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10 Things

You Wish You'd Always Known about Shock-Responsive Social Protection

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Improving the 'shock-responsiveness' of social protection—in other words, its relevance to large-scale natural, economic and political shocks—is an alluring concept. If you're a social protection practitioner, you may be hoping to find a way both to improve the ability of social protection programmes to accommodate needs of any scale, and to enhance their coherence with emergency response activities where such interventions remain necessary. If you work in emergency response, including in government agencies, this policy agenda opens another possible route to mitigating and responding to the risk of disasters. If you are in an international humanitarian agency, this agenda may appeal because you hope to transfer part of your caseload to the government or its partners so that you can focus on other emergencies; or maybe, in contrast, you hope to channel more funds labelled as 'humanitarian' into a nationally led system or extend your influence into the development sphere. Everyone hopes that 'shock-responsive social protection' will produce better results for people in crises, and that it will also save themselves time and energy.

What is this magical idea? Can this recently named (but long practised) approach achieve all these outcomes? Is the gold standard the 'flexible scale-up' of a social protection programme, triggered by an emergency, or is there more to it than that?

Drawing on insights from some recent real-life examples, we thought it timely to tackle a few aspects of the issue that are proving particularly complex or problematic.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is at the forefront of global attention at this time, and while many of the observations here are relevant to that context, the scope of this brief is broader than that emergency. It is intended as a guide to highlight not only how social protection can be used as a vehicle for emergency response, but also how it can build people's resilience so that shocks do not turn into a disaster in the first place.

Here are our mythbusting top 10 tips.



1. This briefing note builds on the approach conceived in the DFID/OPM research project on [Shock-Responsive Social Protection](#) (2015-18) and subsequent research programmes, including WFP's work on shock-responsive social protection. It assumes that you're already aware of shock-responsive social protection and that you're looking for guidance on applying it. If instead you're looking for an introduction, try this [4-minute animation](#) or this [in-depth report](#).

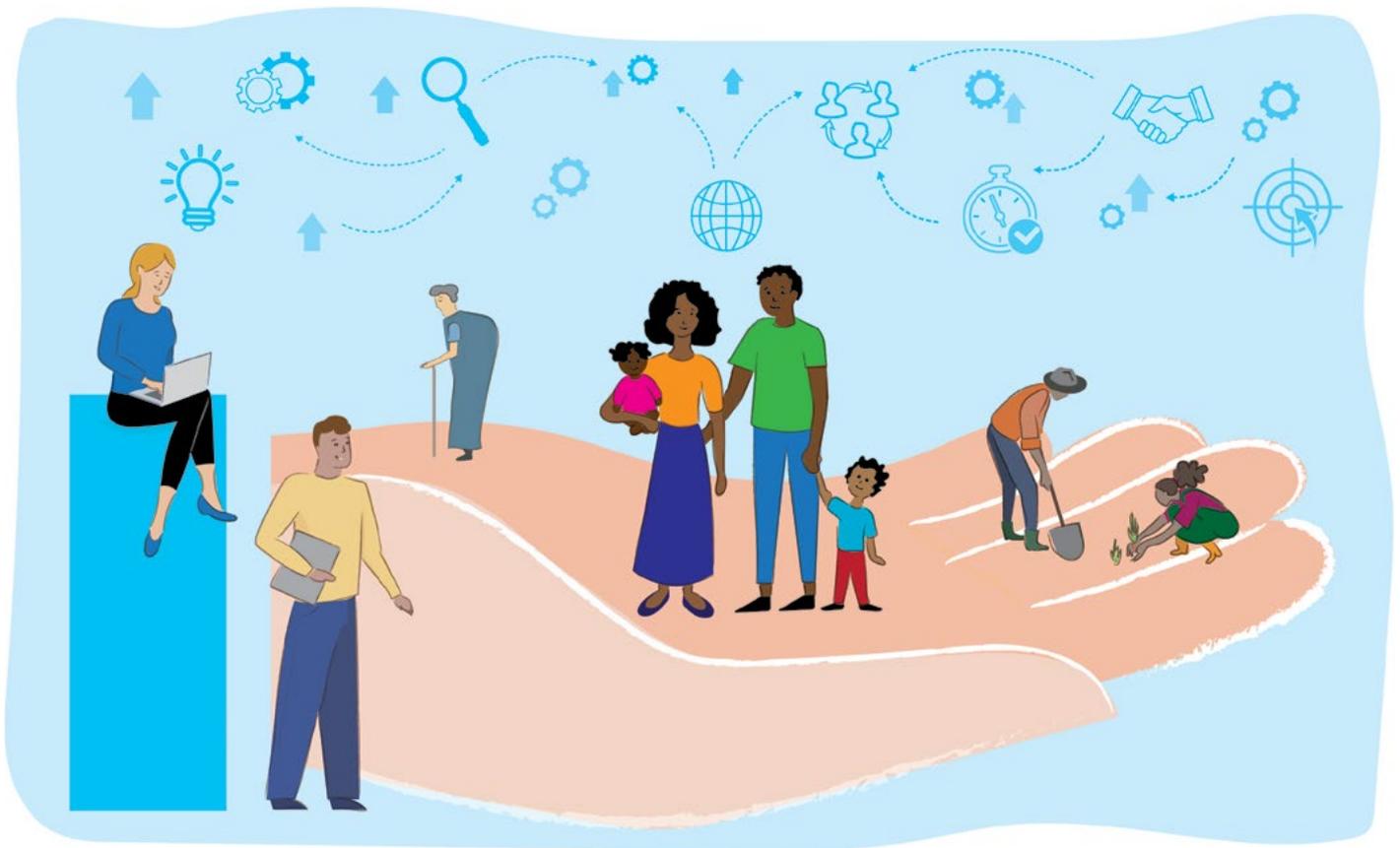


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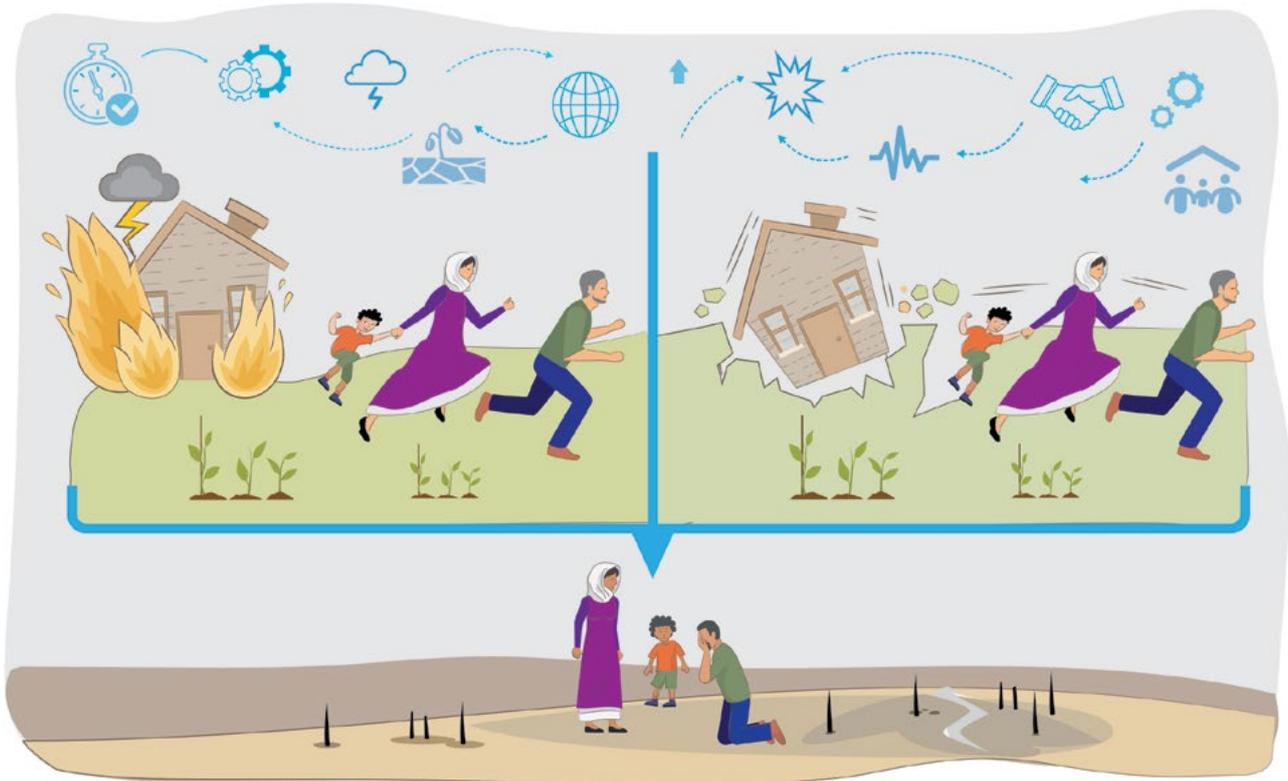
Good social protection programmes are already helpful for reducing crises

All social protection is somehow ‘shock-responsive’. It helps people cope with some of the risks, shocks and stresses that they face during their lives. It can improve their well-being even in times of stability, so they’re better prepared to deal with shocks if they occur, and it can support those in difficulty. As Levine and Sharp (2015) remind us, ‘[Not every shock results in a crisis](#)’: the crisis comes when the event—say, a drought, flood or economic downturn—combines with existing vulnerabilities.²

So, making regular social protection programmes better in terms of their coverage of the population, their adequacy and the range of needs they support—in other words, the aims of the [Universal Social Protection 2030 Agenda](#)—is valuable in itself, as it reduces those vulnerabilities, minimising the impact of shocks. These kinds of investment, and improvements to the overall quality of regular programmes, are among the most useful actions that social protection actors can take to improve the shock-responsiveness of the overall system, especially in countries where social protection coverage to date remains limited.



2. Levine, S. and Sharp, K. (2015, p.5), ‘Topic guide: Anticipating and responding to shocks; livelihoods and humanitarian responses’, Overseas Development Institute.



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If covariate shocks seem to merit special attention in social protection, it's particularly because of their impact on overall service provision (more than their impact on households)

The 'shocks' in 'shock-responsive' social protection tend to mean 'covariate' shocks, the type that affect many people at once (like a drought).

For households, covariate shocks can lead to losses of income and/or assets, similarly to shocks affecting them alone (like a death in the family). The ways they cope are pretty similar, too: things like cutting expenditure, using savings, selling assets, or borrowing. A recent neat study by the World Bank in [Nepal](#) illustrates how, for a household, a personal shock can be just as catastrophic as a community-wide one.³

So why does the social protection community treat covariate shocks as requiring special attention, if the consequences for households are basically no different? Well, they pose two big practical challenges for implementers:

1. **Spikes in demand.** Covariate shocks can—though don't always—cause sudden spikes, cyclical fluctuations or prolonged increases in the number of people needing help. This happens less with accumulated individual shocks. In the same study from Nepal in 2015–16, 37%

of households reported being affected by the 2015 earthquake, whereas 2% experienced losses resulting from a death in the family. (The average size of loss was the same). In a covariate shock, friends and family may be affected and less able to help. Fluctuations in demand mean that implementers must have access to varying amounts of funds, personnel and other resources. Again, good social protection programmes do this anyway; it's just that often programmes are designed with a fixed quota of beneficiaries, for logistical ease and affordability.

2. **Business continuity.** Situations such as earthquakes, floods or conflict can disrupt services: the shock itself can pose problems for business continuity in social protection. Staff may not be able to get to work, payment infrastructure may be damaged, or funds may be diverted to other priorities. Recipients may be displaced internally or abroad, or be unable to reach the place where they usually get assistance, or may lose their identity documents. To maintain services in these difficult circumstances, implementers should be ready with contingency plans and may need to adjust their regular programmes.

3. Walker, T., Kawasoe, Y. and Shrestha, J. (2019), 'Risk and vulnerability in Nepal: Findings from the Household Risk and Vulnerability Survey', World Bank.



3 Improving the shock-responsiveness of a programme isn't a one-off exercise

Making a social protection programme more relevant and effective for crisis contexts is an ongoing process. You don't just add one thing to an existing programme (like a 'scale-up mechanism') in order to call it shock-responsive. In fact, shock-responsiveness isn't really countable: it's rather hard to say, 'This programme is shock-responsive, that one isn't', or even, 'This programme wasn't shock-responsive and now it is'. If you come across efforts to count or list 'shock-responsive social protection programmes', they will most likely be focused on only a subset of all the ways in which such programmes have been made more relevant for emergency contexts—usually counting occasions when international agencies have recently introduced mechanisms to temporarily increase the scale of a social assistance programme after a crisis is declared.

Regular programmes can continually be made more relevant and effective for large-scale shocks through incremental changes (this is part of what the literature calls 'design tweaks').

For instance, if you're rolling out a new social protection programme in stages you might first prioritise the locations most affected by shocks. Then you might adjust a payment date to be better timed with when people's needs are greatest. Later you might establish agreements with multiple service providers in case one isn't able to deliver during a shock. All these are contributing to improving its shock-responsiveness.

Once again, these are all part of what a good social protection programme might do anyway.





4 Shock-responsive social protection isn't just about supporting households after disasters—it's about building their resilience, too...

One emerging myth we sometimes hear is that shock-responsive social protection is all about channelling assistance to households through social protection programmes when a disaster has just happened or is imminent. In fact, you don't have to wait. You can improve the shock-responsiveness of social protection programmes by adjusting them to promote people's well-being even in the absence of any shock. This strengthens households' resilience, which helps make sure that—in the words of point 1 above—a shock doesn't provoke a crisis for the household. Some of the design tweaks mentioned in point 3 are examples.

Incidentally, when we talk about being able to act ex-ante, i.e. before or in the absence of a shock, these interventions that strengthen households' resilience are just one group of activities. Another group is all the 'system preparedness' work, i.e. getting ready before a shock in order to be able to act promptly afterwards. This might include, for example, getting contingency funds or partnership agreements in place, or linking programmes to early warning systems (agencies in the Caribbean have done a lot of thinking about this, as [this report](#) shows).⁴ Some concrete examples of such preparedness activities in social protection are also offered in recent reviews of the [2018-19 lean season response in Mozambique](#), and the [response to Hurricane Maria in 2017 in Dominica](#).^{5,6}

4. WFP (2019), 'Shock-responsive social protection in the Caribbean. Regional symposium. Turks and Caicos Islands, 27 June 2019 report', Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency and WFP.

5. Bailey, S. and Polvanesi, M. (2019), 'Cash transfers and vouchers in response to drought in Mozambique. Lessons on social protection linkages and separation of functions', WFP, HelpAge International and DFID.

6. Government of Dominica, WFP and UNICEF (2018), 'Joint Emergency Cash Transfer for Dominicans most affected by Hurricane Maria. Stocktaking exercise', Government of Dominica, WFP and UNICEF.



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... But some things called ‘shock-responsive social protection’ are about responding after disasters, in which case be aware of the implications

Some things labelled ‘shock-responsive social protection’ might more accurately be described as ‘an emergency response that uses the social protection system’. Responses to rapid-onset shocks such as floods or earthquakes using social protection might fall into this category (see, for example, the responses to tropical cyclones in 2016 in [Fiji](#) and [Sri Lanka](#)).^{7,8} For responses to annual seasonal food insecurity, or long-term complex crises, it may be harder to say if an intervention is an emergency response or social protection response. The dividing line is inevitably fuzzy.

Again, this fuzziness may not matter. But it’s important to recognise which part of government is mandated to respond to the problem being addressed. For example, if you work in social protection and wonder whether your programme might usefully deliver one-off assistance during a flood, you’re asking if it can contribute to emergency response. So you’d need to consult the ministry or other authority with a mandate for coordinating emergency response before making any decision. Otherwise you might just make the response more fragmented by catering for a subset of the shock-affected population through one instrument, while those not on your programme will still have to be reached by other means.



7. Government of Fiji and WFP (2017), ‘Tropical cyclone Winston. Fiji government and World Food Programme Joint Emergency Response—Lessons learned workshop report, April 2017’, Government of Fiji and WFP.
8. Mohan, S. (2016), ‘Sri Lanka: Learning lessons on disaster response’, *World Food Programme Insight*, WFP.



6

Having a shock-responsive social protection system goes beyond having shock-responsive programmes

The 'system' means everything that makes up the social protection sector as a whole: the legal framework, policies and strategies, institutional and financial arrangements, staff, databases and so on. Programmes are just one part of the system: they are the specific schemes designed to address people's needs, such as a cash transfer programme, free school meals, etc. A well designed social protection system will have a coherent set of programmes catering to different needs.

Making the overall *system* more responsive to shocks doesn't necessarily require adaptations to existing *programmes*. Here are some examples of what else you could do:

- Improve **contingency planning and coordination** for the entire sector, promoting early decision-making, or strengthening links between disaster risk management and social protection actors.
- Introduce a **permanent new social protection programme** that fills a gap, supporting people who previously had no access to assistance.
- Offer **elements of the social protection system** (maybe a database, an assessment tool, or even personnel) for use by emergency response actors, especially in the event of rapid-onset disasters. That way the social protection agency could share its operational systems, for example via a memorandum of understanding, without having to manage the response itself which may be unrelated to its core objective. We are seeing several examples of this in the current COVID-19 response.
- Create a **separate emergency programme** (maybe with its own targeting criteria, transfer values, duration and/or personnel) that is on standby, ready to be triggered when needed, like the [Emergency Cash Transfer](#) being proposed in the Philippines.⁹
- Design a method by which variable amounts of financing will be made available to accommodate fluctuations in the numbers of people needing assistance across the social protection sector as a whole.
- Provide **longer term financing** for an existing emergency response programme, turning it into something more 'social protection-like' (e.g. multi-year funding for a seasonal food security programme).

9. Acosta, P., Palma, P., Perez, J. and Velarde, R. (2018), 'Implementing emergency cash transfers: the Philippine experience in response to the 2016/17 disasters', World Bank Social Protection Policy Note no. 15, World Bank.



7 When using social protection programmes for post-disaster response, there are other options besides 'flexible scale-up'

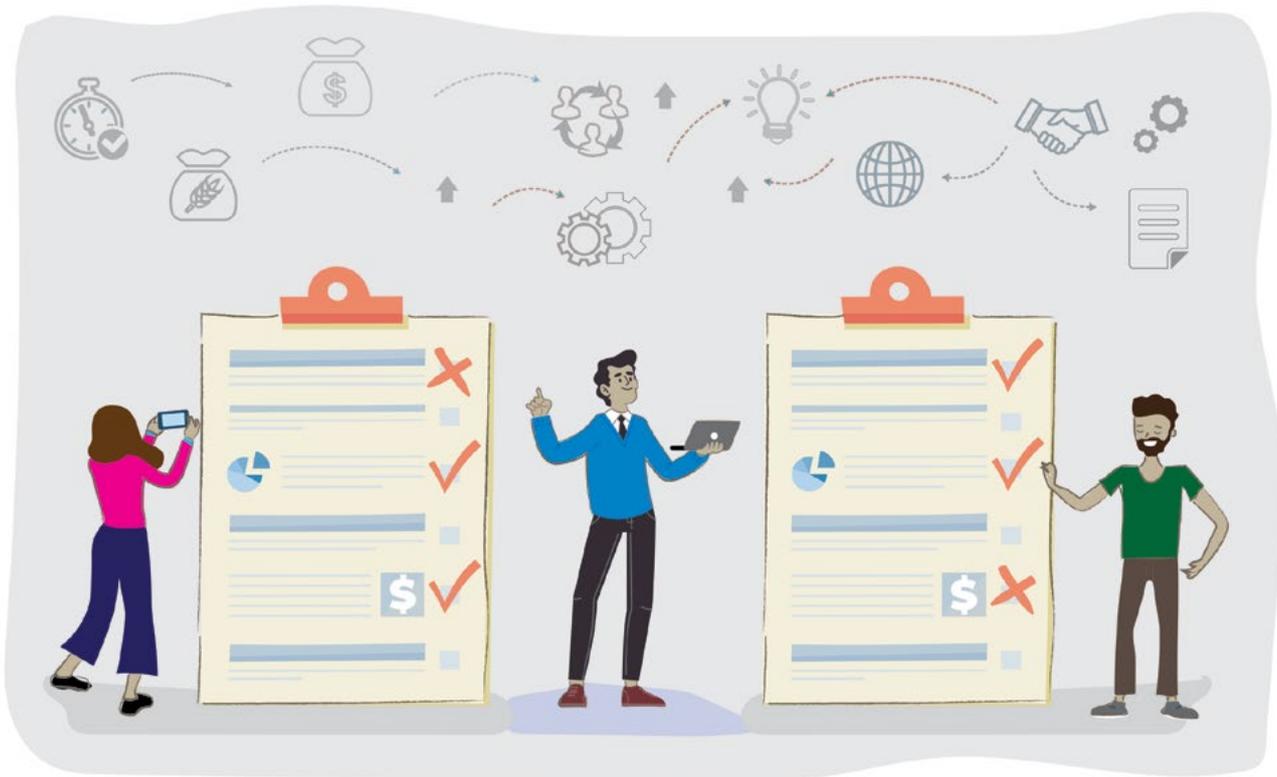
Despite the alternatives in point 6, the idea of the 'flexible scale-up' of programmes after a disaster still resonates strongly with policymakers exploring shock-responsive social protection. By this we mean their temporary expansion and then contraction, either 'vertically'—giving top-ups to people who already receive something—or 'horizontally', temporarily enrolling new beneficiaries.

Often, when people favour this approach, they mean simply that some people who haven't previously received any assistance should get some, and others who already receive assistance should get a bit more. This is reasonable, and fits the idea of social protection responding to its citizens' needs. It doesn't actually require the extension of a specific programme. As we noted in point 6, these extra needs could still be managed by the agency responsible for emergencies, but perhaps borrowing elements of the social protection

system, such as a database or an agreement with a payment service provider, if that improves efficiency or effectiveness (sometimes called 'piggybacking' on the system).

Does it make sense for a social protection agency to be handling disaster responses as part of its own named programmes? Well, that depends on factors like the overlap between the beneficiaries and the shock-affected population (if planning a top-up); the appropriateness of the modality, value and frequency of support that the programme provides (if planning to extend its coverage); the risk of overburdening existing delivery structures (staff, payment providers etc.); the likely speed of response (it's not always faster than an independent emergency response); and the political feasibility of scaling down the assistance once the crisis is over. Vulnerability / needs assessments are likely to be an essential part of working this out. See also point 8.





8

Some key factors help identify when it's a good idea to use social protection for disaster response (clue: speed isn't everything)

We often hear that, 'shock-responsive social protection is faster and more efficient than a traditional emergency response'. Is it true? Not necessarily. It can be; or it can be slower or less efficient. For example, if you top up a social assistance programme that gives quarterly benefits, and you've just missed the pay date, you'll have to wait three months unless you have the means to organise an extraordinary payment. This is a real example. Moreover, sometimes we assume the fastest solution is the best; but assistance may be less effective if delivered fast to the 'wrong' (non-affected) people, just because their names were conveniently on a list. We've seen this, too.

All policy decisions entail trade-offs. Since pure ideology shouldn't drive decision-making, what determines whether social protection is the best vehicle for disaster response? The OPM / DFID [toolkit on shock-responsive social protection](#) (2018) highlights six factors to guide your assessment of the relative benefits of different solutions (we've added a seventh):¹⁰

1. **Meeting needs**—What type and quantity of support best meets needs, while minimising protection concerns?
2. **Coverage**—How to reach the most people, or reduce the numbers needing assistance?

3. **Timeliness**—What support is fastest, or provides early and/ or timely response?
4. **Predictability**—of funding for agencies, and of assistance for households.
5. **Minimising duplication and gaps** in systems and processes, recognising other agencies' activities.
6. **Sustainability**, due to organisational and financial capacity, and/or political acceptability.
7. **Cost**.

This list is sometimes misinterpreted as, 'reasons why social protection is better'. It's not that. Social protection programmes aren't better than other emergency responses across all these. Nor are they consistently better in any one factor. For each factor, compare social protection options with alternatives, and decide subjectively your preferred risks and trade-offs. For example, if one option seems slower, you might still accept it if you prioritise long-term sustainability. This doesn't mean it's not worth investing in or exploring social protection. Clearly, the stronger the system in terms of coverage, comprehensiveness and quality, the more likely that when alternatives are assessed it will prove the best.

10. O'Brien, C., Holmes R. and Scott, Z., with Barca, V. (2018) 'Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems Toolkit—Appraising the use of social protection in addressing large-scale shocks', Oxford Policy Management, Oxford, UK.



9

There may even be options for disaster response that don't use social protection at all... for now

So, we spent the first six points observing how, ideally, social protection systems should be able to handle any amount of people needing assistance, irrespective of whether their needs are caused by individual or covariate shocks. Social protection schemes would be comprehensive and adequate, with wide coverage. They would improve people's resilience, thus reducing the number who suffer when a shock occurs; they'd be well resourced, allow flexible enrolment and keep functioning even during major crises... And then in points 7 and 8 we said social protection isn't always the answer, and that we shouldn't assume that a 'flagship' social assistance programme needs an emergency scale-up mechanism triggered by a specific shock and managed by the social protection agency.

OK, you may be thinking, so this is rather confusing. Where does the responsibility of social protection actors end, and that of emergency response actors start?

The answer changes over time, as systems develop. It depends on context, such as the programmes that exist, the crisis, and the political and financial setup. As we've seen, to decide if shock-responsive social protection is appropriate, be clear what problem you're fixing (see point 5), then compare several solutions and their trade-offs (see point 8). Alternative solutions may lie elsewhere, such as in programmes delivered by a national disaster management authority. Using social protection might be one option. But another might be to improve current emergency response mechanisms—by, say, establishing a contingency fund, or adjustments that enable them to be launched faster.

So, if you're a social protection practitioner, rather than ask, 'I've got this social protection programme, what can I do with it in a crisis?' it's useful to look more broadly: 'How are households supported in crises? What challenges are there, and what solutions might address them?'





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If we can maintain a rational and evidence-based approach to shock-responsive social protection, we can maximise our positive impact

In conclusion, implementers may feel increasingly obliged to attach ‘shock-responsive mechanisms’ to social assistance programmes, just because many agencies promote this. But, as we’ve seen, to maximise impact it’s fruitful to put aside terminology and focus on the desired outcomes. Many options emerge.

As a global community of government, development and humanitarian practitioners, let’s remind ourselves of key questions: *‘If I do X, how will this help households at risk of large-scale shocks? What are the other options? Which is most cost-effective? What will work best today? Where do we want to go in the long term?’* Don’t worry whether or not it counts as shock-responsive social protection.

For social protection practitioners, priorities might be: keep developing good routine social protection programmes, within a system that is well planned and resourced; then envisage how social protection programmes might be affected by various shocks, and prepare to ensure business continuity; then assess which people and places are most likely to be affected by different shocks (both covariate and individual-level), and improve their access to regular social protection. Explore how to accommodate fluctuations in demand for social protection, through flexible budgets and on-demand enrolment.

Meanwhile, consult with disaster risk management colleagues to decide whether it’s beneficial overall to adjust the social protection system or programmes to address specific shocks.

For people in emergency response, priorities might be: keep improving disaster risk management throughout the cycle from prevention to recovery; get familiar with social protection, identify whether there are benefits to handling parts of disaster mitigation and response through the sector, and if so, work out the trade-offs; and invite social protection practitioners to participate in planning for emergencies.

For international humanitarian agencies, priorities might be: understand governments’ structures, activities, and priority populations and locations for both disaster response and social protection; consider a range of possibilities to support governments to address these risks, being clear of their objectives and the trade-offs, and not pre-determining the solution; and consider whether their own activities risk leading to imbalanced responses (such as when multiple agencies decide to top up the same social protection programme in a disaster) and/or are likely to overburden national systems.

We look forward to continuing the debate!



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- For further information, or if you have any comments, you are welcome to get in touch with us at socialprotection@wfp.org
- To know more about WFP's work in social protection, follow this link: www.wfp.org/social-protection-and-safety-nets or scan this QR code:



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