

# SPACE Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19: Expert advice helpline



## Identifying *practical* options for linking humanitarian assistance and social protection in the COVID-19 response

DANIEL LONGHURST, WITH VALENTINA BARCA, SIMON LITTLE, CALUM MCLEAN, SOPHIE PONGRACZ, AND EXPERTS ON THE SOCIAL PROTECTION APPROACHES TO COVID-19: EXPERT ADVICE HELPLINE (SPACE) – CONTACT: [SPACE@DAI.COM](mailto:SPACE@DAI.COM)

July 2020

This Background Document was developed alongside others – most importantly [a Strategy Decision Matrix](#) and a [Delivery System Decision Matrix](#) – as a tool to structure an independent and unbiased analysis of COVID-19 response options. It builds on the [‘Unbundled’ framework](#). It does not necessarily represent DFID or GIZ own views or policies.

### Why link humanitarian assistance and social protection?

This short note examines the relationship between humanitarian assistance and social protection in response to COVID-19. Whilst a variety of guidance is being developed to support humanitarian practitioners around the response to the pandemic, less material exists that guides humanitarian practitioners on how to *practically* link their responses to social protection (SP) systems and programmes in the COVID-19 response, or that provides key emergency response considerations for social protection practitioners.

Both sectors have comparative advantages in the COVID-19 response that together can improve overall outcomes: collectively contributing to achieving higher coverage, adequacy and comprehensiveness of assistance, to better meet needs of affected populations through an approach that ensures better timeliness, cost-effectiveness, accountability, predictability and ownership/ sustainability compared to the status quo and compared to any alternative<sup>1</sup>. The exact ways in which this can be achieved – and trade-offs faced – depends on country context and on the relative strengths of each sector in that country.

The impact of COVID-19 in low income, fragile and conflict-affected states is yet to fully reveal itself, though there is obvious cause for concern. The direct impact on the health and well-being of the population, as well as the broader socio-economic implications of COVID-19 are complex and will most likely result in a protracted, multi-dimensional response. The indirect impacts of COVID-19 may well be more severe and longer lasting than the primary impact with increases in poverty, food insecurity, gender inequality, and losses of human capital, especially in less developed economies more vulnerable to external (regional and global) dynamics such as reliance on commodity exports and food imports. Poverty and vulnerability to COVID-19 impacts, and the effects of other shocks, are likely to overlap or exacerbate each other in certain contexts. But defining the most vulnerable in a changing context with needs exacerbated and [newly affected population groups](#) will also be a unique challenge. In addition,

<sup>1</sup> See [Strategy Decision Matrix](#), TRANSFORM (forthcoming module), [SPaN \(2019\)](#), [O'Brien et al 2018](#) for more on this.

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS



humanitarian crises may emerge or re-emerge in countries that have hitherto navigated a more 'developmental' track.

A crisis of this magnitude clearly requires focusing on common objectives in protecting the most vulnerable, leveraging the relative strengths of each system and sector so as to meet immediate<sup>2</sup> and medium-term needs. The social protection sector has already stepped up globally, proving central in the COVID-19 response<sup>3</sup>, yet responses have often been slow and insufficient to address compounding needs. This is especially the case in countries with unprepared, nascent or fractured social protection systems – or with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including susceptibility to sudden onset hazards and conflict-related displacement and for populations that are known to be vulnerable, including displaced populations, women and girls, people living with disabilities, and older persons.

### Strategies for linking humanitarian assistance to social protection along the delivery chain

This living document (summarised in Table 1 below) defines potential links between humanitarian assistance and social protection along three main 'Building Blocks' – Policy, Programme and Implementation (we call this the 'delivery chain'<sup>4</sup> for simplicity) – aiming to offer practical insight and guidance through examples of good practices and an evolving assessment as to how mutually reinforcing assistance can deliver a more effective response. This is with a view to making existing social protection systems (more) shock-responsive or supporting their design or expansion in countries where social protection systems are non-existent, weak or disrupted. While this paper is aimed at the COVID-19 response, much of it will be applicable more widely.

The graphic below (Figure 1) illustrates this visually, showing how 'linkages' is not just about sharing caseloads – but also '*capacities*': decisions on alignment and/or linkage between the humanitarian and social protection sectors need to consider the relative strength or capacity of each system, along every step of the chain.

Specific strategies for linking in the context of COVID-19 will therefore depend on the country context and on the capacity of both humanitarian and social protection systems, but also on political economy/politics, resourcing and other factors. In some cases 'linking' may not even be a good idea (e.g. where government is party to a conflict). Broadly 'linkage' strategies can include the following, noting more than one strategy may be employed in a country at any given time:

- **Aligning design elements of humanitarian interventions to social protection programmes and systems (and vice versa)** even where they are nascent, disrupted or under resourced. For example, aligning targeting criteria, transfer values, monitoring and coordination, etc., to help ensure people receive similar forms of assistance. Where they do not, or cannot presently align, ensure a commonly agreed and understandable reason is provided. Support mutual learning on the tools and systems humanitarian and social protection actors can utilise, and ensure *mutual* capacity-building takes place.
- **Coordinating humanitarian and social protection programming to enhance coverage, adequacy and comprehensiveness of the overall response.** This can include coordinating separate interventions in different geographic areas and across different target groups to enhance overall coverage; delivering different forms of assistance to the same household in a complementary manner to improve the adequacy and

---

<sup>2</sup> E.g. reducing mortality and morbidity, supporting basic needs, protecting assets, livelihoods and rights, and accessing vulnerable groups.

<sup>3</sup> See Gentilini et al (2020) [July 10 version](#)

<sup>4</sup> Building on the much-used 'Unbundled' framing [here](#).

comprehensiveness of assistance (top ups/alignment/cash plus); or humanitarian actors identifying and assisting the 'newly in need' or those that fall outside of government led responses (e.g. refugees).

- **Reciprocal leveraging and building on each other's systems ('piggybacking')**. This might include using humanitarian systems/tools, capacity, and/or data to deliver elements of a social protection response, especially social transfers, with a view to longer-term system building - and vice-versa (humanitarian actors leveraging SP systems/capacity/data).
- **Cutting across - protecting people and systems**: Ensuring the core functionality and objectives of both humanitarian assistance and social protection are not compromised by clearly defining roles and burden sharing, and that both can deliver without risking further contagion (as part of a Do No Harm approach). Measures to safeguard recipients of humanitarian aid and/or SP must include identification and mitigation of risks of gender-based violence (including sexual exploitation and abuse), violence against children, and other forms of exploitation based on the power differentials between recipients and those in control of aid, cash, and protection.

Figure 1 – Systematically assessing practical options for humanitarian and social protection linkage along the delivery chain (graphic illustrates a theoretical example from a country context)

HUMANITARIAN/EMERGENCY				SOCIAL PROTECTION			
'WEAK'		'STRONG'		'WEAK'		'STRONG'	
<b>Policy</b>							
		X		\$	Financing		X
	X			⚖️	Legal & Policy Frameworks		X
		X		🏛️	Governance & Coordination		X
			X	👥	Capacity (cutting across all)	X	
<b>Programme design</b>							
			X	📋	Vulnerability Assessment	X	
		X		🎯	Targeting (eligibility setting)		X
			X	💰	Transfer Value, Frequency, modality		X
	X			📄	Conditionality		X
<b>Administration/Implementation</b>							
			X	📡	Information Systems		X
			X	📈	Price & Market Analysis	X	
			X	🗣️	Outreach & comms	X	
		X		📄	Registration and enrolment		X
		X		💳	Payments & Service Delivery		X
		X		⚠️	Do No Harm, Protection, Accountability, Grievance		X
			X	🔍	Monitoring and Evaluation		X

Source: Adapted from Seyfert et al (2019) and TRANSFORM (forthcoming). Note: the specific choices of system 'strength', for both sectors, are indicative and would vary significantly from country to country - requiring assessment to determine the extent to which these can be leveraged.

Beyond broad strategic options, it is helpful not to think vaguely and generically (e.g. 'we will try to piggyback'), but to look for the places where linkage may be *practically* possible - and where not (for good reasons). This may require some systems and programme analysis along the delivery chain, from policy and financing all the way to targeting, payments/service delivery and monitoring, to understand where linkage between humanitarian and social protection interventions may be most feasible and why - depending on policy, programmatic and implementation capacities. For example, depending on the context, system or programme,

piggybacking may be possible for delivery of payments (e.g. using the same payment provider), but not in targeting/eligibility determination, where an alignment approach could be employed. Figure 1 above is designed to visually illustrate a 'summary' analysis of an example country, informing strategic decision-making (discussed in depth within the [Strategy Decision Matrix](#)).

The overall intention is to commonly align, coordinate and integrate activities wherever feasible to enhance the overall response and improve beneficiary's status and outcomes. Where possible (e.g. not undermining humanitarian principles), there should always be a focus on moving from parallel to aligned / integrated programmes with government and/or social protection actors over the short, medium or longer term - mutually building capacity to that end.

Table 1 provides a 'tick-list' of suggestions and considerations in this regard, with a primary focus on humanitarian, emergency and non-Government audiences.

Table 1 Issues and considerations for decision making along the delivery chain

Level	Issue	Considerations
POLICY	Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage with social protection actors and economists to get a full picture of available resources, gaps, and sustainability requirements across social protection and humanitarian assistance.</li> <li>Consider channeling humanitarian funding into social protection government-led systems (while retaining accountability measures). When leveraging humanitarian financing, think through flow of funds and reporting/reconciliation requirements from the start.</li> <li>Explicitly budget for 'leave no-one-behind' activities via the humanitarian sector in partnership with civil society, even for a government-led social protection response.</li> <li>Understand the top line compromises, tradeoffs and cost-benefit of using or leveraging SP systems versus more parallel/aligned responses - For instance, linking humanitarian cash to national SP systems could achieve scale and sustainability but compromise effectiveness (e.g. reduced transfer values). It could increase the speed of delivery in the long term but take considerable time to design and establish and could be more rigid and less open to further adaptation.</li> </ul>
	Legal & Policy Frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the social protection policy in country: what is the vision in the short &amp; medium term &amp; how can humanitarian actors help to achieve that (using the crisis as an opportunity).</li> <li>Lobby for policy &amp; legislation reform around SP &amp; linkages to humanitarian assistance in the long term, or advocate for waiving/changes to legislation to support this in the short term.</li> </ul>
	Governance & Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spend time to understand the 'politics', who is who, the different perspectives of the different stakeholder ministries, where power lies with different kinds of decision, etc. This may not align with official documentation!</li> <li>Frame the response as one where different systems and actors can contribute through their comparative advantage to enhance the comprehensiveness, coverage and adequacy of SP systems, and the COVID-19 response overall. Call for the mutual leveraging of systems, capacity etc. across sectors (respecting legislation and Do No Harm principles, including safeguarding), so that the humanitarian response identifies opportunities for supporting the building blocks of a Shock Responsive Social Protection (SRSP) system. Ensure internal coordination to identify opportunities across sectors.</li> <li>Enhance government leadership through combining or linking coordination groups (Humanitarian and Cash Working Groups with SP committees and coordination bodies) and defining this in Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Proactively coordinate with and leverage the networks of ministries / representatives of gender, youth, refugees, disability, informal workers, civil society, and humanitarian NGOs where possible to enhance ownership and implementation capacity. Encourage and convene these meetings initially, to initiate and facilitate linkages.</li> <li>As part of the above, agree on coordinated approaches to programme coverage across humanitarian and government-led SP programmes to achieve maximum reach and to ensure horizontal equity (that those in need receive similar forms of support unless for commonly agreed reasons). Value For Money (VFM) arguments to support the best use of resources can be helpful.</li> <li>Engage with government and private sector jointly with SP actors to ensure decisions around social transfers are informed by monitoring of beneficiary well-being, markets, supply chains and trader liquidity.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Donors can influence this process through funding key functions that support a whole system rather than funding parallel systems (e.g. market monitoring), as well as requesting and incentivising humanitarian actors to work together with relevant line ministries (meaning social welfare as well as Disaster Risk Management etc.), use common government led services and coordination mechanisms, etc. Fund key coordination positions with nexus objectives is often essential to kick-start collaboration.</li> </ul>
	Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leverage government local implementation structures where appropriate (explicitly building their capacity in the process) and align humanitarian interventions with any enhanced/expanded government-led social assistance – offering your capacity to solve technical challenges along the delivery chain. Where interest and opportunity arise, refer governments to SPACE for additional immediate support that is outside your own funding/programme capacity.</li> </ul>
PROGRAMME DESIGN	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The broad emphasis for linking humanitarian assistance to SP should be on designing or adapting interventions with knowledge of government systems in mind, filling gaps in coverage, and working with and through government programmes systems first, particularly if this results in faster delivery at scale. Creating completely parallel (non-coordinated) approaches should be avoided. This can include for instance working through government coordination mechanisms, providing a single transfer that meets multiple basic needs, safely sharing data to reduce duplication and enhance accountability, and jointly negotiating terms with payment service suppliers to maximise economies of scale, etc.</li> <li>Consider working with implementing partners that can provide strong and independent accountability mechanisms or are open to becoming SP implementing partners (often those with existing development operations).</li> <li>Identify where the humanitarian sector has systems and tools to be offered as a common service to support a SRSP approach (whether integrated or operated in parallel) – and make this clear to SP counterparts. This may include market assessments and supply chain analysis, accountability functions (including feedback and complaints mechanisms), Management Information Systems (MIS), needs assessments that look beyond poverty data, last mile solutions (through humanitarian implementing partners including financial service providers), the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) methodology, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&amp;E) systems and third-party monitoring. Do not assume government stakeholders have a firm grip on the details of humanitarian operations or the humanitarian architecture in-country.</li> </ul>
	Vulnerability Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of most discussed and complex operational topics in linking humanitarian assistance to SP is that actors interpret vulnerability differently &amp; apply different approaches and methodologies to assessment, which cascades down to all programmatic decisions. The more joined up these processes can become, the better. In many cases, this can start from bringing those who have developed the tools together to reflect on where information/data sets already overlap and complement each other.</li> <li>Given the scarcity of resources the focus should be on identifying who are the most vulnerable now and in the medium term and how to ensure coverage, as well as adequacy and comprehensiveness of support where possible. Vulnerability to compound crises is important to consider (COVID-19 aggravating food insecurity or a sudden onset shock for example). Humanitarians should do and share this type of analysis, while ensuring no duplication.</li> <li><a href="#">A gender analysis</a>, using available data, should be conducted to understand the underlying gender inequalities and gender norms and how these may be affected by COVID-19 and measures put in place to respond.</li> </ul>

<p>Targeting design (eligibility determination)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share data from vulnerability assessments/other data analysis to inform SP targeting strategies (e.g. defining eligibility criteria).</li> <li>• With a focus on ensuring coverage of those in need <i>across</i> programmes, approaches to targeting should be jointly discussed, with a view to understanding – <i>across humanitarian and SP programmes</i>– who is currently being covered, how approaches could be aligned, who is likely to be left out, and how additional caseloads could be covered complementarily.</li> <li>• Humanitarian actors should ensure that groups that are typically excluded from SP to be included and these groups could include women and girls, people living with disabilities, and refugees and migrants, but will differ by context and their right to SP and humanitarian assistance, including the newly vulnerable. To remedy exclusion errors, a percentage of the budget could be set aside for future corrections. Humanitarian actors should engage with local organisations to enhance inclusion, for example, women’s rights organisations, disabled persons’ organisations, child rights organisations, and informal workers’ organisations.</li> </ul>
<p>Transfer Value, Frequency, modality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge that humanitarian and social protection programmes work around different assessments of need, meaning for example social assistance can cover on average 10-30% of household / individual needs for a month, whilst humanitarian assistance can cover 65-100%. SP programmes are often aligned to longer-term sustainability considerations and fiscal space constraints – but this can be temporarily modified.</li> <li>• Therefore, discuss how to align transfer type/modality, level (values), frequency/timing and duration with a SP programme (now or in the future), including based on the thinking captured in the national social protection policy. Offer your capacities to support informed SP decision-making.</li> <li>• The fact that SP and increasingly humanitarian programmes use cash offers potential for convergence but given there may be various constraints to using cash (programme coverage, access for Financial Service Providers, future market disruption), the capacity to align with other non-cash programmes, or to switch to other modalities can be discussed and planned.</li> <li>• All of the above is with a view to improving the adequacy and equity of support across different caseloads.</li> </ul>
<p>Conditionality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditionality can be relaxed across both humanitarian and SP as appropriate in the short term to improve alignment and lower the burden on recipients.</li> </ul>

ADMIN & DELIVERY	<b>Information Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coordinating humanitarian assistance and SP is enhanced by data sharing and inter-operable data systems: where each sector knows who is being supported by the other and how (including in anonymised ways, e.g. via Zero Knowledge Proofs). Focus on basic information on who, what, where, when.</li> <li>Discuss how to open-up closed humanitarian MIS systems and safely share data to reduce duplication and enhance accountability (whilst following shared standards such as data protection protocols and Humanitarian Exchange Language (HXL)).</li> <li>Where relevant, share technology infrastructure, human resource capacity, etc. with government, and not necessarily data itself. Include principles of privacy by design and rights protection from the outset, in a manner that is tailored to local needs – this will set foundations for the SP sector and help build capacity.</li> <li>Support the SP sector to think out of the box too, leveraging the systems they have in place (ID systems, SP information systems, etc.) creatively to reach new caseloads.</li> <li>Align humanitarian action with Social Registries (SRs) where relevant e.g. utilising their beneficiary lists, data collection tools, SOPs etc., supporting their development in the medium-term. Note however there are challenges for instance around data equivalence, informed consent, data protection and sharing. Likewise, SR data may not be sufficiently comprehensive or up-to-date to use in times of shock (see more details <a href="#">here</a>). However, using and improving SR data could provide significant coordination, cost, programme management and political benefits in the future.</li> <li>Set the foundations for future crises via development of SOPs, Memorandums Of Understanding (MoUs), shared data standards etc. – and critical inputs into the vision for the country’s overarching SP information system (see <a href="#">here</a>).</li> </ul>
	<b>Price &amp; Market Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued regional, national &amp; local analysis of supply chains and price monitoring is critical to determine the continuing appropriateness of the type, size, frequency &amp;/or modality of transfer. The humanitarian side may have a comparative advantage in doing that and could offer this as a common service to the whole response.</li> </ul>
	<b>Outreach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A comprehensive and coherent approach to outreach and communications is essential, particularly to reach those that would otherwise be excluded. Where governmental systems are already strong, these should be leveraged to disseminate messaging and/or where humanitarian counterparts are best placed, they can support in the design and/or implementation of these.</li> <li>However, social protection does not always take a comprehensive and coherent approach to outreach and communications – humanitarian counterparts could support the design and/or implementation of these.</li> </ul>
	<b>Registration and enrolment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Registration and enrolment mechanisms for SP expansions are often constrained due to capacity issues, especially where ID systems for authentication are missing. Humanitarian capacity could support identification of best practices for accessing hard to reach populations (and alternative “know your customer” verification approaches) given specific country context, and/or provide additional capacity for the registration itself.</li> </ul>
	<b>Payments &amp; Delivery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use a common delivery channel and FSP between humanitarian and SP payments to reduce overheads, confusion etc. and provide a single point of contact with cash recipients.</li> <li>Joint investment in digitising payments should be considered given the economies of scale that can be reaped over time and across the caseload.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advise governments on the practicalities of private sector engagement of FSPs, with an eye to enhancing impacts and accessibility for the most vulnerable populations – given the emergency context (Terms of Reference, contracting, clauses, etc.).</li> </ul>
	<b>Do No Harm, Protection &amp; Grievance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humanitarian &amp; SP actors should ensure that COVID-19 action does not have negative consequences for front line workers or recipients or create disproportionate risks &amp; secondary impacts for people in need – they can support SP sector directly (providing their services to ensure this) or indirectly (advising on how to ensure this in practice).</li> <li>Similar action can be taken to ensure functioning complaint and appeals (grievance) mechanisms, which should explicitly include safeguarding concerns and be equipped to receive disclosures of sexual exploitation and abuse and make appropriate referrals to available services and support for survivors as well as refer cases of misconduct to appropriate authorities for investigation.</li> </ul>
	<b>M&amp;E</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider joint humanitarian and SP M&amp;E of implementation effectiveness through third parties – i.e. M&amp;E the overall effort across all sector and caseloads vis-à-vis needs.</li> <li>Offer M&amp;E capacity (e.g. for data analysis) and systems (e.g. approaches/tools, indicators, software, etc.) to support SP M&amp;E processes, with an eye to building SP capacity in the medium-term.</li> <li>Ensure/support the engagement of third-party monitoring and accountability via CSOs and local organisations.</li> </ul>

Source: DFID/GIZ Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 (SPACE) team (2020) – D. Longhurst, with inputs from V. Barca, S. Levine, S. Little, C. McLean and S. Pongracz – building on [Seyfert et al \(2019\)](#), TRANSFORM Shock Responsive Social Protection Module (forthcoming), [UNICEF \(2019\)](#); [SPaN \(2019\)](#), [CALP \(2020\)](#) and [O'Brien et al \(2018\)](#).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLAIMER

This document was developed as part of SPACE – Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19: Expert advice helpline, implemented by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, and funded by UK Aid and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). SPACE is managed by DAI Europe Ltd contracted through the DFID framework agreement EACDS Lot B service ‘Strengthening resilience and response to crises’, and the helpline advice is provided by independent consultants contracted by DFID, GIZ and other partners.

The views expressed in this document are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent DFID or GIZ own views or policies.

© Crown copyright 2020

Copyright in the typographical arrangement and design rests with the Crown. This publication (excluding the logos) may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium, provided that it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright with the title and source of the publication specified.

Published by DFID and GIZ