

BRIEFING NOTE



# Transitioning the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) to Government Systems: Lessons from HSNP Phase 3

## Introduction

This briefing note summarises findings from the independent monitoring of the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) Phase 3. It focuses on lessons learned during the programme's transition to government systems, highlighting achievements and challenges encountered in the process. These insights are drawn from six rounds of transition monitoring conducted between 2020 and 2024.

## The HSNP

The 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 the time: Marsabit, Mandera, Turkana, and Wajir. In 2019 it 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.

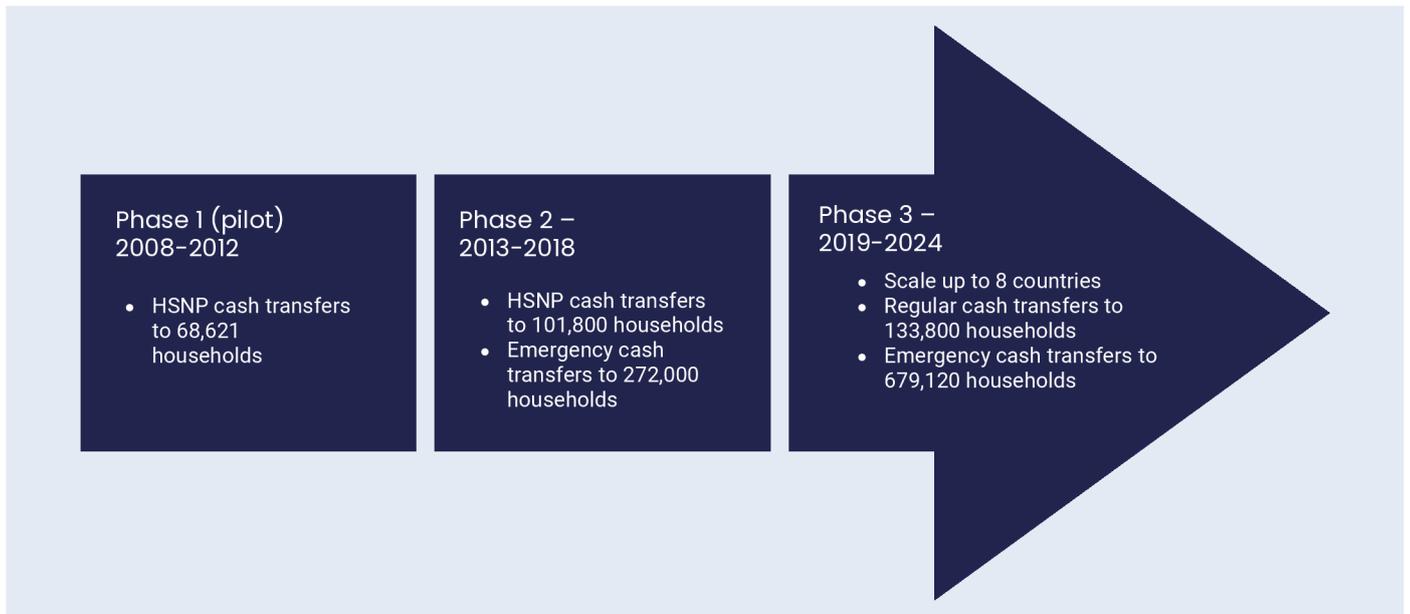
The programme delivers Kenyan shillings (KES) 2,700<sup>1</sup> each month to 125,859 regular beneficiaries across the eight counties. In addition, the HSNP has been able to rapidly scale up to reach a further 679,210 beneficiaries to provide emergency payments following climate shocks.

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 added a separate shock-responsive mechanism to enable the programme to scale up coverage to an additional 272,000 households during periods of drought or other shocks, including El Nino and COVID-19. In the third Phase, cash transfers were scaled up to double the number of counties to 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.

<sup>1</sup> KES 2,700 is equivalent to approximately US\$ 20.8 as at March 2025.

Figure 1: Evolution of the HSNP



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 to 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 poverty severity improved, by seven percentage points each.<sup>2</sup>

The evaluation of HSNP Phase 2 demonstrated that the programme led to a moderate reduction in food poverty, by three percentage points, and had a significant spill-over effect that helped stimulate the local economy: for every KES 1 invested through the HSNP, income in the local economy increased, ranging from KES 1.38 to KES 1.93.<sup>3</sup> 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 highlighted the need to transition the HSNP from an externally managed cash transfer programme run by a separate Project Management Unit (PMU), to an integrated integrated drought response mechanism within the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA). A key focus of Phase 3 was to develop 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. This briefing note summarises findings from six rounds of transition monitoring, detailed more fully in the Transition Monitoring Synthesis Report.<sup>4</sup>

## Findings on the transition of HSNP to government

HSNP Phase 3 marked a major shift from a PMU-led model, delivered by non-government technical assistants financed by development partners, to full NDMA management, embedding programme functions within government systems for long-term sustainability. While the transition was largely completed by December 2024, it occurred in a challenging context of budget constraints and evolving institutional structures. The table and summary below highlight the main achievements, challenges, and lessons from the transition process. Note that the challenges summarised in this section were encountered during the transition process and do not reflect the current status of programme delivery and implementation

<sup>2</sup> Department for International Development (2014). [Evaluation of the Kenya Hunger Safety Net Programme 2009 to 2012](#)

<sup>3</sup> Impact Evaluation of the Kenya Hunger Safety Net Programme Phase 2: [impact-evaluation-final-report.pdf](#) Ntale, A. (2025).

<sup>4</sup> Transition Monitoring Synthesis Report – HSNP Phase 3. Oxford Policy Management

Transition area	Achievements	Challenges	Key lessons
<b>Institutional integration</b>	All core HSNP functions (payments, management information system (MIS), monitoring and evaluation (M&E), audit, project accounts, communications) had formally transitioned to NDMA by December 2024.	Early transition plans lacked structured timelines; some functions (e.g. communications, M&E) experienced delays in staffing or onboarding.	Integration requires clear succession planning and early recruitment. Structured and timebound transition plans are critical.
<b>Programme officer and programme manager integration</b>	District-level programme officers and programme managers were fully integrated as drought officers and drought assistants within the Resilience Directorate.	Prolonged uncertainty led to morale issues and risk of attrition. Training for broader responsibilities beyond HSNP remains ongoing.	Integration of field staff must be accompanied by timely role clarification and targeted skills development.
<b>Training and capacity development</b>	Training efforts were broadened to include NDMA staff beyond HSNP roles. This laid the groundwork for internal capacity in routine system functions and enabled cross-functional support within technical teams.	There were delays in the approval and delivery of key trainings (e.g. audit, payments compliance, M&E analytics). Some sessions were cancelled due to budget or timing issues.	Capacity building should be embedded in government training frameworks, with pre-approved, phased roll-outs.
<b>System transition and MIS development</b>	MIS responsibilities transitioned to NDMA. Major modules were developed internally, reducing dependence on external developers. Multiple specialist roles were created, which reduced dependency on particular individuals.	MIS integration with the enterprise resource planning (ERP) and audit systems remains incomplete, limiting automation and analytics.	Role-specific system training and back-end technical support are essential for cross-system efficiency. Splitting roles within MIS functions enhances resilience and operational flexibility.
<b>M&amp;E</b>	The M&E framework was updated and digital tools were developed. County-level training was conducted.	Field monitoring was de-prioritised due to budget constraints.	Budget predictability and alternative data use (e.g. MIS, payment logs) are critical for continuous M&E during fiscal tightening.
<b>Internal audit and compliance</b>	Internal audit team assumed HSNP oversight. New audit software was procured.	Incomplete ERP/MIS integration and limited exposure to programme operations hindered effectiveness.	Hands-on exposure to programme operations and timely system integration are vital for audit readiness.
<b>Communication</b>	Assistant Director of Corporate Communications was recruited. Social media and radio outreach was improved.	Outdated communication strategy and limited knowledge transfer during technical assistants' exit.	Embed communications within government systems early, with a clear strategy and coordination across teams.
<b>Payments and project accounts</b>	Payments and financial reporting transitioned to NDMA. Payroll continuity was maintained.	Manual interventions are still needed for verification. Delays in payment service provider (PSP) contract alignment with new policies (e.g. mobile money).	Automating workflows and aligning PSP agreements with evolving government directives are key to ensure payment efficiency.

## Cross-cutting lessons from the transition process

- 1. Clear planning and ownership matter:** Successful transitions featured early shadowing, clear responsibilities, and documented handovers. Where responsibilities were vague or were affected by shifting priorities, delays occurred.
- 2. Training must be timely and aligned with system use:** Although training was funded, delays stemmed largely from internal approval bottlenecks. A detailed training plan existed, but was not always actioned on time. Future transitions should pre-approve phased training roll-outs aligned with role transitions to avoid administrative delays.
- 3. System integration is essential for sustainable automation:** The MIS development was a major success, but lack of full integration with ERP and audit software reduced opportunities for automation. Systems must be interoperable and supported by consistent staff training.
- 4. Monitoring cannot be paused during transition:** Field-based monitoring was significantly weakened due to funding cuts. In such contexts, programmes should leverage other data sources (MIS, payments, case management) to maintain oversight.
- 5. Transition needs budget protection:** Budget reallocations created bottlenecks for M&E, training, and post-payment audits.  
**Contingency planning is essential for technical assistants' exit:** Some technical assistants exited early, creating knowledge gaps and disrupting handovers. Future transitions should include contingency plans such as internal secondments, overlapping exit timelines, and internal documentation of critical tasks.
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## Recommendations for future transitions

- Develop measurable, time-bound transition plans, with assigned responsibilities.
- Include structured handovers, with shadowing and documentation embedded from the start.
- Ensure all training and system enhancements are planned early, with phased roll-outs aligned to staff transitions and monitoring needs.
- Prioritise full system integration (e.g. integrating MISs with audit, finance, and case management).
- Adopt hybrid monitoring models that combine digital and field tools.
- Ensure internal communications and knowledge transfer are planned, not incidental.
- Establish contingency strategies for unexpected staff turnover, particularly among technical assistants.

The HSNP Phase 3 experience shows that, despite policy changes and budget constraints, effective programme handovers are possible with strong leadership, timely capacity support, and structured planning. These lessons offer valuable guidance for future transitions as programmes move towards long-term sustainability within government systems.

## About us

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