



# Social protection and humanitarian responses to food insecurity and poverty in Mali

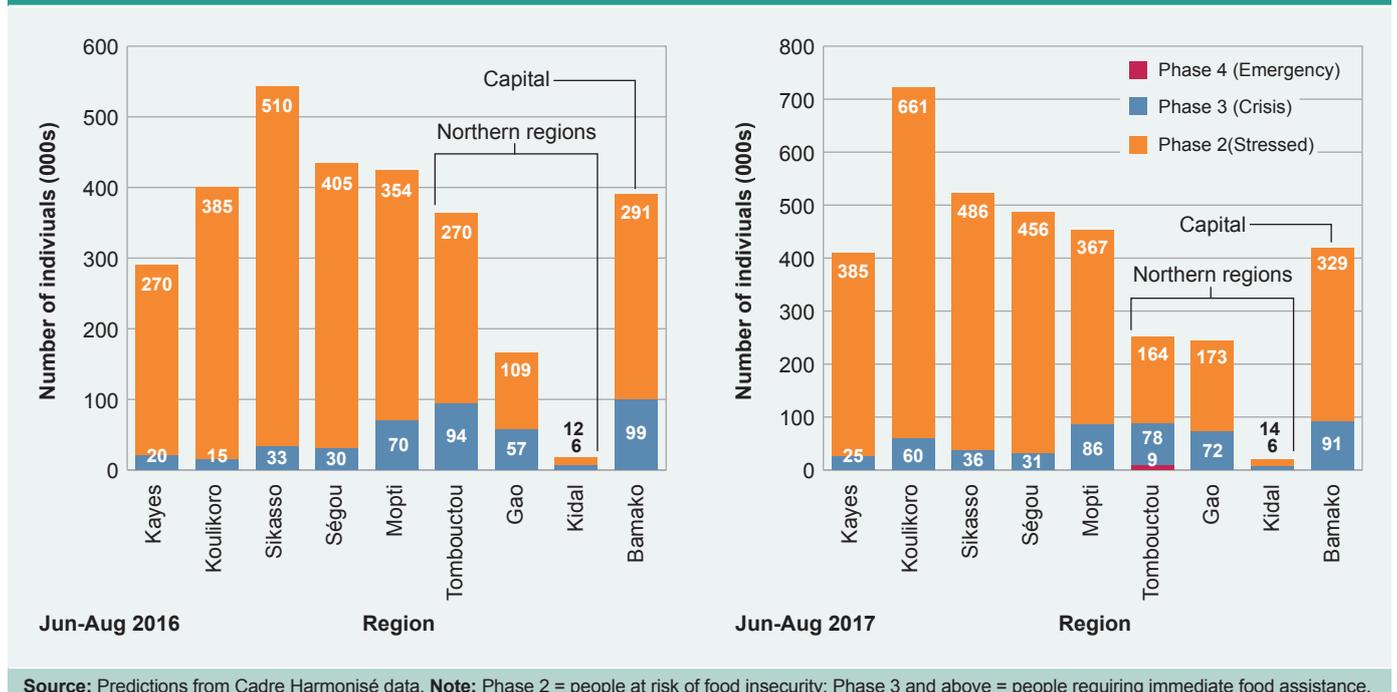
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How can social protection systems be used in disasters, as a complement to, or substitute for, humanitarian assistance? Oxford Policy Management (OPM) led a DFID-funded research project investigating this question, looking at the role of social protection in both mitigating the impact of large-scale shocks and supporting households after a crisis hits. We identify factors that can help and hinder effective disaster response, and consider how social protection actors collaborate with others working in humanitarian assistance and disaster risk management (DRM). The Mali case study explores recent efforts to reduce reliance on annual humanitarian interventions as a response to widespread seasonal food insecurity, with a particular focus on activities undertaken since the sociopolitical conflict of 2012. We present findings from fieldwork conducted in Mali between October 2015 and October 2016.

## Shocks and vulnerability in Mali

Over the last several decades Mali has been affected regularly by many shocks. Mali is located in the Sahel, a region very vulnerable to deteriorating environmental conditions. Repeated droughts have made food insecurity the main humanitarian and development issue. Mali also experiences floods, which occur more often than droughts but usually on a much smaller scale. Meanwhile, nationally, 44% of people live in poverty (2009 data). The combination of chronic poverty and periodic droughts puts around 3-5 million people at risk of food insecurity each year out of a population of 18 million. Of these, upwards of 400,000 are estimated to be in need of immediate food assistance annually. The northern regions of Gao, Kidal and Tombouctou make up two-thirds of Mali's landmass and are much drier than the south, but contain only 10% of the population, so the absolute number of food insecure people is higher in the south. While some people experience hardship only in exceptional circumstances, many are at risk of food insecurity year after year in the lean season. The Cadre Harmonisé, which generates estimates of food insecurity in the Sahel, predicted that 424,000 people would need immediate assistance in 2016, and 495,000 in 2017 (Figure 1): it is fair to assume that a proportion of these individuals were the same.

Figure 1: People facing food insecurity (2016 and 2017)



The greatest shock to Mali recently has been the political upheaval of 2012, in which the government suffered a military coup and then the main northern cities were seized by non-state armed groups while an interim government was being set up. That crisis has compounded vulnerability nationwide. By the end of 2012 the conflict was estimated to have affected nearly 3 million people across northern and central Mali, displacing 400,000 (about half internally and half abroad) and limiting access to basic services for those remaining in the north. While a peace deal was signed in 2015, the effects of the conflict are still felt: 36,000 people were still internally displaced as of late 2016 and the population was still struggling to access some social services.

## How are shock-affected households supported?

Government support for households affected by such shocks is split mainly across three ministries: the Ministry of Solidarity and Humanitarian Action (MSAH), which is responsible for contributory and non-contributory social protection, humanitarian assistance, mutual health organisations and free medical assistance for poor households; the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection (MSPC), responsible for DRM and for emergency and rescue services; and the Food Security Commission (CSA), which runs Mali's early warning system and oversees the response to food insecurity.

In addition, the Ministry of Education leads a school feeding programme; the Ministry of Economy and Finance houses a World Bank-financed national cash transfer programme, Jigisèmèjiri, set up in 2012; the Ministry of Health oversees free access for some health care procedures; and the Ministry of Agriculture represents Mali in AGIR, the Global Alliance for Resilience initiative which aims to promote resilience in West Africa, including through social protection.

These efforts are complemented by the work of numerous aid agencies (international NGOs, UN agencies and national actors) – about 130 as of 2016 – some of which have operated in Mali for decades. They are spread across the country but work especially in the north where the provision of government services is very limited.

The government of Mali does not strongly distinguish social protection from humanitarian responses: activities that might be classified as 'humanitarian assistance' by an external observer are considered by the government as social protection interventions when they deal with direct support to households and individuals. Some of the main relevant programmes are:

- **Annual free food distribution:** This is a *de facto* safety net addressing chronic as well as emergency needs: in 2015, 1.1 million people received food assistance, against an estimate of 410,000 in immediate need of assistance and 2.7 million at risk of food insecurity. The CSA supports about half the caseload itself, drawing on the National Food Security Stock; the remainder are supported by the World Food Programme, the Red Cross and ECHO. Increasingly, besides its focus on free food distribution, the annual National Response Plan for food insecurity (which combines government and donor-funded interventions and is developed at the start of the lean season in April based on 'ENSAN' food security surveys) also includes livelihood support to build resilience: in 2015 1.2 million people received this type of assistance, covering items such as seeds, fertilisers, and the vaccination of livestock.
- **School meals programme:** The national government programme, which provides meals to primary school children throughout the school year, reaches 20% of primary schools and is complemented by externally funded schemes, mainly by WFP. The government scheme operates in the 166 *communes* (local administrative units) classified as the most vulnerable, out of 703 nationwide. It plans to gradually expand when it has the funds and capacity. WFP's intervention varies more in size and location each year to accommodate changing food security needs, and is counted as part of the National Response Plan for food insecurity.
- **Jigisèmèjiri, an unconditional cash transfer programme:** This programme, which aims to enable the creation of a government-led '*adaptive national safety net system*', provides three years of cash transfers at CFA 10,000 (\$16) per month, paid quarterly, to poor households to mitigate food insecurity and promote the development of human capital. It is due to run until 2019. By late 2016 it had reached 47,000 households (2% of households). For most of the time it has worked only in the south because its launch coincided with the 2012 crisis and it was unable to reach the north, but in 2016 it moved into Gao region, in the north.
- **ECHO-funded emergency cash transfers ('CCFS' and 'CCTS'):** A group of NGOs (the '*Cadre Commun*'), with ECHO funding, has been implementing a cash transfer programme in the north since 2014 through two one-year projects, known as the CCFS in 2014 and the CCTS in 2016. These are explicitly intended as a model towards a system of predictable cash transfers that are sensitive and responsive to shocks, and that move away from in-kind food aid. The CCFS assisted just under 40,000 households with a total of CFA 100,000 (\$160) per household over the year – estimated to be about one-third of typical household income in a normal year. Its successor programme, the CCTS, set its total value at CFA 120,000 (\$194) to align with Jigisèmèjiri, and was operating in some of the same areas previously covered by the CCFS. ECHO's cash assistance under the CCTS is intended to be complemented by EU delegation-funded accompanying measures such as assets for income generation, to support resilience-building. The total package is planned as a three-year intervention.

## What needs to change?

As far as food insecurity is concerned, the current model of the implementation of an annual National Response Plan led by the CSA works in terms of getting food to people nationwide (including by using local NGOs for delivery of assistance in areas affected by conflict, and collaborating with international aid agencies to increase coverage). However, the response is a big annual logistical challenge, comprising the purchase and transportation of grain, and an annual targeting exercise to identify recipient households. A comprehensive reform of the CSA's process for addressing food insecurity was already being discussed at the time of the research; the increasing emphasis on livelihood support and on cash rather than in-kind aid is part of that reform. As we have seen, many of the people being supported are chronically food insecure: the policy debate in Mali highlights the importance of making a transition of some of this cyclical caseload to a longer-term social protection programme in place of annual short-term responses. Key improvements in efficiency that policymakers are seeking to achieve include:

- Timeliness – the distribution of food can be severely delayed, and in any case, for households already classified as being in 'crisis', even prompt distribution is rather too late;
- Predictability – both for households, and predictability of funding;
- A reduction in duplicated delivery systems; *and*
- An increase in coverage.

This does not mean that there is no place for humanitarian assistance, especially in areas experiencing conflict where the government may not always be able to operate, and where the presence of external actors operating under humanitarian principles may be vital for ensuring the effective provision of assistance.

## Factors influencing the use of shock-responsive social protection

So, can the response to shocks be improved by greater use of longer-term social protection measures? And how can humanitarian and DRM interventions better link up with social protection? In principle, social protection interventions should be a good fit for shock-response. In practice, financial and human resourcing limitations may constrain the government's ability to transition the chronically food insecure caseload into its social protection programmes for many years to come, and international agencies will continue to be relied upon. Moreover, as illustrated by the fact that Jigisèmèjiri focused solely on the south for several years, routine social protection programmes may struggle to operate in conflict situations. Nonetheless, discussions and activities are underway to address some of these constraints. We consider the various factors from three perspectives: institutional, organisational and operational.

## Institutional issues: policy context and coordination

There is political will for using social protection interventions to address shocks in Mali. We have already seen that the annual National Response Plan for food insecurity is increasingly looking to livelihood support and cash transfers to assist households, not just in-kind food aid. Meanwhile, one of the two objectives of the National Social Protection Policy of 2016 is to, 'develop mechanisms for preventing and managing calamities, disasters, catastrophes and other humanitarian crises'; and similar commitments are also discussed in Mali's National Resilience Priorities document (PRP), the articulation of the AGIR resilience initiative at national level. Some policy statements call for overall expansion of social protection; others suggest there is value in a system that scales up in a crisis and ensures complementarity between programmes. These various options are also supported by some of the policies and programmes of Mali's international partners, such as the Adaptive Social Protection programme, a multi-donor trust fund managed by the World Bank with financing from DFID.

Regarding humanitarian action, the government, UN organisations and other international and national partners come together around an annual Humanitarian Needs Overview and the Humanitarian Response Plan. The plan for 2017 expresses the link between chronic and emergency needs. Drawing on the scale used by the Cadre Harmonisé, it declares the priority for food assistance to be areas classed as in 'crisis' or 'emergency', but also aims to support areas 'under stress'.

The sector least integrated with the others at policy level is DRM: neither the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction nor the two main planning documents, the multi-risk contingency plan and the 'Plan ORSEC', specify a role for social protection in disaster response. The MSPC's approach emphasises instead the role of social protection in reducing risk and strengthening resilience.

The drive to improve links among sectors and actors has resulted in numerous coordination and communication mechanisms. This includes common tools for data analysis (ENSAN and the Cadre Harmonisé) and many working groups (a Social Protection Group, a Cash Working Group, and a technical working group for scaling up social safety nets, to name a few). While meetings are attended with varying degrees of commitment, and some felt there are too many, the broad sense was that they afforded plenty of opportunity for information exchange and coordination.

## Organisational issues: human resource capacity and financing

The political commitment discussed above had not yet translated into political influence to secure the resources needed to implement the vision. However the government is working on strengthening elements of the social protection system.

In respect of human resource capability, stakeholders generally agreed that the government should be taking the lead on exploring the use of social protection initiatives as a response to large-scale crises where appropriate (with conflict situations being potential scenarios where it might not be), but that it was unable to respond singlehandedly. It has some well qualified and experienced staff, whose capacity is extremely stretched, even for routine social protection nationally; hence, for example, the very gradual plan for expansion of the school feeding programme. It is not in a position to create 'surge capacity' through recruiting additional personnel to respond to a crisis that is continually present. Strengthening human resource capacity is also needed at local levels, especially as decentralisation becomes more prominent. The number of staff at local level is particularly problematic. Most government agencies had few or no staff present in the north of the country during the conflict in 2012–14, with the exception of the CSA; those that remained were mostly concentrated in the towns and unable to visit rural areas. Non-government actors will continue to be a key part of the human resource capability in shock-response and social protection in Mali for the long term. For example, most of the dozen staff running Jigisèmèjiri nationally, as well as their local counterparts, are funded by the World Bank.

As for financing, while Mali's economy and the government budget are expected to grow in the medium term, spending on social protection is due to rise at a slower rate than other sectors. In absolute terms, the budget for food security is expected to increase; yet enormous demographic pressures from a population that doubles every 20 years mean the budget for social development and basic social services is envisaged to be devoted increasingly to education and job creation. Some analysts have observed that expenditure on e.g. subsidies for energy and transport far exceeds expenditure on social protection, and there might be a case to justify a reallocation of funds; others propose the creation of 'innovative financing sources' (such as ringfenced taxes), though the difficulty is that many sectors, including e.g. the health sector, have the same idea. Even within the social protection budget there would need to be advocacy to use funds to promote food security and respond to crises, since the sector faces other pressing demands such as the deficit in its contributory social security programmes.

A government-funded social protection sector therefore cannot cover seasonal food security needs by itself. Improvements in households' ability to withstand crises will have to come from policies across all sectors, including in e.g. agriculture or education. Disaster risk financing schemes such as the African Risk Capacity, a mechanism that insures governments against climate shocks, might also smooth the cost of responding to disasters. However, the ARC insures against exceptional events that might result in a payout eg. once every five to 10 years, not annual food insecurity. In the meantime, the government and its partners are making progress in forward planning and the commitment of financial resources for longer than one year at a time, which is a useful step.

## Operational issues: programme design and implementation

At a programme level, the interventions listed above contain some features in their design and/or implementation that facilitate or limit their ability to respond to shocks.

The annual programme of **free food distribution** is designed to provide a flexible response to food insecurity: in principle the CSA and its partners can work where needs are greatest and can increase the ration per household ('vertical expansion') or the number of households supported ('horizontal expansion') from one year to the next, provided funding is available. International agencies also work in communes where the CSA is present and are discussing whether to provide only top-ups to CSA-supported households, or to support additional households. The main constraints to improving its response to shocks are securing predictable funding, achieving timely distribution, and providing households with certainty of support (not guaranteed when targeting is undertaken afresh each year).

The government's **school meals programme** has education – not just food security – objectives, so it would be inappropriate for it to constantly shift its priority schools in response to shocks. By focusing on the 166 communes identified as the most vulnerable it is already somewhat sensitive to shocks. Two constraints in expanding the government scheme in a crisis, especially a conflict, are, first, that provision of school meals must keep pace with basic education provision (schools will not be reopened in conflict areas for the purpose of providing meals unless there are also qualified staff, a secure building and a water supply); and second, disbursement of government funds to the decentralised authorities responsible for school meal provision is slow. In an attempt at the temporary expansion of the school meals programme in 2014–16, some schools received their first tranche of funding up to six months after the start of the school year, while others received fewer transfers than planned, resulting in fewer meals offered per week than had been intended. Instead the donor-funded schemes, of which WFP's is the largest, are used to deliver the flexible element of the intervention. Besides moving geographical areas or reaching different schools and pupils according to need, it can also expand vertically, increasing the level of support to those already on the programme. This can be done by increasing the amount of food provided from one to two meals a day, extending provision into the school holidays, and/or giving pupils take-home rations.

The World Bank and the multi-donor funded Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery are looking at options for funding the possible scale-up of the **Jigisèmèjiri cash transfer** in a disaster, and a technical working group has been set up for this. However, given its small scale relative to the level of chronic poverty and difficulties operating in conflict-affected areas, a priority question is how to expand the programme in the long term and adapt its design so it can function in locations affected by crisis. Meanwhile it is already trialling an adjustment of its design to strengthen households' resilience by linking up with the national medical assistance scheme for poor households, RAMED: in some regions Jigisèmèjiri beneficiaries are automatically enrolled in RAMED. This harmonisation should reduce the impact of 'idiosyncratic' health shocks on beneficiaries (those affecting particular individuals and households), which is valuable in building their resilience to and ability to cope with large scale 'covariate' shocks (those affecting many people at once such as a drought).

As for emergency cash transfer programmes, donors such as ECHO would like a progressive transfer of the caseload to a state-run system so they can focus on acute crises. However, this requires the state system to operate fully in the north, which is likely to take many years. In the meantime, the NGOs collaborating in the CCFS and CCTS have more closely aligned their operations with one another, which enhances their use as a model for government-led programmes. They have harmonised their logframe, questionnaires and M&E approach, and have linked up with DRM systems by using early warning system data to select geographical areas for intervention. They are also cooperating with Jigisèmèjiri on some components of the method for household listing and selection of households, a common household identification code and – in 2016 – the use of the same transfer value. An alignment between a long-term cash transfer intervention and an emergency cash transfer may not always be appropriate if the emergency transfer aims to cover a different scale of need; but in Mali agencies reached agreement on this alignment in part because they recognised that they were dealing with chronic poverty more broadly. Many aspects of humanitarian programming are not yet aligned, including the interventions of many agencies not in the *cadre commun*.

There is an aspect of the social protection system that is being elaborated for use across multiple programmes and that has been conceived as being of potential use in supporting a response to shocks: this is the '**Unified Social Registry**' (**RSU**), a database that is intended eventually to contain details of actual and potential beneficiaries of social assistance and maybe also social insurance. The RSU is now in its design phase and is expected to launch in early 2018. This does not automatically mean that it will be relevant or efficient for use in the event of all shocks; however, many of our respondents expressed optimism that it had a genuine prospect of resolving some challenges of duplication in data collection and inequity in targeting. There remain fundamental concerns about governance arrangements – who should own, manage and access the data; coherence with other databases; and, crucially, how to minimise the risk of violations of data privacy, particularly in conflict situations where there may be high risks to beneficiaries if their confidential details are revealed.

**Table 1: Summary of some key factors enabling and constraining shock-responsive social protection in Mali**

Institutional issues		
Policy context and institutional setting	✓	There is some political will within the government for using social protection to address shocks where appropriate. The topic is discussed in the National Social Protection Policy of 2016 and in the national document of resilience priorities known as the PRP.
	✓	Some of the policies and programmes of international partners also support this vision.
	✓	The link between chronic and emergency needs is expressed in policy documents on humanitarian action.
	✗	The sector least integrated with the others at policy level is DRM, where the national strategy is less explicit about a role for social protection in managing disasters.
Coordination	✓	Many active mechanisms for coordination and communication.
	✓	Common tools for data analysis and several multi-stakeholder working groups.
Organisational issues		
Capacity and resources	✓	Government has some well qualified and experienced staff who are able to deliver some big initiatives relating to shock response, and has links with non-government partners, including local NGOs, who provide additional capacity.
	✗	Government faces a considerable general constraint in numbers and capacity of personnel, even for its routine programmes, and especially at local level. This means it has no 'surge capacity' to respond to a 'crisis' that is continually present; still less to bolster its presence in conflict zones. It is also dependent on external capacity.
	✗	Most relevant government agencies had few or no staff present in northern Mali during 2012-14 – with the exception of CSA – and are still struggling to build capacity there.
	!	In conflict situations it may not be appropriate for assistance to be delivered through a government system (e.g. if the government is party to the conflict).
Financing	✗	Political commitment not yet translated into influence to secure necessary resources.
	✗	Government struggles to fund existing programmes and to release funds in a timely manner. A government-funded social protection sector cannot cover food security needs by itself. It will need to find opportunities for funding in other sectors.
	✗	Emergency fund for post-drought recovery in rural areas has never been operationalised.
Operational issues		
Targeting and data management	✓	Free food distribution can be targeted to different areas each year.
	✗	But annual targeting of food aid is administratively heavy, and some of the same households are likely to be affected year after year.
	✓	School meals programme has experimented with vertical expansion (extra support to existing beneficiaries) in crisis.
	✓	Automatic enrolment of Jigisèmèjiri beneficiaries onto RAMED medical assistance scheme is likely to improve resilience of beneficiary households.
	✓	Some NGOs are cooperating with Jigisèmèjiri on harmonising aspects of household listing and targeting.
	(✓)	Plans for a Unified Social Registry may help resolve some challenges of duplication in data collection and inequity in targeting (though subject to considerable design challenges relating to the generation of high quality data and their governance).
	!	Concerns about how to address the risk of violations of data privacy in conflict situations where the security of beneficiaries may be compromised.

Source: OPM. Note: ✓ = aspects that could be conducive to shock-responsive social protection. ✗ = aspects that may pose a risk, but could be mitigated. ! = aspects that hold true regardless of any details of policy design or implementation.

## **Lessons learned from Mali: how can social protection best complement and enhance disaster response?**

Mali is a country with high exposure to natural shocks, where seasonal food insecurity has been an issue for decades. This has led to a blurred line between development and humanitarian interventions, meaning a key policy question is how to transition some of the humanitarian assistance caseload to long-term development, especially for food security. In this context, what are some of the broad lessons for Mali?

### **Improving coverage of routine social protection interventions will help the whole system be more responsive to shocks**

Improving the coverage of routine interventions would offer a major contribution to households' ability to withstand crises, given the 3-5 million people estimated to be at risk of food insecurity each year. To improve geographical coverage programmes would need to strengthen the delivery of essential government services in conflict-affected areas; to improve the coverage of households it might need to find a way to deal with their mobility, to meet the needs of pastoralists and migrants as well as people displaced by shocks.

### **Social protection measures can be funded through sources other than the social protection budget**

Recognising that the social protection budget alone is not sufficient to deliver the step change in funding that is required to address food insecurity more fully, it will be valuable to consider how activities relevant to shock-responsive social protection relate to – and can be funded through – other sector budgets, especially agriculture.

### **Alignment between emergency and long-term social protection interventions can be a first step towards a handover**

Mali's experience has demonstrated the strong complementary role that can be played by international aid agencies in contexts where the state is unable to deliver (e.g in the conflict-affected north of the country). Alignment of core delivery mechanisms – for example the transfer modality and value, or the approach to registering and selecting beneficiaries – can enable a transition in the medium-long term, once government capacity and funding are in place. This may be appropriate in situations where the objectives of the interventions are similar.

### **The Unified Social Registry will need to be designed with crisis response in mind if it is to play an instrumental role**

The planned Unified Social Registry could play an instrumental role in supporting the expansion of existing programmes as well as being used by new programmes. Yet this research stresses the necessity of developing a system for data collection and updates that generates trust in the data quality; and also the importance of enabling appropriate access to those responsible for disaster response and social protection, particularly at local level – including training for staff in its use – while ensuring that this does not generate security risks for beneficiaries.

## About the project

The Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems study is a research programme led by Oxford Policy Management (OPM), in consortium with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) and INASP. Its aim is to strengthen the evidence base as to when and how existing government social protection systems can better respond to shocks in low-income countries and fragile and conflict-affected states, thus minimising negative shock impacts and reducing the need for separate humanitarian responses. The research is funded by UK Aid as part of the UK Department for International Development's (DFID's) Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence Programme (HIEP).

## Further information

This policy brief builds on work by Clare O'Brien, Jenny Congrave, Kay Sharp and Naffet Keïta. The Mali research draws on both quantitative and qualitative data gathered through a combination of literature review, document review and consultations with key informants and stakeholders at the national and sub-national levels. Our methodology builds on insights offered by the literature and summarised in our overarching conceptual framework for shock-responsive social protection. These are all accessible on our project webpage, where the full Mali case study can also be found. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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