been eroded over time and in the face of persistent, overlapping and compounding shocks. There is little evidence at present to answer this question, but it will be a significant focus of BASIC Research in Iraq moving forwards.

There is also little focus on institutional capacities. Although it is widely acknowledged that broadly shared public expectations have a strong influence on options for reform, there is less activity directed to applying key policy documents once outside the MIS project activities, including the 2018–2022 Poverty Reduction Strategy. Part of the reason for this appears to be shifting levels of commitments and priorities among high-level staff within MOLSA as a result of turnover between ministries.

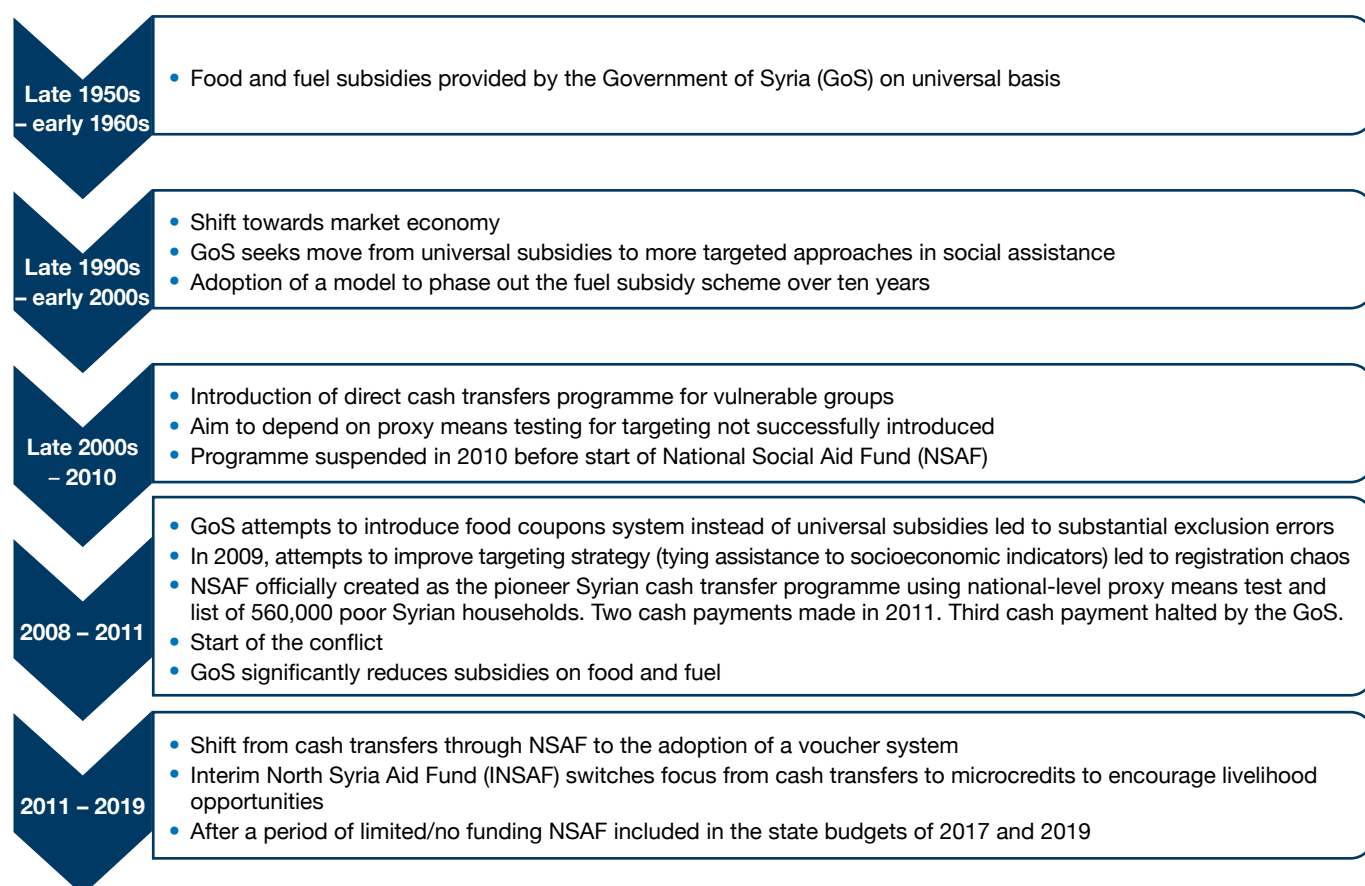
Syria

Following the evolution and transformation of social protection in Syria is insightful and helps to identify shifting capacity needs and deficits (see Figure 2). In the various distinct periods of development and change, different capacities have been required to effectively design and deliver social protection programmes. In the 2000s, investments were made in technical capacities to shift from universal consumption subsidies to more targeted social transfers which at various stages have been

delivered as cash, in kind, or via vouchers. Required competencies at the staff level have substantially changed with this shift and a key area of focus for the remainder of the research in Syria will be to understand the shifting competency requirements.

At some stages there have also been investments in organisational competencies. The nascent National Social Aid Fund (NSAF) provides a useful example. NSAF was officially created in 2011 following a pilot phase. It was to play a central role accompanying the Syrian government’s strategy of economic transition towards a social market economy in the early years of Bashar al-Assad’s presidency. NSAF sought to support the transition away from universal consumption subsidies and to consolidate existing social assistance into a unified national programme. Through the pilot phase and following the launch in 2011, the emphasis of organisational-level actions was on building capacities of NSAF staff and the organisational procedures. For example, organisational/programme policies

Figure 2: Evolution and changes in Syria’s social protection system



Source: Author’s own.

and guidelines were developed for NSAF including recruitment, performance appraisals, promotions, and training.

The outbreak of conflict in Syria brought further shifts – in capacities to deliver programmes, especially at the local level, and in political incentives to maintain particular programmes. These changes were set against a backdrop of deteriorating economic performance, constrained fiscal space, currency devaluation, and substantial internal and international displacement. This in turn brought increases in poverty and vulnerability and new caseloads of people in need of support via social protection.

In relation to capacities to sustain the delivery of government programmes, there are a number of lessons emerging from the work thus far in Syria.

First, unsurprisingly, the stage of evolution of social protection matters for the capacity to sustain existing programmes. Programmes and systems in the earliest stages of development appear less likely to be sustained. Some of this depends on individual and organisational capacity, some on wider financial capacity of government and willingness to fund social protection. For Syria, a perfect storm of factors led to the collapse of the NSAF just as it was getting off the ground. In contrast, government consumption subsidies, especially food and energy, were far more established and, notably, far more entrenched in Syria's political settlement despite their escalating costs. Steps towards smaller, more targeted subsidies were painfully slow and difficult. Syria has required not only technical competencies to transform administrative systems (and initially there was lots of support from international agencies to do this), but also capabilities to navigate the political minefield where public expectations of government support were being challenged. The Syrian case clearly reinforces the fact that it is not just technical skills that are needed to move along a pathway from near-universal consumption subsidies to more targeted subsidies and social assistance. Rather, what is required is a substantial range of functional skills and capabilities: to explain, to communicate, and to influence.

Attempting to deliver this transition in the midst of a civil war, where the government does not have access to or control over significant

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swathes of territory, requires elements of adaptive capacity/adaptive programming, and at varying levels. The fiscal space crisis has seen the government shift away from the emerging targeted NSAF providing cash transfers to individuals and families, to microfinance grants to small- and medium-sized enterprises. This, in turn, requires new technical competences to appraise business plans and appropriate investments – some distance from competences for identifying poverty proxies and applying them across communities. Case management work for local units and staff has shifted from referrals to other public services (especially health and children's education) to referrals for adult education, employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities where vulnerable families, especially IDPs, reside.

These adaptations work differently in three distinct parts of the country. In areas controlled by the Government of Syria, international actors are seeking to replicate elements of the planned NSAF. In the northwest, humanitarian actors seek to replicate existing government programmes (such as bakery subsidies) to ensure the availability of food in markets where the government does not reach. In the northeast, there is a hybrid local governance system delivering government social programmes but with some elements of independence.

What have we learned so far across countries?

When using the Capacity Cube to appraise approaches to capacity in a number of contexts, several initial insights emerge:

- The Cube is a starting point for identifying solutions that go beyond individual technical competencies, towards individual and organisational functional competencies,

and solutions that tackle behavioural, structural, and environmental impediments to social assistance delivery. These other solutions take us to a different part of the Cube (see Figure 1). Most efforts, whether by government or international actors, are clustered predominantly on the bottom-left-front of the cube. Overall, there is more attention to the left than the right; more focus on the bottom than the top; and more investment in the front than the back. This might mean more regular work-based and task-based training focused on updating and maintaining systems rather than courses focused on building registries. It could mean a greater emphasis on sharing learning about how to navigate difficult situations that emerge for frontline workers.

- The weighting towards bottom-left-front appears to be persistent across the three countries but we doubt it is universal or static. In a number of countries, there are increasing investments in organisational-level competencies. In particular, building single/unified or social registries or other MIS systems is a growing priority in both Nigeria and Iraq. However, the temporal challenge of registries (for example, the critical question of how and how often they will be updated) is still too often considered as a secondary issue, something to be addressed once the registry is built. A more balanced approach to strengthening the capacity of social protection systems would place more emphasis, even in the earliest concept and design stages, on how systems are maintained. This is something that is even more important in situations of protracted crisis where poverty and vulnerability are highly variable. It is possible that maintenance is such a difficult question that it is avoided, lest it paralyses progress.
- While many development agencies increasingly focus on the middle organisational layer (especially in building registries), the question of how registries and data are maintained is frequently problematised but not resourced. Another part of the reason for this might be that questions of maintenance can often depend on wider, cross-sectoral procedures and non-sector specific activities. An example might be where a registry also depends

on updated data provided via a census or national living standards survey, but such initiatives are the responsibility of another department. Ministries leading social protection may not be able to influence either the timing or the content of such surveys. The lack of attention to capacities that are not sector specific appears to be an important blind spot.

- These actions are important in the wider operating environment, such as making sure people have the time and skills to engage with the local community, including the military, local leaders, etc. This can include making sure that the technology works for the realities on the ground, such as the provision for alternative stand-by communications infrastructure, or generators for when the power goes out. In a highly projectised aid environment, these wider investments that go beyond sectors and might be viewed as broader public goods are important. But there is a collective action challenge – and fiduciary risk challenges – where investments in a social protection programme have much wider benefit.
- Staff turnover remains a big part of the ‘maintain’ challenge. If you have a broader view of investments as wider public goods, it is less of a problem – with investments made across sectors and people moving between them. However, there is little evidence of this perspective, and less evidence of funding to support it, given the sectoral preoccupations of international actors.
- It is important to go beyond categorisations of varying contexts regarding capacity that focus on the national (for example, Winder-Rossi *et al.* 2017; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2022). Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria all provide good examples of having different operating environments for social protection in different parts of the country. In Syria, for example, there are three distinct mechanisms for sustaining social protection or other programmes to reduce poverty and vulnerability in each. This perspective immediately suggests that international humanitarian and development actors need to vary and adapt their engagement in different situations. In practice, the toolboxes for engagement deployed by

international actors are relatively limited in scope and options. In terms of capacity, they offer little more than training to support the building of technical competencies at individual and organisational levels. They operate within a rather binary view in which either government technical competencies are built, or this is impossible and so local non-governmental organisation (NGO) competencies are built. The experience in Syria suggests that options to build capacity at the local level should be explored even where relationships with the national level are fraught with difficulties.

- There are other dimensions that could usefully be introduced to the Cube. In ways that are reflective of highly projectised approaches, analysis in Nigeria (Baur, forthcoming) suggests that capacity initiatives focus significantly on products (for example, the programmes themselves) and risk ignoring wider questions about workforce (people) and systems (procedures). This projectisation demonstrates how the focus on technical projects builds competences and enables them to be applied, but leaves capabilities and the sustaining of programmes as a serious knowledge gap.
- A number of BASIC Research team members have commented that the competency-capability-performance dimension has echoes of Sen's Capability Approach (1999). While Sen's approach focused on people rather than staff, it suggests that the individual level might be usefully divided or more clearly defined to incorporate two sets of people: (1) staff employed in the social protection system, and (2) people who receive (or are excluded from) social protection and the communities that they live in. Two other pieces of work in the BASIC Research portfolio, on inclusion and accountability, are

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asking these sorts of questions (Rohwerder and Szyg 2022; Seferis and Harvey 2022). Linking what we know about these wider stakeholders to formal organisational and individual providers could also give useful insights. Diagnosing and then resourcing the right elements of capacity in civil society, among community groups and people who received transfers, could add substantial value to the capacity of social protection systems as a whole. For example, where communities participate in grievance reporting and redress systems, or in targeting design and verification, there is potential to increase the capacity of the whole social protection system. But doing so requires an understanding of the impediments to participation – whether they be competency-, capability-, or incentive-based – and targeted resources to tackle the right capacity gap.

- Overall, there is a very linear perspective or theory of change in most countries in terms of how investments in capacity lead to improved outcomes for vulnerable people. In practice, these approaches ignore multiple other factors; they programme and plan to build capacity as if operating environments are secure and stable, even when needs emerge precisely because they are neither secure nor stable.

What is next for BASIC Research on crisis-resilient social protection?

The initial findings identified using the Capacity Cube as a research tool confirm the hypothesis that the current focus on technical competencies, generally at individual and organisational levels, results in an incomplete approach to strengthening capacity, theoretically at least. The next step for BASIC Research is to obtain a better empirical understanding of what is happening on the ground. This will be achieved by tracking the capacity strengthening journeys of individuals and organisations that design and deliver social protection programmes and systems over time. This is proposed in two main locations, Iraq and Syria, but is accompanied by complementary work in Ethiopia, Lebanon, and Yemen.

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