BRIEFING NOTE

Monitoring the Implementation of Social Protection Programmes: Lessons from the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP)

Introduction

This briefing note summarises findings from the independent monitoring of the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) Phase 3, focusing on the assessment of programme delivery quality and the effectiveness of programme monitoring systems. It presents the key lessons learned, highlighting achievements and challenges encountered in monitoring programme implementation.

The HSNP

The Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) is a government- led unconditional cash transfer programme that aims to relieve extreme hunger and vulnerability for poor households living in its target counties in arid and semi-arid areas of Kenya. The programme started in 2007 in the four northernmost counties of Kenya which were the poorest in the country at that time: Marsabit, Mandera, Turkana, and Wajir. In 2019 it was expanded to four additional counties: Garissa, Isiolo, Samburu, and Tana River. These target counties have experienced successive droughts and face high levels of food insecurity. When rains come, floods can damage infrastructure and temporarily cut off affected areas, further exacerbating food insecurity.

The programme delivers Kenyan shillings (KES) 2,7001 each month to 125,859 regular beneficiaries across the eight counties. In addition, the HSNP has been able to rapidly scale up to reach a further 699,710 beneficiaries to provide emergency payments following climate shocks.

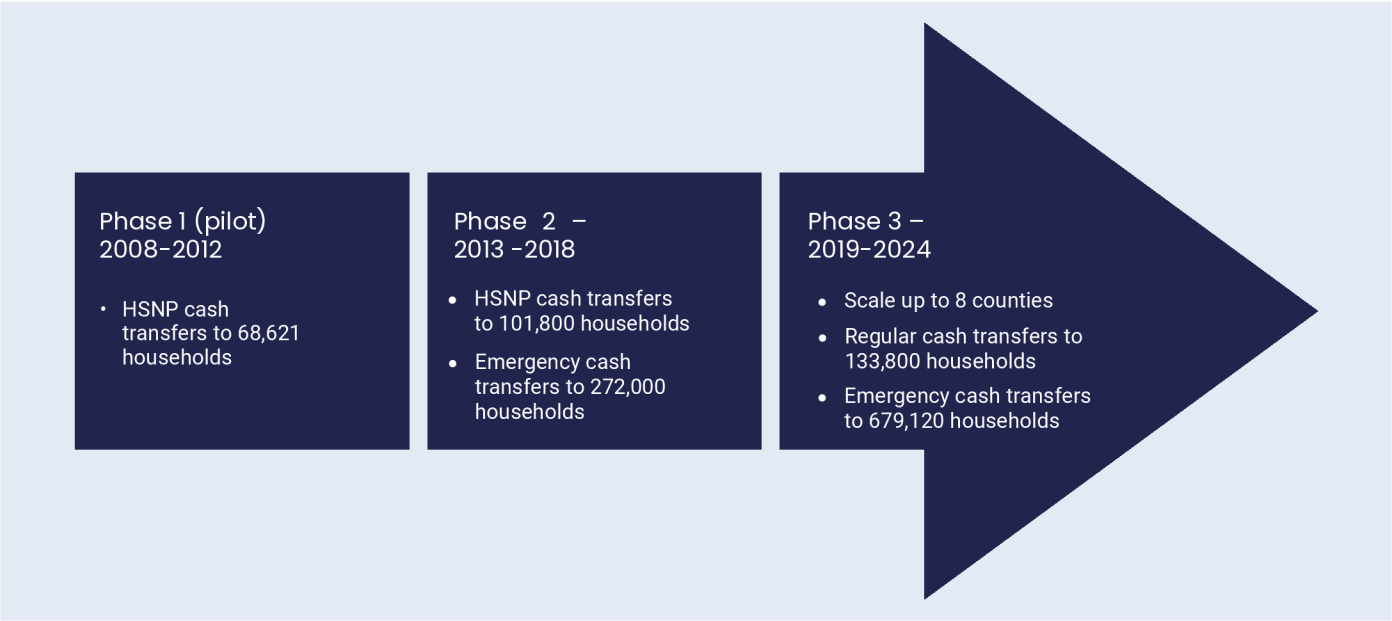
The HSNP has been implemented in three phases, as shown in the figure below. The first phase piloted cash transfers as an alternative to costly and often poorly targeted food aid provided to households during drought periods. The second phase expanded the reach to over 100,000 households, which received regular electronic cash transfers and added a separate shock-responsive mechanism that enabled it to scale up coverage to an additional 272,000 households during drought periods. In the third phase, cash transfers were scaled up to double the number of counties and reach a total of 125,859 routine beneficiary households and 679,120 emergency cash transfer beneficiaries.

Over the last 15 years, Oxford Policy Management (OPM) has been funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to work in partnership with the Government of Kenya to generate evidence on the impact of the HSNP and its operational performance, to inform programme strategy and management.

OPM's impact evaluation of the first phase of the programme showed that it was an effective safety net that helped people in remote areas lift themselves out of extreme poverty. The beneficiaries in Phase 1 were found to be 10% less likely to fall into the bottom national decile for income compared to the control group. In addition, both the poverty gap and the severity of poverty improved, by 7 percentage points each.[2] The evaluation of HSNP Phase 2 found that the programme led to a moderate reduction in food poverty, by 3 percentage points, with a significant spill-over effect helping stimulate the local economy: for every KES 1.00 invested through HSNP, income in the local economy increased, ranging from KES 1.38 to KES 1.93.[3]

[1] KES 2,700 is equivalent to approximately US$ 20.8 as at March 2025.
[2] Department for International Development (2014). Evaluation of the Kenya Hunger Safety Net Programme 2009 to 2012
[3] Impact Evaluation of the Kenya Hunger Safety Net Programme Phase 2: impact-evaluation-final-report.pdf

Figure 1: Evolution of the HSNP



The programme also fostered the integration of marginalised and hard-to-reach communities into national and financial systems, which is a prerequisite to increase resilience.

Phase 2 of the programme highlighted the need to transition the programme from a stand-alone cash transfer programme run by a separate Project Management Unit (PMU) to an integrated drought response mechanism within the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA). A key focus of Phase 3 was to build capacity within NDMA to fully take over the management, leadership, and coordination functions required to deliver the HSNP.

OPM was contracted to deliver the independent Monitoring, Evaluation and Knowledge (MEK) component of HSNP Phase 3. This involved monitoring the transition process; assessing the quality of programme delivery; and examining the effectiveness of programme monitoring systems. The findings and recommendations from the assessment of the quality of programme delivery and the effectiveness of programme monitoring systems are described in two summary reports and are summarised below.[4]

Findings on service delivery during the transition, and recommendations

The main findings and recommendations from OPM's assessment of the quality of programme delivery are summarised below.

Key findings

- **Successful scale-up and system setup:** The HSNP successfully expanded from four to eight counties during Phase 3; effectively targeted and registered beneficiaries; opened new accounts; and set up systems, including linkages with pay agents for payment delivery. While the programme succeeded in reaching the target beneficiaries with cash transfers (i.e. 125,859 regular beneficiaries and 679,120 emergency transfer beneficiaries), payment regularity was affected by delayed Treasury disbursements. This meant that beneficiaries received infrequent payments, there was uncertainty around when payments would be delivered, and in recent rounds the total funds released by the Treasury were insufficient to cover all beneficiaries, so the programme had to stagger the payments by sub - county.

- **Effective transition of roles and systems:** By the end of Phase 3, NDMA was fully responsible for service delivery, supported by an improved management information system (MIS). This allowed for greater operational control, though some functionality gaps remain.

- **Ongoing challenges:** Analysis of monitoring data showed several persistent issues in payments, including high travel costs for beneficiaries to reach pay agents, fees charged by some agents, and a lack of consistent communication about payment dates and beneficiary rights. Furthermore, pay agents faced challenges with point of sale (POS) equipment functionality, hindering timely payments.

Recommendations

OPM made a number of recommendations to NDMA on ways to improve service delivery to beneficiaries:

- **Improve communication and monitoring:** The programme should invest in enhancing communication to beneficiaries about payment dates and beneficiary rights, and ensuring beneficiaries are

[4] Evaluation of Hunger Safety Net Programme Phase 3: Management Information System (MIS) Assessment, 2025; and Evaluation of Hunger Safety Net Programme Phase 3: Operational Monitoring Synthesis Report, 2025

informed about their entitlements, including the non-payment of fees to agents. Regular monitoring should track the effectiveness of communication.

- **Optimise the distribution of pay agents and resolve equipment issues:** To address beneficiary travel costs, the programme should map beneficiary locations and pay agent distribution to identify areas that need additional agents. The programme should engage with pay agents and partner banks to address issues related to authentication and equipment malfunctions that impact payment delivery.
- **Tailor monitoring to specific implementation areas:** In the next phase, the programme should add targeted surveys to monitor registration and account opening processes, as well as beneficiary engagement with the case management and grievance systems. This will allow for the identification and resolution of implementation issues as they arise.

Findings and recommendations on the HSNP's monitoring systems

The main findings and recommendations from OPM's assessment of the operational monitoring system are summarised below.

Key findings

Improvements in monitoring systems: Over the course of the programme, there have been incremental improvements in the monitoring system, including the development of a monitoring framework, improved sampling methods, and updated data collection tools.

However, key challenges remain in the implementation of operational monitoring. These include the following:

1. **De-prioritisation of monitoring:** Budget cuts by the Treasury have led to the de-prioritisation of monitoring activities. Post-payment monitoring surveys have not been conducted consistently across the programme since March 2024 due to inconsistent payment delivery and resource reallocation.
2. **Incomplete integration of the monitoring framework:** Although approved, the monitoring framework has not been fully integrated into the HSNP operations manual. The revised operations manual lacks a clear description of roles and processes for data collection, management, analysis, and reporting.
3. **MIS and data reporting gaps:** While NDMA now manages the MIS internally, key limitations remain, particularly in regard to automating reports aligned with the monitoring framework and enabling offline data collec tion.

Recommendations

For the next phase of the programme, we recommend the following actions to strengthen the programme's monitoring and data management processes, to ensure more accurate reporting and improved decision-making:

Budget and resource allocation for monitoring: The programme should allocate a sufficient budget and sufficient resources for monitoring activities from the start. Monitoring should be incorporated into both annual and quarterly workplans at headquarters and county levels.

Coverage of emergency payment beneficiaries: Emergency payment beneficiaries should be included in one-off surveys, as they are currently excluded from routine post-payment surveys due to resource constraints. This will help fill gaps in the evidence base regarding programme delivery for these beneficiaries.

Training and compliance monitoring: To ensure high-quality and reliable data for decision-making, training should be provided to the Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME), MIS, and county teams on the agreed sampling approach, to ensure consistency and accuracy in surveys. Periodic spot checks should be conducted to ensure compliance with this approach.

MIS enhancements: The MIS team should enable offline functionality for surveys, to reduce errors from manual data entry. The MIS dashboard should be updated to include auto-generated reports based on the monitoring framework, allowing for trend analysis over time.

Standardisation and documentation: Case management forms and monitoring reports should be standardised to improve usability. The operational manual should be updated to include detailed tasks related to operational monitoring and to clarify the roles of personnel involved in data management. A data confidentiality policy should also be created to guide the handling, storage, and distribution of programme data.

Lessons

The importance of effective system setup and scaling: The successful implementation of programmes like the HSNP requires meticulous planning, both in setting up systems for targeting and enrolling beneficiaries in the cash transfer programme and ensuring sufficient funds for ongoing payments. In the HSNP, financial delays disrupted payment schedules and affected beneficiary trust, highlighting the need for stable cash flow planning. Ensuring timely financial releases and allocating sufficient funds is crucial in order to maintain consistency and trust in such programmes.

Challenges in communication and service delivery: Ensuring beneficiaries are informed about payment schedules and their rights – such as not paying fees to agents – is essential for effective service delivery. It is

critical to incorporate robust communication strategies and regularly assess their effectiveness. Addressing persistent challenges, like inconsistent communication, high travel costs, and pay agent equipment malfunction, can improve beneficiary satisfaction and participation.

Resource allocation for monitoring: Budget cuts can negatively affect monitoring activities, leading to gaps in evidence-based decision-making and programme adaptation. Allocating sufficient resources for monitoring from the outset, and integrating monitoring into routine workplans and reporting systems, can mitigate this issue. These lessons can help social protection programmes manage resources better, improve service delivery, and ensure that data-driven decisions enhance overall programme impact.

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