



# What role can social protection systems play in responding to humanitarian emergencies?

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This policy brief summarises the findings from the shock-responsive social protection research [Synthesis Report](#). It draws on examples from across the project's case studies - [Lesotho](#), [Mali](#), [Mozambique](#), [Pakistan](#), the [Philippines](#) and the [Sahel](#) – and a global [literature review](#).

## 1. Background to the study

Globally, the frequency, size and duration of natural, economic and political disasters and crises are on the rise. Governments and international agencies alike are committed to finding a way to respond more efficiently and effectively to shocks. Our research explores two themes in relation to this: first, the role of long-term social protection systems – with a focus on social assistance – in the response to large-scale shocks, either before or after a crisis occurs; and second, opportunities for coordination (and possible integration) of humanitarian, disaster risk management (DRM) and social protection assistance. We address covariate shocks—those that affect a substantial share of the population—likely to trigger an international humanitarian response.

## 2. How to assess what counts as 'better'?

In order to know whether shock-responsive social protection is a useful complement or substitute for alternative forms of emergency assistance, we first need to know how to assess what counts as 'better'. In our case studies the key criteria that emerged for making such judgements were:<sup>1</sup>

- **Meeting needs:** delivering an equal or greater impact than alternatives, through a response that is better targeted, provides a more adequate level of support, or provides support of a more appropriate nature;
- **Coverage of population:** increasing the absolute number of people reached, or the relative share of those in need of assistance;
- **Timeliness:** delivering a more timely response to crises, avoiding interventions being delivered too late to be of use for the shock they were intended to address;
- **Predictability:** of funding for implementing agencies and of assistance to households;
- **Elimination of duplicated delivery systems and processes:** such as multiple agencies conducting similar targeting exercises in the same communities;
- **Sustainability:** leading to strengthened organisational capacity, such as through responses being embedded in government-led systems.

When combined with information on **costs**, the value for money of shock-responsive social protection versus alternative responses can be assessed. The research found that the discussion focuses particularly on improving *cost-efficiency*, i.e. how well inputs (financial, material and human resources) are converted into outputs (e.g. amount disbursed to beneficiaries or number of people reached with assistance). There is less attention to outcomes and impact.

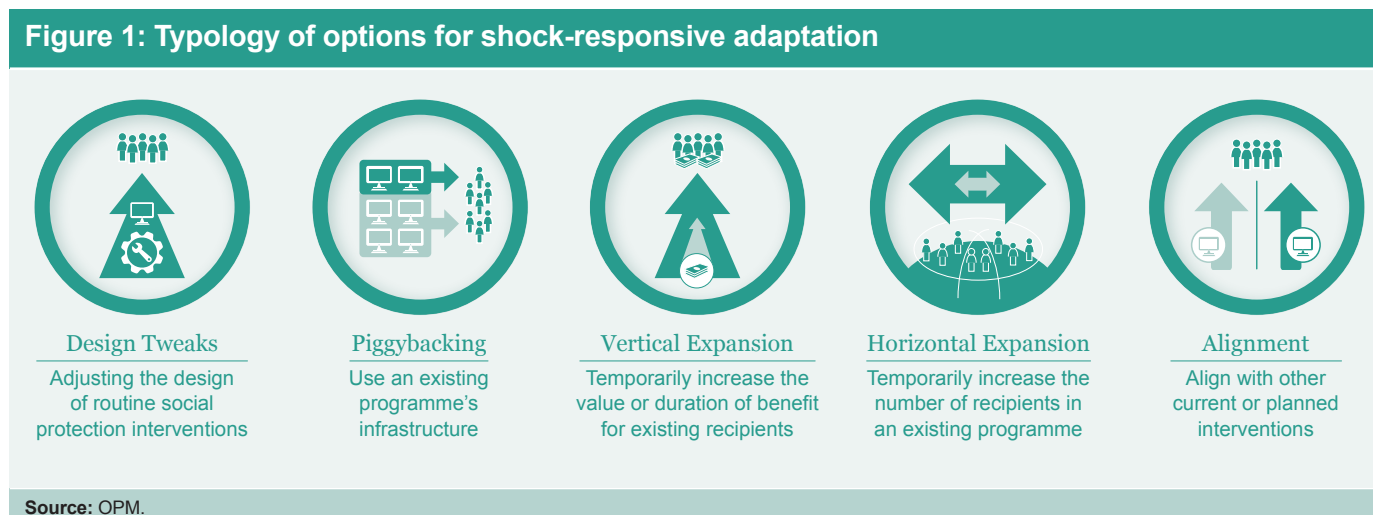
No intervention is likely to be better across all these dimensions: our research stresses multiple trade-offs. For example, an agency might be able to achieve a better targeted response if it conducts a needs assessment at the moment of a crisis, but this may reduce timeliness of response; or it may be able to meet more short-term needs by funding a response through an emergency appeal, but at the expense of establishing longer term predictable funding or promoting sustainability through the use of government systems.

What works better will always depend on the context and on stakeholders' particular perspectives and priorities. This may be driven by the type of crisis (e.g. whether it is rapid or slow-onset); the regularity and size of the crisis; whether it is a conflict context; and the capacity of agencies, including access to financing and infrastructure.

<sup>1</sup> The same criteria are relevant for assessing the suitability of humanitarian responses.

### 3. What are the options for shock-responsive social protection and where might they work?

Governments and their partners worldwide have considered various options for making use of their social protection programmes and systems in a shock, and for linking them with other emergency responses. We summarise these in Figure 1 below, showcasing a revised typology, tested over the course of the research.



- **Design tweaks** are small adjustments to a routine social protection programme. They can introduce flexibility to maintain the regular service for existing beneficiaries in a shock (e.g. by waiving conditionalities). Alternatively they can address vulnerabilities that are likely to increase in a crisis, through adjustments to programme coverage, timeliness or predictability (e.g. by altering payment schedule), without requiring a flex at the moment of the shock.
- **Piggybacking** occurs when an emergency response uses part of an established system or programme while delivering something new. Exactly which and how many elements of the system or programme are borrowed will vary; it could be e.g. a specific programme's beneficiary list, its staff, a national database or a particular payment mechanism.
- **Vertical expansion** is the temporary increase of the value or duration of a social protection intervention to meet the additional needs of existing beneficiaries (i.e. a top-up). For such top-ups to be relevant the programme, or programmes, must have good coverage of the disaster-affected area, and also of the neediest households.
- **Horizontal expansion** is the temporary inclusion of new beneficiaries from disaster-affected communities into a social protection programme, by extending geographical coverage, enrolling more eligible households in existing areas, or altering the enrolment criteria.
- **Alignment** describes designing an intervention with elements resembling others that already exist or are planned, but without integrating the two. For example, this could be an alignment of objectives, targeting method, transfer value or delivery mechanism. Governments may align their systems with those of humanitarian agencies or vice versa, either because an existing intervention is not operational as needed in a crisis, or because it may not yet exist.

The best option in a particular country may well involve implementing a combination of these – as well as combining them with separate, humanitarian and DRM responses. [Our research found](#) some options are better suited to certain contexts and certain types of disaster than others, and some have specific prerequisites that must be in place before or after a shock for them to work.

## 4. Designing and implementing shock-responsive social protection, what to keep in mind?

The research has clearly shown that shock-responsive social protection can be a good idea, but not always, nor is it always better than alternatives. Its appropriateness is affected by the overall context for policymaking and by how underlying delivery systems work. We explore each in turn.

### 4.1. Contextual factors

Each of the case studies brought to life the role of the following factors in shaping shock-responsive design:

- **Political will** for shock-responsive social protection: for example, in Mozambique the government discourages actions perceived as ‘handouts’, which translates into a reluctance to provide cash transfers in an emergency. In Mali, in contrast, the expansion of social protection systems is perceived as a welcome and more efficient alternative to the annual ‘emergency’ responses that, for decades, have addressed the seasonal food insecurity affecting millions.
- **Regulations:** Mozambique, Mali and Lesotho include references to the potential use of social protection in responses to shocks in their laws, policies and regulations. However, DRM policies and social protection policies were not always consistent on this, creating setbacks for operationalisation. Moreover, opinion varies as to whether embedding social protection programmes in law helps or hinders their use in shocks: some felt there was a risk attaching emergency response to social protection interventions without it (e.g. the Philippines) while others felt legislation limited the possibility of adapting the intervention (e.g. in Lesotho).
- **Organisational capacity and mandates:** shocks worsen existing constraints by increasing demand and requiring rapid adjustments to programming while staff capacity is often reduced – an issue which was observed across all the case studies, especially those with limited capacity at local levels of administration (such as Mozambique, where activities at community level are run through voluntary structures). In the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan, surge capacity was drafted in from surrounding unaffected regions to help with the scale-up of the Pantawid cash transfer.
- **Financing:** effective programming requires robust processes for anticipating the size of any funding requirement. We found this to be more systematic in some countries (e.g. Mali) than in others (e.g. Lesotho). A separate challenge is how to mobilise resources, so that contingency funds are not discovered to be ‘empty’ just when they are needed (Lesotho, Mali, Pakistan). Instruments such as disaster risk insurance and contingency credit can play a role but are not always appropriate: the former doesn’t provide annual payouts, while the latter increases debt.
- **Conflict:** can increase the need for shock-responsive social protection while changing the nature of the support required and undermining capacity for response. It can also affect which actors can get involved in emergency programme delivery (e.g. Mali).

### 4.2. Operational factors

Our research stressed the following practical factors and challenges should be carefully assessed:

#### Who to support and how

- Respondents generally agreed that **the poor are often some of the most vulnerable** to disaster (especially in slow-onset food security crises).
- The extent of the correlation between social protection beneficiaries and disaster-affected people is linked to **how social protection households are selected** (categorical, community-based targeting, proxy means-testing, self-targeting etc.), and the type and scale of shock. This should be carefully assessed in advance of a crisis.
- A shift from ‘humanitarian’ to ‘social protection’ caseloads, if it leads to different targeting methods, can **exclude previously eligible households**, a risk that needs addressing.
- Social protection beneficiary databases and wider social registries can contribute to shock-response, by offering **pre-positioned data**. However, their use should not be automatic. Five dimensions affect their suitability for use in emergencies - relevance, completeness, currency, accessibility and accuracy (see our [Briefing Note](#) on this).
- Households identified before a shock never entirely overlap with those in need after a shock. Giving top-ups to regular beneficiaries will require **a system for reaching other affected households** (e.g. in the Philippines).
- Some form of **revalidation exercise** will also always be needed to track down displaced households and those with no ID, inform beneficiaries, replace named recipients, etc.

## How much support to give

- Transfer values should depend on what needs are to be covered, e.g. basic survival needs, rebuilding livelihoods or promoting resilience. There are **challenges harmonising transfer values** between emergency response through social protection programmes, and those implemented separately by humanitarian actors. In both the Philippines and Lesotho, variations in transfer values between standalone humanitarian responses and the top-ups to social protection beneficiaries risked confusion and disappointment.
- In resource constrained contexts, we also found **trade-offs between scale** (number of people reached) and value (amount per beneficiary), as well as **political resistance** to higher values for fear of negative repercussions on perceptions of the core programme.
- Addressing these issues as part of **preparedness planning** is important (ideally **borrowing tools from other sectors**, such as those for market and needs analysis), so that values can easily be computed post-disaster.

## Resilience of delivery mechanisms

- Shocks can **disrupt or damage infrastructure** for routine social protection and **affect liquidity** at local level. Delivering humanitarian assistance through social protection systems risks compounding this burden unless actions are taken to make the underlying systems more disaster-resilient.
- The **payment schedule** of social protection programmes affects their capacity to promote resilience / respond to shocks – e.g. quarterly payments by the Child Grant in Lesotho.
- We found no consistent relationship between the **type of payment mechanism** and its **appropriateness in a shock**. Manual distribution of benefits (e.g. Mozambique) can be resource-intensive and slow; In the Philippines, the e-payment infrastructure was damaged after Typhoon Haiyan, and recipients reverted to over-the-counter payments.

## Communications for beneficiaries and other community members

- There is a risk (e.g. Pakistan, Lesotho and the Philippines) that aspects of humanitarian assistance provided through social protection programmes may **not be well understood by communities**. This includes **decisions on targeting**, the **transfer value** and **how long** households will be enrolled.
- Some respondents expressed concern that adjusting the design of a social protection programme to incorporate emergency response could risk **undermining** the understanding and legitimacy of long-term programmes.

## 5. How can humanitarian, DRM and social protection systems work better together?

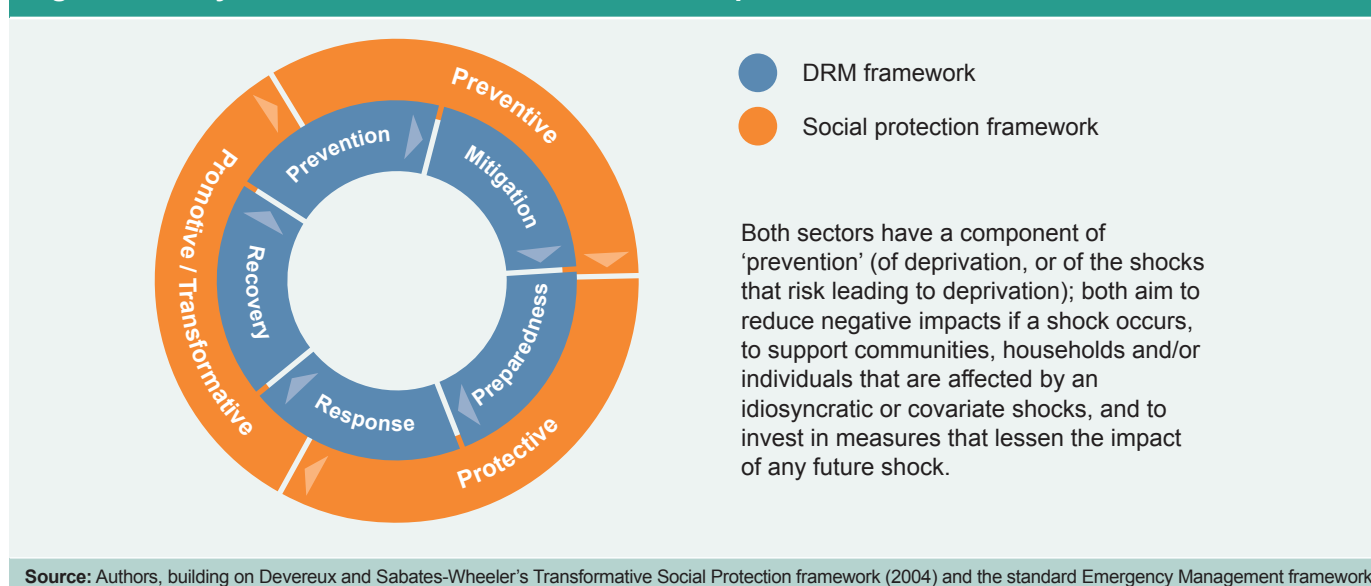
The need for social protection, DRM and humanitarian actors and systems to work more effectively together is a theme emerging from all case studies. We noted that change is occurring, as social protection actors become more engaged in emergency response and humanitarian actors adopt longer-term perspectives. The ideal scenario is a coordinated social protection sector that feeds into a disaster management platform responsible for coordinating emergency response.

1. **Improving understanding of one another's fields.** The definitions of 'social protection', 'disaster risk management', and how they relate to humanitarian work, are not widely understood outside their respective sectors. This is the case, to varying extents, even where they fall under the same budget line (Pakistan) or under the same ministry (the Philippines), and more so where there is no institutional link. In fact, both social protection and DRM are conceptualised in similar cycles (e.g. with an initial focus on prevention), with multiple entry-points for joint thinking and working – as shown in Figure 2.
2. **Strengthening engagement between sectors, in policy and practice.** In many countries, collaboration between the social protection, DRM and humanitarian sectors is limited. Better coordination is important not only among sectors nationally, but also at different levels of public authority—regional, national, subnational and community. A starting-point is to improve policy coherence within each sector, as the more each sector is internally consistent, the more feasible cross-sectoral collaboration becomes. Actions such as developing sector-wide strategies, policies or budgets can contribute to this.

3. **Strengthening coordination between programmes and between delivery systems.** Linking programmes and delivery systems to improve shock-responsiveness requires agreement on design and implementation details, so these can fulfil both development and emergency functions. Moreover, since shock-responsive social protection will only ever be a partial solution for responding to emergencies, effective coordination with separate emergency interventions will be needed to ensure that the neediest households are not excluded from support. Effective coordination of M&E across interventions will also be required.

One of the main opportunities for enhanced coordination, underexplored in many countries, is the link between DRM delivery systems and programmes and the social protection and humanitarian sectors. There are numerous examples of DRM systems that could offer benefits – from preparedness activities, such as linking the expansion of social protection programmes to the release of funding under disaster risk financing mechanisms (as is proposed in Mali with the African Risk Capacity), to the use of early warning systems as triggers for different thresholds of emergency support (as in the Hunger Safety Net Programme in Kenya), to the planning of emergency assistance using local DRM committees.

**Figure 2: Analytical frameworks for DRM and social protection**



## 6. Preparing for an effective response to shocks

We identified **six principles** that any actor engaging with the idea of developing shock-responsive social protection systems should keep in mind:

- **Strengthening routine social protection is worthwhile in its own right** for building resilience and laying a better foundation for shock-responsiveness, while simple 'design tweaks' can be implemented to further adapt existing programmes to potential shocks.
- **Vulnerability and needs assessments are an essential component of decision making** about whether or not social protection is a suitable vehicle for addressing a shock.
- **Interventions are likely to work more smoothly if they are planned in advance**, through early decision making, active planning, and (where appropriate) early delivery of support.
- **Mature social protection contexts have more options in a crisis.** Small, fragmented, under-funded and low capacity programmes are unlikely to be able to replicate the kind of response possible in effective mature systems with broad coverage.
- **Coordination with other interventions is essential.** No shock-responsive social protection can meet the needs of all households who need assistance.
- **Measuring success in shock-responsive interventions is contingent on the identification of appropriate indicators** that can be compared across humanitarian and social protection responses, and that cover outcomes and impacts, not just inputs and outputs.

The synthesis report highlights further opportunities for shifts in policies and practices among social protection, humanitarian and DRM actors, read the '[recommendations](#)' section for details.

## About the project

The Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems study is a research programme (2015 to 2018) 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 from the UK government, 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 the synthesis report that draws together findings from the whole research project. This includes findings from case studies in Lesotho, Mali, Mozambique, the Sahel, Pakistan and the Philippines, and a global literature review. These are all accessible on our [project webpage](#). We warmly acknowledge the work of the 26 team members whose contributions form the foundation both of the synthesis report and all other outputs. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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