



Mali: Building Effective Social Protection for Conflict Affected Areas

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

An ECHO-funded technical assistance facility, managed by the World Food Programme (WFP), aimed 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 was provided to improve programme design or implementation in nine countries facing protracted crises¹. Each assignment tackled 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 focused on linkages between humanitarian action and social protection: this included the identification of good practices and recommendations for improved institutional coordination, knowledge transfer, and delivery systems such as information systems or payment mechanisms. Projects were 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 country context. One partner served as the lead in each country.

This briefing note summarises technical assistance in Mali. We developed a framework for supporting the provision of social protection (transfers or basic services) in areas of the country where the presence and capacity of central Government is limited due to conflict or insecurity. The framework maps and builds upon existing approaches being employed by humanitarian and civil society actors, that are accepted by communities. It develops practical guidelines for implementers to strengthen, harmonise and standardise the consistency and quality of these various services, filling gaps while aligning service provision with national policies and strategies. It places special emphasis on strengthening capacities of local State technical services (where they are present) to support gradual ownership of approaches in the future. It complements previous research on the potential for shock responsive social protection in Mali, which focused on needs stemming from climate vulnerability and prioritised analysis of social transfers.

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

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Since the coup d'état in 2012, the Malian government's ability to provide essential services to the population has been considerably limited or reduced in a large part of the country. Areas covered by the peace agreement are under control of interim authorities, with limited experience in provision of essential services. Other areas controlled by extremist groups or where government workers and law enforcement agencies have been targeted with violence, there is very limited government control and access to public services.

In this complex political context, the government is nonetheless determined to extend social protection system across the country, including in conflict zones. This includes a particular focus on non-contributory support, including social transfers to households and ensuring access to basic social services. In conflict zones this includes exemption from health costs.

Social protection commitments are included in national policies and planning documents². The Specific Strategy for Development of the Northern Regions of Mali (SSD/RN) 2017 outlines the extension of health services with targeted exemptions from health costs, and cash transfers, as the main priorities.

Humanitarian actors are supporting the government in providing the necessary assistance to vulnerable populations in these areas, though the degree of alignment with national objectives varies. In this context the development of a strategy to guide all actors in the provision of key services could contribute significantly to stabilisation and reducing the risk of conflict and lay the foundations for a future social protection system in the conflict zones.

RESEARCH METHOD

This assignment was led by WFP Mali. WFP sought feedback on the ToR and concept note through the multi-stakeholder coordination group on social protection, comprising international agencies, INGOs, the Ministry of Solidarity and humanitarian donors. This engagement ensured the ToR's references to the political context in the north and centre of Mali were phrased in a way that was acceptable for the government.

Work was led by an independent consultant, supported by a national expert. Work comprised identification of priority social protection sectors and programmes for which guidelines are needed to ensure access to key services,

while ensuring consistency with applicable government strategies and policies. Following review of secondary data on non-contributory social protection and humanitarian assistance in Mali, primary data collection activities included interviews with key informants in government, the humanitarian community and other civil society actors³, and field work in three villages in north-east, north-west and central Mali⁴. A national consultation workshop shared preliminary findings regarding the challenges, good practices and recommendations, attended by government and non-government stakeholders⁵.

FINDINGS

Programming in conflict-affected areas of Mali is complex and challenging, fraught with issues such as local mistrust of central government, risk of politicization of targeting, limited oversight, capacity challenges in local implementers, conflict mediation and negotiation with intermediaries, and concerns over safety and beneficiary data protection. This notwithstanding, the study identified opportunities for developing more coherent, consistent and inclusive social protection services through collaboration between state, civil society and humanitarian actors, building upon existing initiatives and aligning with government policy. There are also inevitably factors hindering such collaborations that are explored as well.

The government's basic services access strategy can be effectively adapted for the north and centre, if capacity gaps can be addressed: Humanitarian actors are already supporting the government in planning and implementing national strategy to improve access of vulnerable populations to basic services in the north and centre, due to budget constraints and limited presence of government in these areas. Numerous practices emerging from the efforts of humanitarian and civil society actors are proving effective at removing geographical and financial barriers for vulnerable populations, including mobile clinics, Integrated Management of Childhood Illness and establishment of community health workers. These tried and tested approaches provide a solid foundation for service provision in the north and centre, providing that an institutional framework can be established to improve governance of these parallel initiatives.

UN and NGO experiences should inform development of 'institutional standards', to provide a framework informing quality programming and enabling greater harmonisation of activities between actors. This should incorporate humanitarian standards to promote knowledge transfer

2 Including the Strategic Framework for the Economic Recovery and Sustainable Development of Mali (Cadre Stratégique pour la Relance Economique et le Développement Durable au Mali CREDD 2016-2018), the National Policy for Social Protection (PNPS) 2016, the Global Alliance for Resilience in the Sahel and West Africa (AGIR), the National Policy for Humanitarian Action (PNAH) and the National Policy for Food and Nutrition Security (POLNSAN).

3 Including stakeholders in government (Ministère de la Solidarité et de l'Action Humanitaire - Direction Nationale de la Protection Sociale et Economie Solidaire, Direction Nationale de la Santé - Division Nutrition, Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire, Système d'Alerte Précoce, Centre National des Cantines Scolaires (CNCS), Jigisèmèjiri); donors (ECHO, EU, USAID), UN agencies (WFP, FAO, UNICEF, OCHA), representatives of coordination forums (Ad hoc working group on social protection, Cash working group (CWG), Cluster leads for Nutrition/ Santé and food security, ICC, Cadre commun santé (CCS), Consortium ARC, Rapid Response Mechanism), INGOs (IRC, ACF, PUI, Solidarités, OXFAM, Save the Children), and research institutes (IRD, MISELI).

4 Ansongo district (Gao region) near the Nigerian border; Goundam (Timbuktu region) and Tenenkou (Mopti region).

5 Including 12 representatives from government, 8 representatives from donors and UN, 7 representatives from consortia and coordination bodies, 10 representatives from INGOs and research institutes.

from humanitarian actors to national development policy and ensure that strategies for service provision are appropriate to the context. Given the government's objective to increase coverage of the national medical assistance plan, RAMED, specific opportunities are identified to adapt this service to make it more appropriate for the north and centre. This includes amendment of proof of eligibility requirements to reduce barriers to access for those who lack formal ID, and geographical coordination of the expansion of RAMED with other social transfer programmes.

Humanitarian actors can bring important added value and expertise to the execution of development strategies in conflict zones: the mandate of humanitarian actors to create humanitarian space and meet needs of affected populations in difficult to reach areas means they have developed good practices for overcoming challenges of access in the north and centre, which can be equally applied on social protection programmes. This includes:

- Complementary assessments and analyses to better understand local power dynamics, market dynamics, capacities and resources and to pre-identify and mitigate possible protection risks during implementation.
- Approaches to improve inclusion throughout the programme cycle, including participatory assessments, decentralization of information sharing activities to the level of the commune, village and clan, verification of all site proposals made by local authorities to ensure access for marginalized populations, and engagement of traditional leaders and community committees managing social services.
- Triangulation of information collected, through strategies such as diversifying information sources, direct field observations, use of geospatial software, consultations with different population groups, and a two-stage process to targeting assistance that combines household socioeconomic data with voices from the community.

Coordination is crucial but the nature and extent of coordination should vary: while humanitarian and civil society actors can take a lead role in implementation in the north, the government are the duty bearers for social protection service provision in the country and must be implicated and involved in the delivery of services that they are ultimately accountable for. Coordination mechanisms between government and humanitarian and civil society actors need to be better and more consistently defined, at regional and local levels. These mechanisms should take into account the diversity of security contexts in different parts of the center and north, to ensure the appropriate level of state engagement. In all areas, as a minimum, this should include forums and processes for regular sharing of information with administrative authorities and technical services on planned and ongoing actions. Where and as soon as conditions make it possible it should actively and systematically engage these authorities in partnership, to gradually strengthen their technical capabilities.

Mechanisms to improve accountability to affected populations have many benefits but must be appropriate for the context: Improving awareness of the population on social protection eligibility criteria, and enabling communities to provide feedback on programme design and implementation have potential to support populations to better claim their rights, reduce confusion and community tensions, reinforce satisfaction with services received and increase perceived legitimacy of service providers. The study identified several barriers which limit effectiveness of 'traditional' feedback mechanisms employed to date, such as illiteracy of communities, location of complaints boxes, fear of retribution (such as being taken off assistance/reduced access to informal assistance), and cultural barriers to 'complaining'.

The coverage of digital technology offers potential to improve access for dispersed populations and to provide channels that better ensure anonymity and security, such as through toll free hotlines. An identified best practice was ensuring sufficient access to information, through combining a range of contextually appropriate media channels such as griots / public criers, local radio stations and CSOs/NGOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends various joint actions for government and non-governmental actors, to develop the institutional framework for better coordinated and quality service provision in conflict zones aligned with national priorities, and more effectively address needs of poor and vulnerable populations:

- Develop national standards and norms for social transfers, aligned with the sectoral policies for health and education and ensure complementarity between instruments and approaches used by different actors.
- Mainstream protection and accountability mechanisms throughout the national social protection plan to mitigate risks for beneficiaries participating in social protection schemes.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms at different levels, ensuring a stronger involvement of decentralized authorities and actors to increase of accountability towards the populations
- Reinforce the collaborative dynamics of the humanitarian community and state service through a commitment around the common objective of providing immediate quality assistance to the most vulnerable. Also invest in the information of the population and ensure their involvement in all stages of the cycle, through a participatory process which connects to the local level.
- Leverage existing coordination forums and platforms to bring the different actors together and enable consultation, as opposed to creating new platforms and groups;

- Extend proven outreach strategies and establish a dialogue at national level on the adaptation of national standards to volatile contexts and nomadic populations.
- Encourage knowledge sharing, especially dissemination of learning from innovative approaches to basic service provision in conflict zones.
- Promote collaboration among stakeholders on targeting and needs assessments and improve information sharing, while also increasing awareness on the part of the population of targeting methods and their rights.
- Pursue harmonization of approaches between partner at a national and sub-national level, as well as partnership and communication approaches between the various platforms in Mali.
- Pursue discussions and agreement on the importance of multisectoral approaches, including education, and school feeding.

NEXT STEPS

This technical assistance was highly relevant to the context. Findings have been well received by humanitarian stakeholders within and outside government. They were amongst others also discussed at the social protection forum in November 2018. The next steps is work with Government to engage with the full range of development partners, to develop and endorse a road map based on these findings, in order to coordinate joint efforts for improving social protection provisioning in the north and centre of Mali.

LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences have generated lessons for actors seeking to build and strengthen social protection provision in conflict affected areas:

- Conflict zones are not homogeneous and political relationships, community dynamics, legitimacy of state and non-state actors and systems of governance will vary between locations. Efforts to build or strengthen social protection provision must take this variation into account, to ensure the approaches proposed are appropriate. In the right context, alignment with government policies and systems is useful to ensure future ownership and sustainability, but in other contexts it could pose a risk to programme success, or safety. Guidance and procedures should clearly define the nature, levels, and extent of joint engagement or cooperation between stakeholders, and amend these as needed to reflect dynamics in different locations.
- Any multi-agency and multisectoral approach should actively engage with and include civil society groups and the United Nations and other relevant actors from the outset, to act as a gateway into conflict affected communities. These are often the de factor service providers. In contexts where international agencies may not be perceived as neutral, this can improve relationships with and build trust of communities and tolerance of any incumbent local authorities to improve access.

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