WFP
World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Social Protection Learning Facility
Policy Brief #2

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND COVID-19
AMIDST CLIMATE SHOCKS

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an increasing focus on the role of social protection in building the resilience of households to climate-related shocks and stresses. This brief considers some of the potential impacts and implications of the coronavirus pandemic on this work in East Africa, drawing lessons from WFP's programming in a number of countries.

VULNERABILITY, CLIMATE CHANGE & COVID-19

> 'The ***triple threat*** of **COVID-19, floods and locusts** could have catastrophic consequences for the region'
>
> *(WFP July 2020 Regional Update).*

East Africa's vulnerability and food insecurity situation was already challenging, even before COVID-19 emerged. In recent years, the region has faced multiple climate shocks, notably droughts, floods and desert locusts outbreaks. In the 2018-2019 agricultural season, well before COVID-19, parts of East Africa experienced below average rainfall and delayed seasonal long rains, resulting in drought-like conditions across Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda and a deterioration in food security and nutrition situations. The knock-on effects of this were compounded, in late 2019, when heavy rains then led to flooding affecting some 2.8 million people in Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti. WFP established airbridges to access hard-to-reach areas in Kenya, South Sudan and Somalia. Three consecutive seasons of above-average rainfall since the end of 2019 has led to flooding and localised landslides across the region in 2020. While these rains have had positive impacts on production and environment resources for livestock, it has also led to severe impacts on livelihoods, production, and human displacement, with floods leaving 845,000 people displaced across the Horn, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi (FEWSNET 2020).OCHA estimates 3.6 million people affected by floods in 2020[1].

At the same time, to further compound the challenges, beginning January 2020 an unprecedented desert locust swarm broke out across many countries in East Africa. FAO projects that the current second phase of the swarm could be as much as 20 times worse than the first. FAO[2] have reported damage to tens of thousands of hectares of crop land and pasture in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda – with potential knock on effects to agricultural production, livelihoods and food security and the wider economy. This impact is ongoing, with swarms present in Ethiopia, Kenya, Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia as of December 2020.[3]

The broadest projections – including urban areas as well as climate-relate shocks – estimate the number of food insecure people will increase from 24 to 41.5 million[4]. At the same time, above average rainfall through to September continued to push up the number of those affected by flooding. The heavy rains in April were ranked among the wettest in 40-year records in parts of Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia.

Going forward, modelling points to a high probability of below-average rainfall in late 2020 and early 2021, particular in Somalia, eastern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, associated with a weak to moderate La Nina condition. If realised, this will further compound the challenges facing many countries in the region. COVID-19 also makes responding to climate shocks more difficult.

In the context of COVID-19, restrictions to movement and transport imposed to try and contain COVID-19 created logistical challenges for monitoring the movement of locusts and for pesticides/insecticide supply. Limitations on using social protection as a response to climate-related shocks and stresses have emerged because operations have been disrupted or delayed whilst programme implementers ensured that social protection targeting, verification and delivery mechanisms did not themselves become a source of infection. In particular, this led to a temporary halt to the use of biometrics, or where it is still being used much slower processes that allow for disinfecting of equipment.

1 https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/eastern-africa-humanitarian-snapshot-october-2020
2 FAO (2020b) Greater Horn of Africa and Yemen – Desert locust crisis appeal, January–December 2020, Rapid response and sustained action, revised edition. Rome.
3 http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/index.html
4 WFP / UNHabitat (2020) 'Impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods, food security and nutrition in East Africa – urban areas

IMPLICATIONS FOR WFP'S WORK ON SOCIAL PROTECTION

There are three main implications for social protection as it seeks to respond to the compounded challenges of COVID-19 and climate-related shocks and stresses.

First, ensuring that social protection is shock responsive – i.e. that it can flex and adapt to respond rapidly and directly to emerging needs - is critical. Shock responsive systems include a number of features – particularly functioning information systems and social registries to allow horizontal and vertical programming expansions and pre-positioned resources. As analysis by WFP in Rwanda has noted, these are not additional features for social protection systems but part of the foundations. The work to develop these foundations is ongoing in many countries in the region, WFP and partners support to strengthen this work on core shock-responsive systems can therefore take us a long way towards building climate-resilience. Where these are not already in place they need to be developed, and in the meantime other systems can be used to support scale-up.

Second, it is key to ensure that the medium and long-term focus on building resilience (both of social protection systems and of households) is not put to one side in the immediate COVID-19 response. Because there is only rarely a simple and continuous overlap between those affected by COVID-19 and those affected by weather-related shocks and their impact, there has been fiscal pressure to allocate expenditure towards COVID-19 thus risking deprioritising efforts to deal with climate change / weather shocks. In practice, it is therefore important to deliver a COVID-19 social protection response that does not undermine resilience building efforts but rather contributes to them.

Third, in order to be most effective in the social protection sector, organisations such as WFP also need to focus on the wider vulnerability landscape and identify those actions that can reduce risk and vulnerability more broadly. Examples include supporting logistics and supply chains (especially to ensure the supply of safe and nutritious foods) and supporting households in building resilience through asset creation.

More focus here could be placed on an integrated approach with other programs such as nutrition, asset creation, and livelihoods to support communities and households to reduce exposure to risks while at the same time contributing to building resilience over the long term with an overarching drive on enhancing absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities for sustainable and resilient livelihoods.

WHAT IS WFP DOING TO TRY AND ACHIEVE THIS?

In terms of strengthening shock responsive social protection …

WFP supports shock responsive social protection in the region in two ways. First, it supports expansions of government social protection programmes – for example in Ethiopia where WFP is working with government to expand elements of the Productive Safety Net Project in urban areas where the combination of climate-related shocks impacting on food production in rural areas and COVID-19 have pushed up food prices. Second, WFP provides complementary programming alongside government social protection such as in Kenya where it is expanding its support to 380,000 vulnerable people in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands. Counties are reached with food and cash assistance to cover seasonal food gaps in addition to broader support to productivity and engagement in resilient and profitable food systems.

A key element of WFP's work is ensuring that there are synergies rather than duplications between social protection programmes for COVID-19 and wider locust responses. In Somalia, WFP works with government, the World Bank and UNICEF on the national safety net project, Safety Nets for Human Capital (SNHCP) reaching 1.2m people (in 200,000 households). In addition, WFP in collaboration with Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) is implementing a Shock Responsive Safety Net for Locust Response Project (SNLRP) to deliver emergency cash transfers to approximately 100,000 households (or 600,000 individuals) affected by locusts. The additional financing for the shock response project SNLRP for locust response builds on the national safety net project, SNHCP, with vertical and horizontal expansion. The targeted caseload eligible for the vertical expansion, will receive an additional $40 to the $20 paid through the SNHCP. The eligible beneficiaries identified in additional districts impacted by Locust will receive a full payment of $60 per month for a period of six months. At every stage of the project cycle (including targeting, registration, verification and payment) there are adaptations to mitigate the risks of COVID-19. The project draws on existing operational partnerships, including the use of SCOPE (WFP's digital beneficiary database) and the systems established among partners for the Shock Responsive Safety Net for Human Capital Project (SNHCP) to ensure coherence and harmonisation of various safety net programmes across Somalia.

In terms of maintaining a focus on longer term resilience building …

A number of COVID-19 responses are taking both an immediate and longer-term view. In many countries, there is a focus on ensuring that households impacted by COVID-19 avoid falling deeper into food insecurity and avoid distress of productive assets – for example safety net programmes in urban and rural Somalia.

In Rwanda, both government and WFP recognise as a priority the enhancement of existing social protection programmes and systems to resilience and to mitigating the risk of natural disasters. Challenges to achieving this include:

- The limited geographical distribution of climate-related shocks in Rwanda means that some of the usual tools may not be effective – for example a social registry is generally most relevant in supporting horizontal expansions of programmes in case of a covariate shock with a widely distributed impact rather than highly localized or lifecycle shocks. In Rwanda, climate-shocks are most commonly localized. In this case the challenge is to adapt the registry to respond locally and to help guide responses in other sectors (such as emergency management or health);
- Rwanda benefits from a strong and functioning government-led disaster response system alongside the social protection system. There is therefore an opportunity to support the coordination of government actions across ministries and sectors to build synergies that contribute to resilience.
- The assets that households are supported to create through public works in the national flagship social protection programme – VUP –could be adjusted to enhance their climate-sensitivity.

WFP Rwanda is working towards overcoming these challenges by supporting national assessment and analysis (including carrying out an assessment of the shock-responsive features in the existing social protection systems and programmes in the country), identifying the strategic and operational partnerships that can support improved climate-sensitive social protection responses, and strengthening capacity through piloting new approaches in selected districts. In the context of COVID-19, WFP is seeking to ensure that the experiences of using social protection to respond to COVID-19 – either through government programmes or WFP-implemented complementary programming – are reflected in approaches to shock-responsive social protection going forward.

In Burundi, there are good examples of the trade-offs between immediate and long-term responses in WFP's decisions about adapting and expanding FFA programming. In order to ensure social distancing and reduce the risk of contagion, work switched from household and community level asset creation to solely a household focus. Recipient households in Burundi were supported to elaborate their own development plans according to their specific needs, including integration of climate change adaptation such as through agro-forestry and access to safe and environmentally friendly cooking technologies. The household development plan includes the productive assets to be created and a cash use plan. The payment of cash is conditional on the level of implementation of the household development plan.

In the meantime, WFP as part of a UN consortia including FAO, UNFPA and UNICEF, implementing the joint EU funded TUBEHONEZA project have developed COVID-19 sensitive measures to aid resumption of community asset creation. These measures aim to prevent the spread of the pandemic amongst participants. These precautionary and risk reduction measures are aligned to the National Contingency Plan for the Preparation and Response to Covid-19.

However, using social protection for Covid-19 response also creates two particular trade-offs between immediate and longer term objectives: first, decisions about whether to scale horizontally but reduce the duration of works and payments are caught between reaching as many vulnerable households as possible and creating assets that make a meaningful difference to people's livelihoods in the longer term; and second, given that the greater impact on environmental resilience is usually through the creation of public / community environmental assets, rather than individual assets, it is difficult to maximise works to best mitigate the impacts of environmental and climate change. The lesson from Burundi is that clear pathways back to maximising climate-sensitive asset creation are required in order to ensure that long term gains are not lost.

IN TERMS OF ADDRESSING THE WIDER VULNERABILITY LANDSCAPE ...

WFP also works to deliver complementary programmes and initiatives that address the wider vulnerability context that households face. In Kenya, WFP is undertaking real-time market and supply chain assessments, providing a weekly summary of key trends for external partners to guide their programming. In Ethiopia, under the R4 Rural Resilience project, WFP supports risk-insurance for pastoralist farmers. During COVID-19, when income generating activities of participants were constrained, the programme was adapted to allow participants to pay their full premium in labour rather than cash, in order to, in turn, reduce dropouts and ensure that the longer term benefits of the programme were not lost. In South Sudan, WFP is working with FAO and other partners to ensure supply chains and agricultural extension support to farmers to protect vulnerable rural households against a negative spiral of COVID-19, restricted input and extension supply chains to support productivity and disrupted demand.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the impacts of multiple and serious climate-related shocks and stresses on vulnerable households in the East Africa region – from the lagging impacts of drought in late 2018, to floods and locust, COVID-19 has created another layer of risk.

Key to WFP's work in the region has been responding to immediate threats while not losing focus on longer-term agendas and programming in support of resilience building in the face of climate shocks. This is being done in three main ways, with a rich and varied experience across countries: strengthening shock responsive social protection systems – particularly by establishing or reinforcing the foundations of social protection that contribute most to enabling vertical and horizontal scale-ups; maintaining a focus on longer term resilience programming – especially by leveraging the entry points that COVID-19 offers, such as changing the usual ways that FFA programmes work to a wider focus on individual assets that support resilience rather than community or public assets alone; and finally, ensuring that WFP's work on social protection links to work outside the sector that indirectly reduces vulnerability and food and nutrition insecurity.

THE SOCIAL PROTECTION LEARNING FACILITY

is an initiative developed by WFP's regional bureau for East and Central Africa, with country offices in the region. It seeks to enhance evidence-based decision making, learning and accountability in WFP's social protection work in the context of COVID-19 and other shocks. It does so by combining real-time evaluation of WFP's activities with technical assistance to WFP staff who are navigating difficult trade-offs as they seek to support governments to flex social protection in the region.

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