



Regional approaches to addressing food insecurity and the contribution of social protection: the Sahel

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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 led a two-year 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). Here we explore the regional approach to addressing a specific crisis, that of food insecurity in the Sahel, and consider whether and how social protection contributes to that response.

The six countries of focus are Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.

How are disaster-affected households supported in the Sahel?

The Sahel is a region of high population growth – the population has doubled in the last 20 years, reaching 89 million in the six countries in 2015 – and high geographical mobility, partly linked to nomadic pastoralism and partly to political crises and conflicts. It is also vulnerable to climate change and deteriorating environmental conditions and heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture. The region experiences low and irregular rainfall which, over the last 50 years, has had an increasingly negative impact on the population. Prolonged, structural food insecurity has become the norm (affecting some 19 million people in 2016), overlapping with short-term, but recurring, acute food insecurity. Floods and droughts have also become more frequent and severe, while repeated shocks have led to significant asset erosion, reducing households' resilience over time.

The role of social protection systems

Despite this context, the Sahel region was one of the last in sub-Saharan Africa to be engaged in the consolidation of social protection systems for the poorest and most vulnerable. In recent years – faced with an intensifying series of major crises and in line with recommendations emerging from the African Union and International Labour Organisation, as well as support by UNICEF, the World Bank, DFID and others – each Sahel country has established a national social protection strategy or policy with an emphasis on multisectoral action and risk management. They often highlight food and nutrition security as a major strategic focus. Subsidies for food or fuel products are now being complemented with, or replaced by, long-term cash transfers, public works programmes, school feeding programmes and health fee waivers.

Of the six countries, Senegal's cash transfer programme is the most institutionalised within government systems; Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are all implementing cash transfer programmes, though at a smaller scale; Mauritania and Chad are starting to elaborate similar schemes. Most remain largely dependent on external financing and have very low coverage – except in Senegal. The capacity of national structures also remains low, and delivery systems (payment mechanisms, management information systems, etc.) basic. Moreover, adequate social protection for vulnerable populations with specific needs, such as pastoral nomads, is largely absent in the region. Nonetheless, the political will to eventually increase coverage and build on existing systems seems to be present.

The role of humanitarian actors

In the absence of effective and shock-responsive national social protection mechanisms, the management of food crises in the Sahel has traditionally been based on emergency humanitarian aid in the form of targeted cash and food transfers to vulnerable households and, more recently, actions to promote the nutrition of young children and breastfeeding women in particular. Nonetheless, the number of people targeted by international humanitarian responses is only a fraction of the total estimated to be in need of some kind of support: about half in 2016. Moreover, in a context of recurring crises, this crisis management model based on targeted emergency aid is not sustainable and is leading to an increase in the volume (and cost) of emergency aid from one crisis to the next. This has led to several major policy pronouncements stating that the humanitarian community should work more on building resilience to shocks; plan to a medium-term rather than annual timeframe; and support the ability of national social protection systems to contribute to the response.

The contribution of regionwide institutions, strategies and initiatives

A significant feature of the Sahel is the set of regionwide institutions, strategies and initiatives that aim to address recurrent crises, particularly those related to food and nutrition security. These provide guidance on policy approaches and instruments for use by member states; disseminate information gathered from the national level; and design and deliver programmes that respond to issues that extend beyond national borders. We find that, while some of these efforts are nascent, overlapping, and sometimes lack specific social protection focus and expertise, others have developed a distinctive and valued role. The opportunities and limitations of these mechanisms, in terms of their promotion of shock-responsive social protection in the region, are presented next and summarised in Table 1.

Membership organisations

Three of the main organisations that governments can join as member states are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) and the G5 Sahel. Their value in promoting a more effective response to food security shocks among the six countries in the region is constrained by their variable membership: Chad and Mauritania are not in ECOWAS, while Senegal is not in the G5 Sahel. All six are members of CILSS.

- **ECOWAS** is a policy-making – and political – body. Strengthening national social protection policies is part of its wide remit. Some of its policies are aligned with the principles of shock-responsive social protection in that it explicitly prioritises long-term social assistance in addressing seasonal as well as structural needs. It promotes the use of social assistance in crises through its regional agricultural policy. This means that it tends to be ministries of agriculture (rather than social affairs) of the respective countries that discuss progress in this area. Among the challenges in implementing a regional programme is the intersectoral nature of social protection and food security which requires coordination with stakeholders in many other sectors including social affairs, finance, education and health.
- **CILSS's** role as ECOWAS's technical arm for food security and drought prevention is valuable for promoting knowledge-sharing across countries. Social protection is not core to its traditional expertise. In the past it has acquired skills in new areas such as nutrition, so the same might be possible for social protection, though many other sectors are also competing for attention.
- The **G5 Sahel**, set up in 2014, has a primary focus on cross-border governance and security, and views resilience initiatives as a means of achieving its objectives. It has not yet been very explicit about the contribution of social protection to its agenda.

Key coordination mechanisms: the Cadre Harmonisé, the RPCA and AGIR

The bodies cited above, alongside others, have developed three key initiatives for guiding the planning of interventions and triggering national or regional food crisis management mechanisms: the Cadre Harmonisé, the Food Crisis Prevention Network (known as RPCA) and the Global Alliance for Resilience Initiative (AGIR).

- The **Cadre Harmonisé** – the ‘Harmonised Framework for the Analysis and Identification of Areas at Risk and Vulnerable Groups in the Sahel’ – has become the reference instrument for assessing food security and providing early warning of a crisis. Its assessments, which code all geographical areas in the Sahel down to subnational level on a five-point scale indicating the severity of food insecurity and estimate the size of populations affected, have become more relevant since about 2012 when they started examining food insecurity from all causes, not just drought. Data quality is variable. The assessments are not designed to pinpoint precise areas in need of assistance, nor the precise households. However, the framework has aided the shift from crisis response to preparedness and is effective as a trigger for national and international responses to food insecurity.
- The **RPCA** hosts twice-yearly meetings that give decision-makers a space to review the Cadre Harmonisé data and plan a response. Representatives tend to come from agriculture or food security rather than social protection. Recently, efforts have started to be made to improve understanding of the role of social protection for food security.
- **AGIR**, an alliance of 17 countries across west Africa formed by ECOWAS, CILSS and others, aims to combine humanitarian and development expertise to eradicate hunger and malnutrition and increase resilience. The intention is that each country produces a document of National Resilience Priorities (PRP-AGIR), set out in a consistent manner. By declaring social protection as one of its four strategic pillars, AGIR has enhanced recognition of the sector’s relevance for food security. Many of the numerous initiatives from intergovernmental organisations to strengthen resilience in the Sahel often explicitly reference the AGIR framework, and thus support social protection programmes which could be regarded as shock-responsive. The next challenges are to bring in all relevant sectors within the country to support implementation, and to ensure alignment of donors with the national priorities. The approach to food security that is promoted by AGIR can be hindered by conservative approaches favouring agricultural production and food availability (pillar 3), to the detriment of social protection (pillar 1).

Development partner initiatives

Development partners are contributing to shock-responsive social protection in the Sahel both at a regional level and within countries, including through support to the initiatives cited above.

- Some initiatives deliver a broad vision for the region. For instance, the **UN’s Integrated Strategy for the Sahel** consolidates the strategic objectives of all UN agencies, identifying resilience as a priority and social protection as a core area of intervention.
- Others, such as the **World Bank’s Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) programme**, funded by DFID and operating in the six Sahel countries, work more operationally to support national governments working on social assistance and food security. The ASP has a strong emphasis on building resilience to and improving response to climate shocks, including through support to adaptive and shock-responsive social assistance programmes and to strengthening early warning systems.
- **Non-government organisations** (NGOs) that provide ECHO-funded humanitarian assistance for food security, including through seasonal cash transfers, have set up alliances in all six countries as a way of improving coordination and strengthening their ability to conduct joint advocacy to governments on better linking humanitarian with development activities. Some alliances have progressed beyond simple information exchange, to the harmonisation of some practices such as common logframes or targeting methods.
- As chronic food insecurity in the Sahel has been reframed as a matter also for long-term development, **Cash Working Groups** – active in several countries – have evolved from supporting purely humanitarian cash transfers to supporting others working on social protection and national policy frameworks. They now engage with governments and UN agencies as well as NGOs. They have most traction when there is a mutual desire from both types of stakeholder to share knowledge and learn from one another, regardless of the crisis context.

Table 1: Summary of contribution of regionwide institutions, strategies and initiatives to shock-responsive social protection in the Sahel

Institutional and organisational issues		
Policy context and regulatory environment	✓	Willingness of intergovernmental and international organisations – as well as states – to extend social protection to the most vulnerable groups.
	✓	Intergovernmental structures play a role in lending greater visibility to the policy question of the value of considering social protection as part of a response to food insecurity.
	✗	Multisectoral nature of both food security and social protection has resulted in a divergence in the sectoral 'home' of shock-responsive social protection. At regional level, relevant policies of agencies such as ECOWAS, tend to be framed as agricultural issues. At national level they have fitted more naturally into a social protection context
	✗	'Shock-responsive' social protection agenda has to compete with equally valid multisectoral themes for integration into regional food security policy (nutrition-sensitive, climate-sensitive, gender-sensitive).
	✓	AGIR provides a consistent framework for considering the use of social protection for food security.
	✓	Some adoption of regional interventions to prevent and respond to food and nutrition insecurity through social protection, though implementation can be slow (many initiatives are very recent).
Coordination	!	Regional bodies each cover slightly different groupings of member states, so the use of any one body for collaboration on relevant policy issues inevitably excludes some countries.
	✓	Cadre Harmonisé improves collaboration on diagnosis and measurement of food security shocks.
	✓	RPCA meetings have recently started discussing the role of social protection for food security, though participants tend to be more from agriculture sector.
	✓	'ECHO alliances' in the region strengthen ability of NGOs to conduct joint advocacy to governments on better links between development and humanitarian initiatives, including for cash transfers.
	✗	Complexity of arriving at a consensus on, and securing financing for, initiatives intended to support many countries at once while countries' needs differ – especially when multisectoral response needed.
	✗	Some policies derived from regional initiatives, eg. AGIR, not always fully owned and led yet by national governments. States could use them more to align donor activities with national priorities.
Organisational issues		
Financing	✗	Lack of significant domestic funding for social protection (except for Senegal), consistent with the low profile of the sector. Most national social cash transfer programmes financed by international development partners.
	✓	Recognition of value of multi-year public expenditure programming and budgeting for emergency-related operations.
	✓	AGIR intended to harmonise existing financing for resilience, not require new funding. But perceived as the latter. Resulting in some mobilisation of national resources for resilience (e.g. Mali).
	✓	World Bank's ASP Programme, funded by DFID, supporting thinking on insurance/risk financing mechanisms
	✗	Limited links between early warning systems and financing. Cadre Harmonisé forecasts, issued in October/November, arrive too late to be considered in budget for countries whose financial year begins in January.
Capacity and resources	✗	Familiarity of regional units for food security (incl. statistical institutes and agriculture specialists) with social protection is currently limited as the theme is new to the agenda.
	✓	Several technical assistance and capacity-building activities on social protection and humanitarian assistance are being undertaken by ECOWAS, CILSS and international development/humanitarian partners.
	✗	Limited capacity of governments to manage implementation of regional policies on shock-responsive social protection, especially as other sectors/international agendas are competing for attention.
	✗	Cost of attending regional meetings (eg. RPCA) can limit participation by key actors.
Operational issues		
Targeting/delivery systems	✓	Governments generally all looking at improving targeting, payment mechanisms, grievance management, social registries and management information systems, both for social protection interventions and emergency responses, with technical assistance from regionwide and international agencies.
	✓	National studies and regionwide exchanges of ideas taking place on relative merits of two main targeting methods (proxy means tests/Household Economy Approach) – essential for making progress on transition from humanitarian to development programming.
	✗	Perceived injustice of poverty-targeted transfers or quotas, as these go against the prevailing culture of solidarity. Need for 'community-sensitive' shock-responsive social protection systems.
	✗	Multiplicity of actors and differences in the rules of each programme create confusion as well as opportunities for manipulation of the system by local actors and communities.
<p>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.</p>		

Lessons learned from the Sahel: what features in the design and implementation of regional mechanisms best facilitate the effective use of social protection in food security crises?

The Sahel region is characterised by a strong tradition of regional engagement and collaboration on the policy challenges that are common to the six countries discussed here, especially in relation to recurrent food and nutrition insecurity. We have seen that intergovernmental structures and mechanisms lend greater visibility to the policy question of the need to improve linkages between humanitarian assistance and development initiatives across many sectors. They have not yet been as prominent in supporting the delivery of new interventions. Reasons for this include the fact that many initiatives were only launched within the last few years and are still at the stage of policy formulation (e.g. AGIR's resilience priorities); and that it is complex to reach a consensus on, and secure finance for, initiatives that are intended to support many countries at once while those countries' needs differ.

What are the broad lessons for the Sahel that may enable the regional mechanisms to strengthen their effectiveness in supporting shock-responsive social protection among national governments and their partners?

The importance of promoting intersectoral coordination and understanding

- Governments and their partners could usefully promote further awareness among social protection actors of the relevant dialogues taking place regionally among actors in the agriculture sector, and of the opportunity of updating the regional agricultural policy as a space for embedding social protection initiatives into the policy response for food insecurity.
- Conversely, it would be valuable for governments and their partners to continue to find ways of promoting understanding of social protection among regional policymakers in other sectors, eg. education, health and food security. This includes an understanding of the opportunities for social protection to contribute to impact, but also the constraints it faces in accommodating linkages across numerous sectors.
- At national level, governments and their partners could strengthen exchanges between the representatives of the ministries working on regional policies and attending RPCA meetings, and the representatives of ministries responsible for social protection and DRM.

Improving data analysis and use

- There might be a benefit in an organisation such as CILSS, that collects national data on poverty and vulnerability, expanding its synthesis of the data it receives, eg. through greater comparative analysis across countries. This might help to highlight countries where good progress has been made, which might lead policymakers to identify successful policy solutions. It could also bring to light cases where countries with similar characteristics are interpreting their vulnerability status differently (for example in the border regions of adjacent countries, where one country might classify the crisis as 'severe' and the other as 'extreme').
- Governments across the region could consider how to strengthen links between early warning systems data and social protection interventions. If early signs of stress were used as triggers for social protection interventions this might increase the predictability and timeliness of the release of funds.
- Governments and donors could also consider whether and how regional data such as the Cadre Harmonisé might feed into multi-year and longer-term programming rather than being used for annual responses.

Supporting social protection development

- In view of the fact that the Sahel has been one of the last regions in sub-Saharan Africa to be engaged in the consolidation of social protection systems for the poorest and most vulnerable, recognise the importance of the gradual expansion of routine social protection as a valid contribution to building resilience to and improving responsiveness to shocks, that does not necessarily require the integration of elements that expand programmes vertically or horizontally on a temporary basis.

About the project

The Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems study is a two-year research programme (2015 to 2017) 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, Cécile Cherrier, Carol Watson and Jenny Congrave. The Sahel research draws on data gathered through a combination of document review and consultations with key informants and stakeholders at national and regionwide levels, including on the margins of RPCA meetings and other regional forums. Our method builds on insights offered by the literature and summarised in our conceptual framework for shock-responsive social protection. These are all accessible on our project webpage, where the full Sahel case study can also be found. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not necessarily be assumed to reflect the UK government's official policies.

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