



Malawi: Unpacking the issue of targeting in responses to slow-onset weather-induced food crises

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

An ECHO-funded technical assistance facility, managed by the World Food Programme (WFP), aims to explore how social protection systems can be strengthened in fragile and forced displacement contexts, with a view to contributing to the global learning agenda on when and how these can be used to address humanitarian needs in a more cost-effective, efficient and predictable way.

Short-term technical assistance has been provided to improve programme design or implementation in nine countries facing protracted crises¹. Each assignment tackles a priority theme identified collectively by humanitarian and development partners, complementing and catalysing efforts by national governments and their partners to enhance the well-being of chronically poor or vulnerable populations, those affected by crises, those living in conflict situations and/or refugees. The assignments focus on linkages between humanitarian action and social

protection: this includes the identification of good practices and recommendations for improved institutional coordination, knowledge transfer, and delivery systems such as information systems or payment mechanisms. Projects are designed and managed in country by a partnership of WFP, FAO, ECHO, UNICEF, DFID and World Bank representatives, in consultation with the government and other agencies according to the context. One partner serves as the lead in each country.

This briefing note summarises technical assistance in Malawi, where we examined the targeting methods employed in cash-based humanitarian responses to acute food insecurity, to inform development of shock-responsive targeting in response to future drought-related shocks. It collected data to answer three strategic questions: i) who to target (population sub-groups and identifying criteria); ii) how to target (systems and processes); and iii) when to target (timeframe and early warning triggers, for preventative

¹ The nine countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia and Uganda.

action). It assessed the feasibility of using the Unified Beneficiary Registry (UBR) underpinning social protection in Malawi for targeting of the Joint Emergency Food Assistance Programme (JEFAP), including its application in a range of targeting methods (community based targeting, categorial targeting and proxy means testing), with a view to move towards common and 'shock-sensitive targeting' mechanisms.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Malawi is a shock-prone country with a high prevalence of poverty and chronic food and nutrition insecurity. A large proportion of the population is vulnerable to climatic shocks which are becoming increasingly frequent and intense. The compounding effect is driving a vicious cycle of poverty and recurrent vulnerability². The national social protection system already includes a nationwide, quickly developing cash delivery system, built around the flagship social cash transfer programme (SCTP), whereas the national disaster management institutions currently have no capacity to deliver such assistance. The social protection system supports a proportion of the chronically poor, but is not equipped to respond to these seasonal needs. This means that each year over 10 percent of the population relies on international emergency assistance to fill this gap³. This misses the opportunity of building national capacity to respond to what are now, essentially, chronic needs. Furthermore, the development gains that social protection contributes to risk being undermined.

In recognition of these challenges, addressing the needs of those vulnerable to crisis has become a priority for the Government and its partners. In 2017 the national social protection framework (Malawi National Social Support Programme MNSSP II) was adapted to include a focus on resilience building and shock-sensitive social protection. This has the dual objective of improving resilience of the population while better meeting additional seasonal needs of existing beneficiaries under different integrated phase classification (IPC) phases and establishing formal linkages with emergency programming to improve preparedness for and responses to climatic shocks. It is expected that plans to scale up the coverage and value of and improve the delivery of assistance provided under social protection schemes will contribute to reducing caseloads of food insecure people requiring assistance. In districts where the social protection system is advanced enough, it is hoped that it may be possible to leverage that system to deliver emergency food assistance to regular social protection beneficiaries at low cost, while making use of national systems, such as social registries, could reduce the time and resources allocated to emergency targeting processes, supporting

more timely and efficient emergency responses. Shock sensitive social protection is a priority across national planning processes, including the National Resilience Strategy, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, the lean season food insecurity response plan; and UNDAF 2019-2023. Actions to date include a study by WFP, the World Bank and GIZ assessing options for shock response through the social protection system, piloting vertical expansion of the SCTP during seasonal drought, and trialling use of Malawi's new unified social registry for humanitarian targeting.

A key question to resolve, therefore, is how to operate inter-connections between the two systems so that an emergency response, triggered by the IPC early warning system, and supported by international donors when needed can be delivered through the national social protection system. Evidence from these early experiences indicates that targeting processes are a key barrier to fostering these linkages. Each social protection programme, and emergency programmes, use a range of different targeting criteria and methods, implemented through separate systems and processes. Vulnerable households on social protection programmes are often excluded during targeting of emergency programmes, while at the same time not all households on poverty-oriented programmes are considered eligible for temporary food assistance. There is a need for clear and harmonised targeting criteria and processes with which to identify households for assistance, including temporary food assistance. This was highlighted as a key investment area under a Returns on Investment Model of Shock-Responsive Social Protection undertaken in Malawi.



2 Over 50% of the population are poor and 25% live in extreme poverty, while Malawi is one of eight crises in the world with the largest numbers of people in 'IPC Phase 2' (i.e. households are in a stressed food security situation, and in danger of falling into crisis situation).

3 In the 2016/17 lean season almost 40 % of the population required support.

RESEARCH METHOD

The terms of reference for the TA and the research scope was developed through consultations between WFP, UNICEF, FAO and the government. WFP Malawi managed the assignment, in partnership with UNICEF Malawi, who shared a complementary analysis of the PMT formula and categorical variables used in the national Unified Beneficiary Registry (UBR) data. Work was led by an independent consultant. It comprised:

- A literature review of contextual documentation on the food security situation, social protection and emergency response systems in Malawi, as well as relevant experiences and best practices from shock responsive social protection globally.
- In country and remote consultations with a range of key informants from national government, international donors, the UN, Red Cross, INGOs and coordination bodies⁴.
- Field visits to Chikwawa and Balaka districts and consultations with district councils, local leaders, NGO staff and community members.

FINDINGS

Expanding an integrated social protection floor in normal times will support shock sensitive social protection: in Malawi the intention is to provide a social protection floor to the ultra-poor, including consumption support for those with constrained labour capacity, and asset creation work for those with labour capacity. This will be underpinned by common operational systems such as the Unified Beneficiary Registry currently being rolled out across the country and a national ID system. This expansion in coverage (in terms of number of the vulnerable population, and in terms of household needs) of regular social protection programmes is noted as an essential 'enabler' of the SSSP agenda in Malawi. It will help to build the resilience of populations vulnerable to these seasonal covariate shocks, include and familiarise a larger pool of vulnerable households in systems that can be used for channelling emergency assistance, while also strengthening and harmonising these underlying operational systems.

Determining which targeting approach(s) will be most appropriate for SSSP and (pre-)targeting of emergency responses requires adopting a systems perspective: the social protection system incorporates a range of targeting approaches including poverty, categorical and community based targeting. Assessing the practicalities, and pros and cons of using these an emergency must take into account the likely ways

in which the national social protection system will evolve over time – and specifically how quickly this will transform from the present discretionary household-based approach towards an entitlement-based individual life-course approach. In the Malawi context, where poverty is widespread and homogenous, and targeting largely ineffective, there is a strong case for transitioning towards such an approach which focuses on vulnerable categories of the population in a transparent manner, and such a shift is already happening elsewhere in Southern Africa. This will impact on the coverage of overall social protection, the scale of individual programmes, and of course the targeting criteria being used, all of which will influence the benefits and limitations of the different approaches to shock sensitive social protection.

Community perceptions must be taken into account in the design of any targeting strategy for SSSP:

while targeting should be accurate for the effectiveness of the intervention, it must also be seen to be fair and equitable by communities. Research in Malawi has highlighted that poverty-targeted or overly complex methods designed at the national level with the aim of reducing targeting errors are not well understood at the local level, which can create social tensions and also undermine effective application of the targeting process. The report emphasises the importance of including the cultural and political dimensions of rural life in the selection of targeting criteria and methods, and that it is better to keep the process simple, communicable, and 'good enough' even if this is slightly less accurate. In this respect the use of categorical indicators emerges as a useful approach to explore, since communities themselves tend to prioritise easily identifiable groups, such as elderly-headed households, the chronically ill, and heavily disabled persons.

A Unified Beneficiary Registry has potential to improve targeting of emergency assistance, though perhaps not in the ways initially envisaged:

this social registry is being developed to address concerns about fragmentation of the social protection system, with the aim to provide a consolidated source of information on the socio-economic status of households to inform eligibility for social programmes. This has initially been developed for the two flagship SCTP and PWP programmes, but with a view to serving additional programmes over time. It is currently based on a Harmonised Data Collection Tool (HDCT) collecting data on a range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. It gives each household a poverty score and wealth ranking through use of a proxy means test. In 2018 the registration target shifted from 50 to 100 per cent of rural households and it is expected to have been rolled out in all districts by 2020 and be

4 Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning, and Development, Department of Disaster Management Affairs, Unified Beneficiary Registry, European Union Delegation, ECHO, Irish Aid, DFID, KfW, GIZ, World Bank, USAID, WFP, UNICEF, CARE, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Malawian Red Cross Society, United Purpose, World Vision, Shock Sensitive Social Protection Learning Taskforce Plus, JEFAP Taskforce.

updated every four years. There is consensus on also using the UBR as a basis for any SSSP system. Actors were keen to explore the possibility of using the UBR to inform targeting of emergency food assistance, on the expectation that this could improve accuracy, cost-efficiency, and timeliness of response. However, a trial in 2017 concluded that such benefits were not so clear cut. Using the UBR's PMT results to generate a pre-defined beneficiary list for emergency assistance was not appropriate as it did not capture the dynamism of the emergency context, while assumptions within the poverty ranking did not necessarily reflect the assumptions underlying vulnerability to food insecurity. There were concerns as to whether the PMT accurately identifies those 'most in need' in a context where poverty and food insecurity are widespread and homogeneous. Other ways that the UBR could be more appropriately leveraged to support targeting of emergency assistance under the JEFAP were identified, including the ability to geotag households and the 100 per cent registration coverage in at risk districts which provides a list for further assessment and verification. Here, the demographic information included in the UBR offer potential to support a categorical approach in emergency targeting.

Thought must be given to HOW social protection programmes can effectively inform targeting of emergency assistance: linked to the above, a key finding is that i) the targeting approach used for one programme (such as the SCTP) is not necessarily suitable for another with a different objective, and ii) the accuracy of targeting on social protection programmes to data is highly error prone, meaning those enrolled are not necessarily the most in need according to the published criteria. It means that a household enrolled in a poverty alleviating programme like the SCTP cannot be automatically *assumed* to be most vulnerable to food insecurity and thus eligible for emergency assistance. This means that, for any interventions that plan to piggyback on an existing group of beneficiary households to provide complementary assistance, or future vertical expansion of the SCTP in seasonal crises, the suitability of using the SCTP beneficiary list as the basis for such targeting should be assessed.

A phased approach to delivering emergency assistance linked to social protection is needed: the research concludes that, in light of the above, the main approach to SSP currently being put forward by development partners (vertical and horizontal expansion of the flagship SCTP) may not be the most effective in the short to medium term while coverage of the SCTP and social protection targeting approaches and systems and capacities are still evolving. It highlights the added value of introducing a specific lean season social protection programme in the first instance, rather than relying on the expansion of an existing poverty-alleviating programme, such as the SCTP, in order to prevent overburdening the SCTP and retaining the oversight of emergency/humanitarian actors, while still fostering linkages with the social protection system and reducing fragmentation of

emergency responses. Similarly it highlights the need to carefully define the scope of any SSSP, that this should aim to address the annual cyclical, slow-onset weather-induced food crises that characterise the regular lean season, but that a parallel emergency system should still be activated in the event of major shock-induced needs such as in severe drought years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study makes several recommendations for what the government and its development and humanitarian partners should prioritise during the implementation period of the MNSSP II (2018-2023), in order to move forward with shock sensitive social protection in Malawi:

- Developing a common vision and action plan across the nexus: including establishing a Donor Coordination Team for joint dialogue between development and humanitarian donors and defining a common, and long term, vision guided by needs as opposed to institutional mandates.
- Incrementally transitioning towards an integrated system: including scaling up implementation of the SCTP through e-payments across the country; prototyping and piloting the proposed interim 'SSSP' model in priority districts; generating learning from this to inform further development of the future SSSP system (UBR, targeting committees, guidelines and SOPs etc) before further scale up once systems and processes mature; adjusting on-going projects to aligned with the emerging long-term vision; and introducing new projects and programmes directly supporting the long-term vision; and clarifying funding sources over the medium term.
- Testing new targeting innovations during the lean season response to inform the future SSSP system development: such as piloting use of the completed UBR and wealth ranking data, adjusting the emergency top-up value according to household size, or testing a 'pre-targeting' process for SCTP beneficiaries.

NEXT STEPS

Taking into account findings from this TA and wider experiences, the government and donors are discussing implications for shock sensitive social protection in Malawi, with a view to developing common agreement on the way forward. It is hoped that this can inform an upcoming 5-year World Bank project on shock-responsive safety nets, due to be approved by the end of the year.



LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences highlight lessons for actors seeking to build similar linkages between social protection and humanitarian action:

- Building linkages between social protection and humanitarian action can be conceived in different ways – involving expansion of an existing social protection programme, or the leveraging of aspects of the underlying social protection system for a separate programme. These approaches will move future programming in different directions. Operationalising these linkages therefore first requires close coordination among all actors at the conceptual stage, to reach agreement on the practical meaning of ‘shock responsive social protection’ that is most applicable and appropriate to the context. Without this, different competing can risk harming rather than strengthening the development of the social protection system.
- While international partners can have a catalytic function in supporting building assistance across the nexus, they might also at times constrain progress. In Malawi the number of NGO partners intervening in this area on independently conceived programmes, without a system-wide view, and the many trials and pilots being implemented, can lead to duplication and confusion and impede development of an integrated SSSP system. All actions in this space should be connected to and guided by policy discussions at a central level.

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