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Niger: Improving social protection systems for food security and nutrition

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 Niger. Here we assessed the feasibility of introducing an institutionalised cash response for acute/seasonal food security crises as an alternative or complement to food distributions, with a roadmap of the operationalisation process and capacity building needs. We examined the current operational processes of the government's department established to coordinate multi-year social transfers for food and nutrition security, the *Cellule Filets Sociaux* (CFS), and developed a roadmap for establishing the technical framework required for the CFS to fulfil its mandate. We then identified possible entry points for developing linkages between these transfer mechanisms addressing cyclical and chronic vulnerabilities at the national and sub-national levels. Work is intended to support the government to achieve

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

its strategic objective of reducing vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity. It is complementing ongoing reforms of government and donors aiming to develop the social protection sector and link mechanisms addressing chronic and seasonal vulnerability.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

The causes of vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity in Niger are both cyclical and structural. Its position in the Sahelian region exposes much of its population to a range of cyclical climatic risks - particularly droughts but also floods, extreme temperatures and windstorms – as well as to crop and livestock diseases. These risks overlap with structural factors such as food market fluctuations, weak production systems, land degradation, a high population growth rate and land insecurity. They contribute to regular food security crises that are systematically degrading households' livelihood systems and their ability to absorb external shocks and contributing to high rates of chronic and acute malnutrition.

Since restructuring in 2016, short-term responses to acute food insecurity due to drought are institutionalised under the *Cellule Crise Alimentaire* (CCA) department within the *Dispositif National de Prévention et de Gestion des Crises Alimentaires* (DNP-GCA), which has a mandate for prevention, mitigation, management and early recovery of the impacts of food, pastoral and nutritional crises. Government responses to rapid onset shocks and population displacements are less institutionalised and are heavily supported by humanitarian actors working alongside the recently-formed Ministry of Humanitarian Action and the DNP-GCA. Until recently an institutionalised social protection system was non-existent. However, the government recognises the important role social protection, especially social transfers, can play in reducing vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity and is committed to moving forward with its development.

Social protection is enshrined in the 2010 constitution and the National Social Protection Policy (PNPS) that was adopted in 2011. The development of a comprehensive safety net system, ensuring targeting of and coverage for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are key objectives of the national development plan and the 2016-2020 action plan of the cross-government 3N (*Nigériens Nourrissent les Nigériens*) Initiative to tackle nutrition. Strengthening the strategic and operational linkages between short-term responses to food and nutrition insecurity and long-term social protection is another strategic objective of the government and its partners². Efforts in this regard include: establishing a specific department, the CFS, under the DNP-GCA in 2017 to lead on these issues, a cross-governmental workshop in 2018 to move forward with a strategic and technical framework for social transfers, the creation of a unified social register along with a steering committee and technical committee, technical contributions from the Food Security Alliance, and a World

Bank public expenditure study. These efforts are contributing to the construction of the much needed underlying systems and institutional frameworks.

There are inevitable capacity and coordination challenges faced in a context of limited resources, multiple actors and where multi-year social protection is so limited. The few multi-year transfer programmes that do exist are timebound externally funded 'projects'³ and the CFS is not fully operational. An institutionalised and sustainable social protection mechanism for supporting vulnerable households protecting them from the impact of shocks and reducing food insecurity will take time to realise.

RESEARCH METHOD

WFP Niger managed this assignment in close consultation with other international agencies, INGOs, the government and humanitarian donors that contributed to draft of the TORs. Work was led by an independent consulting firm, and following a desk review of existing policies, processes, programme documents and studies, a series of consultations took place. 22 stakeholders were involved in the research, with representation from across government, as well as from development partners, and NGOs⁴. The diagnoses were shared with key stakeholders in country through a bilateral review process. The revised deliverables were presented in a multi-stakeholder validation workshop, where thematic group work discussed the findings and contributed to development of roadmaps for operationalising the CFS, developing a technical reference for social safety nets in Niger, and options for financing.

FINDINGS

The analysis identifies a range of opportunities to institutionalise social transfers 'across the nexus' in Niger, along with constraining factors, and it unpacks some of the implications at strategic, technical and operational levels.

Cash could be a feasible and appropriate crisis response modality if gaps can be addressed: within the DNP-GCA, the CCA leads the implementation of responses to acute food security and nutrition crises. This is currently done through in-kind transfers. Cash transfers have been effectively used in drought response programmes of other actors for several years and evidence shows they would be much more cost efficient for the CCA to implement than the current process of procuring, storing and transporting food aid, while reaching more people. That said, the CCA presently faces several difficulties in implementing its activities including procurement delays, implementation difficulties in insecure areas; procedural bottlenecks in the treasury limiting the disbursement of cash (payment of transport), plus political and social pressures that are impacting on targeting. The research concludes that the introduction of a cash component is feasible providing there is careful planning, efforts put into

2 Further reinforced through the passing of the Social Protection Act in April 2018.

3 The World Bank's social safety nets project is implemented through CFS but in a separate project management unit. Another examples is WFP's Resilience project.

4 CFS, DNP-GCA, SAP, CCA, High commission of the 3N Initiative, Ministry of Employment, Labor and Social Protection, Ministry of Planning, Office of the Prime Minister, ECHO, EU, World Bank, FAO, HCR, UNICEF, WFP, OXFAM and ACF.

accurate targeting, and strong monitoring of vulnerability and markets. The programme should maintain both modalities since where markets are inaccessible distribution will be preferred. The research flags the importance that each location be targeted by only one modality to avoid tensions.

Early warning systems designed for humanitarian response can support social protection targeting: In Niger under the *Système d'alerte Précoce* (SAP), the process of identifying areas vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity is through regular surveys, which categorise areas according to whether households are at risk, moderately vulnerable or very vulnerable to food insecurity. There is also ongoing validation of the IPC approach to take into account chronic vulnerability. The SAP could be used to prioritise locations (to the level of the *departement*) based on both structural or cyclical factors and could serve as a basis for identifying areas of intervention for preventative seasonal social transfers as well as emergency assistance. This would need to be complemented by household level targeting approaches to identify the caseload. A limiting factor is the insufficient consideration of trigger indicators for monitoring vulnerability in pastoral settings.

Operationalising the CFS should be through a phased approach as capacities develop: the CFS is conceived as a technical unit, tasked with developing and managing a permanent multi-year social safety net system to improve the living conditions of poor households, protect them from the impact of shocks and reduce their level of food and nutrition insecurity. This includes vulnerability analysis, assessment and identification of appropriate safety net designs, mobilising funds, developing a national strategy for its implementation through developing and monitoring a technical reference framework, coordination of all programmes ensuring conformity to the standards, and inputting to specific relevant projects under the national policy⁵. While the administrative structures and processes of the department need to be compliant with the 2017 decree, there is some flexibility in how the unit is operationalised and structures can evolve as capacities develop. Establishing a separate donor pool to receive and retain financial resources for social safety nets, with funds managed under the World Bank's programme management unit attached to the CFS, is considered an appropriate scenario for the first step in the operationalization process. Over time this could transition to an arrangement whereby the government directly contributes to the budget and the CFS retains its management autonomy.

Linkages between predictable social protection and humanitarian response are conceptually appropriate but require care for effective implementation: In Niger, cyclical vulnerability of populations (i.e. vulnerability to shocks) is closely linked to structural food insecurity and poverty (structural vulnerability). The research concludes that efforts to build linkages between two pillars that are essentially tackling different parts of the same problem will lead to better protection for those who are among the most vulnerable. It envisages a continuum of programmes whereby those vulnerable to cyclical shocks will be targeted by seasonal social safety nets, while chronically vulnerable and

poor groups will be involved in multi-year social safety nets and other long-term social protection. These groups are not mutually exclusive, since some of the chronically vulnerable are also exposed to hazards, and households should be able to benefit from multiple programmes.

The research identifies several operational challenges to overcome if such linkages are to be effectively realised:

Targeting: this approach requires effective methods of targeting chronically and cyclically vulnerable households. In Niger there is currently no standard method agreed by all stakeholders. The most commonly used are the Household Economy Approach to target seasonal or cyclical responses and the Proxy Means Test targeting chronically vulnerable and poor households. While there are strengths and weaknesses in each method, these have several areas of similarities and provide opportunity to combine elements of both to develop a "consensus" methodology with common indicators for adaptive social protection systems.

Unified Social Register: this platform will be critical for coordinating a continuum of social protection addressing chronic and acute food and nutrition insecurity and harmonizing future data collection and coding. There is political traction and a technical unit is set up, however the RSU needs to be fully institutionalised within the DNP-GCA. Mechanisms must be developed for importing data from the various databases currently managed by different actors, as well as protocols for data sharing and agreement on common identification fields and harmonised data collection tools.

Coordination: At the DNP-GCA level, the Permanent Secretary (PS) oversees activities in the various departments (the CCA, the SAP and the CFS) and would have overall coordination responsibility for any approach to link short term and multi-year safety nets. However, the PS does not have the full means to coordinate the actions of each individual department. It will require careful definition of roles and perhaps a re-articulation or clarification on responsibilities and ownership to ensure effective ways of working between these constituents and the different actors involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends various actions for government and development partners, to strengthen the institutional framework for social transfer provision and to coordinate emergency assistance with multi-year support to more effectively address the needs of populations vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity:

- Strengthen state leadership in implementing policies and strategies on early warning, prevention and management of food and nutrition crises and natural disasters and ensure that development partner strategies align with these.
- Clarify role and responsibilities of the different structures responsible for social protection, including the CFS and each of its sub-departments, the Permanent Secretariat

⁵ Including drafting of implementing decrees for the Law on Social Protection 2018, the unified social register, the social protection floor and scaling up of cash plus (nutrition components, agricultural inputs).

for the national technical committee on social protection and ways of working between them.

- Improve coordination of social protection and response activities managed by DNP-GCA and MAH.
- Improve DNP-GCA's engagement in managing seasonal peaks of malnutrition (therapeutic support and food supplementation, advocacy, resource mobilization) with the Directorate of Nutrition.
- Revise the mandate of Regional Committees, strengthening its capacity to coordinate activities related to adaptive social protection and preventative safety nets.
- Develop a medium and long-term financing strategy for social protection.
- Develop relevant indicators for risks of crises in pastoral zones for incorporation into the SAP, such as animal load capacity, water and pasture availability, epidemic outbreaks, and resource conflict destocking.
- Define roles for municipal and regional governance bodies and other local entities in the SAP, in line with the ongoing decentralisation process, to support early warning and the prevention of food crises.
- Strengthen the systems and staffing of the SAP to take advantage of new surveillance approaches (satellite information, mobile telephony, IPC etc), better monitor risks and their effects on people's livelihoods and make early warning information accessible and timely.
- Strengthen capacity of the CCA to monitor and ensure adherence to standards at communal distributions.
- Build technical and operational capacity of the CFS to "spearhead" the development of multi-year food and nutrition safety nets in Niger (define strategies, develop common technical standards, ensure harmonisation of approaches, and oversee the unified social register).
- Reinforce the coordination carried out by the regional committees with all actors involved in safety net provision.
- Establish a technical reference on safety nets, providing best practice guidance for all stakeholders on targeting, transfer values, payment mechanisms, complaint

resolution, accountability measures, and monitoring and evaluation for more harmonised, efficient and effective implementation.

NEXT STEPS

This technical assistance was highly relevant to the country context, and findings have been well received by humanitarian and social protection stakeholders within and outside government. The next step is to formally endorse and begin to implement an action plan for realising the changes. The World Bank and WFP, in collaboration with other development partners, will be providing support to the operationalisation of CFS (technical assistance and capacity building) following the planned roadmap.

LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences have generated lessons for actors seeking to link social protection and humanitarian action in other contexts where social protection systems are emerging:

- Approaching social protection system development through the lens of adaptive social protection has many benefits. However, just as with any lens this will inform the prioritisation of certain vulnerabilities and thus programme approaches at the expense of other programmes/instruments, which may be more effective at meeting the long term/chronic needs of other particular vulnerable groups. The research found that in Niger cash transfer mechanisms designed as adaptive or preventive safety nets would not necessarily be the most effective instrument at meeting the longer-term needs of severely vulnerable people such as those living with disabilities and children under five. Meanwhile the focus on social transfers in the policy discourse is detracting from addressing the issue of universal health coverage, some aspects of which would also significantly influence the nutritional status of women and children.
- Such changes require sustained efforts over a long period to build capacities and systems and to develop and realise medium- and long-term financing strategies.

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