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Somalia: Review of databases and beneficiary registries for cash transfer programming

Summary of technical assistance under the ECHO-funded facility, 'Linking Humanitarian Action to Social Protection in Fragile and Forced Displacement Contexts'

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 the technical assistance in Somalia. Here we take stock of beneficiary registration practices and information management systems currently used by the main humanitarian and resilience actors and government. By documenting what systems exist, the assistance contributes to conversations on how common data management systems might underpin better coordination or pooling of caseloads and assistance between large-scale humanitarian actors, potentially serving as a foundation

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

for a harmonised, government-owned social registry or supporting an eventual transition to a national ‘safety net’ approach.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Somalia is one of the world’s poorest countries. Large segments of the population are exposed to multiple hazards, particularly climatic shocks, conflict and insecurity. This, combined with decades of fragile governance, has eroded livelihoods and exhausted coping mechanisms. The recurrence of severe droughts requires the re-establishment of massive humanitarian operations every five to seven years. There is no formal government-led social protection. This gap is partially but inadequately filled by informal community assistance and remittances, and short-term humanitarian assistance.

Since the 2011 famine, humanitarian and development partners have sought new ways to address these challenges. Agencies’ programmes have evolved to provide more harmonised, predominantly cash-based assistance, delivered with more predictable and longer-term financing. As state-building gathers pace, the further harmonisation and consolidation of assistance is envisaged to improve cost-effectiveness, reduce fragmentation of aid and contribute to the emergence of a social protection system.

Social protection is recognised as a priority by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in the National Development Plan. A social protection sub-working group has been established, and a policy is being developed by WFP, UNICEF and the government. The European Union commissioned a review to identify opportunities for transitioning towards a government-owned ‘safety net’. These initiatives emphasise the importance of the knowledge, institutions and systems developed by humanitarian and development programmes as foundations of any nationally owned system.

RESEARCH METHOD

This assignment, led by WFP Somalia, builds on the abovementioned social protection policy and EU reviews. Technical assistance partners collectively identified its focus. A concept note was presented to the Cash Working Group, comprising all UN, NGOs, and donors working on cash transfers in Somalia. This ensured coordination with complementary initiatives, helped avoid duplication and secured collaboration on data-sharing. Government endorsement was ensured through WFP’s collaboration on social protection (co-chairing the social protection sub-working group and developing the social protection policy). The multi-agency approach and the engagement of donors behind a common objective is intended to

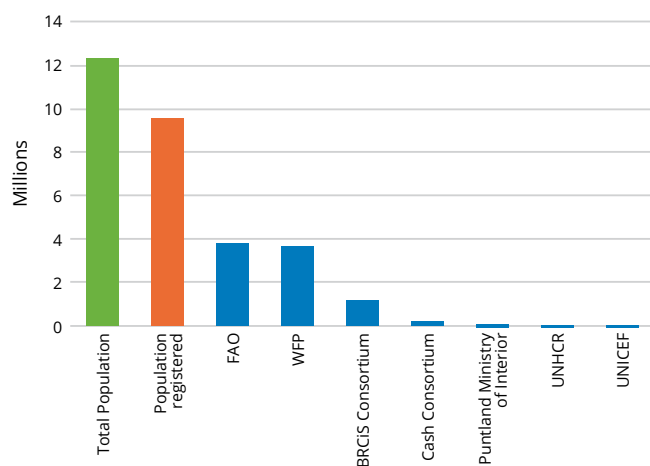
facilitate future collaboration, despite any challenges of navigating divisions of opinion on next steps.

Findings are drawn from a questionnaire to which nine Cash Working Group members responded plus in-depth stakeholder interviews². Data was collected on the scale and geographical coverage of cash and in-kind interventions (numbers of individuals/households and transfer values), delivery mechanisms, capacity to scale up, targeting criteria and methods, registration and enrolment processes, data fields captured including biometric data and mobile phone numbers, tools and procedures to ensure data quality, data management solutions, and processes for data protection and security.

The study generated a concise overview of databases used by the main actors providing assistance in Somalia. Analysis is presented as a table comparing their respective features, processes and capacities. A short narrative report provides a summary analysis and recommends actions for humanitarian actors to i) improve data harmonisation in the short-term ii) move towards a common platform and the foundation of a social registry system for all programmes in Somalia.

FINDINGS

Total population and population registered in databases (by database)



Opportunities for more efficient and effective programming in Somalia can potentially be realised through linkages between humanitarian action and social protection. Databases underpinning major programmes of international (and government) actors can support, through lessons learnt, the development of a national social registry. The findings reveal:

High coverage of at risk populations: the humanitarian assistance databases of agencies participating in this study include over 5 million individuals, nearly half of

2 The nine respondents were the Puntland Ministry of Interior (IDP Affairs), African Disability Association, Cash Consortium group of NGOs, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), FAO, Somalia Red Crescent, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP.

the population³, across most geographical areas. Even accounting for duplicates, these regular registration exercises clearly produce data on a large proportion of the Somali population.

Data management platforms help manage duplications, but lack of inter-operability is a constraint:

there is a trend towards adoption of dedicated applications for managing beneficiary data, with tools to identify duplicates within a programme. However, besides WFP's interface with the data management systems of UNHCR and FAO there is little data exchange across organisations. Most organisations cannot cross-check beneficiaries between programmes - a critical function of any foundational social registry to report on total assistance received by a household.

Common data fields and biometrics could provide 'functional ID' for a social registry:

Most databases include four common fields - the name of the household head, household size, location and cell phone number. These could form the basis of a common database - also the conclusion of a World Bank digital ID study. Critical here is the assignment of a "unique identifier" - a field in a beneficiary record that is unique to that individual. Databases using a common unique identifier can more easily inter-operate, or otherwise share data. This may reduce duplication and gaps and improve planning and monitoring. In Somalia there is no single national ID or civil registry, and organisations have created programme-specific serial numbers. Common data fields could be used until a national ID system is established. Possible solutions which could serve as a unique identifier are the collection of biometric data already integral to WFP and UNHCR's registration processes as well as several NGOs (which together comprise most beneficiary records) or mobile phone numbers included in most household-level records⁴. Any foundational social registry should however take account that multiple households may use the same phone, that one household may have several phone numbers, and that phone numbers may change over time, making them less reliable than biometrics for comparison purposes.

Common approaches to targeting, but registration practices limit the potential for building a registry for shock response:

Most actors follow similar methods for targeting and registration (geographic targeting following the integrated phase classification system, with community-based targeting using categorical indicators). This is an accepted approach in Somalia, generally considered as transparent and fair. Inclusion criteria generally fit drivers of vulnerability such as loss of livestock, lack of access to income, remittances

or assistance, and demographic factors (pregnant or lactating women, orphans, elderly, disabled and chronically ill, and women-headed households). The use of common criteria, many of which align with those used in long-term social protection, offers potential for greater harmonisation⁵.

However, registration practices currently limit the potential to develop a social registry. Registration and enrolment phases are effectively the same for most partners - data is collected after eligibility has been determined, and from eligible cases only. Data is collected or stored on non-beneficiaries only by WFP and UNHCR, whereas a typical social registry contains records of both. Data collection is concentrated on data needed to identify the beneficiary to make the transfer, not vulnerability characteristics/household conditions. This limits the availability of data to either inform targeting efforts on future programmes, or for rapid scaling up of assistance in case of shocks⁶.

Data management applications are improving efficiency and accuracy but good practices for data security are still emerging: Organisations using data management applications report improved efficiency of data collection during registration and improved data quality, on account of tools to validate or restrict entries. This is considered a best practice on social protection MIS and it is logical that any foundational registry builds on these experiences. Humanitarian actors are also making efforts to adhere to good practices for data protection, and these applications can help through inbuilt controls. However, most actors are still developing their policies on data protection and there is extensive variation in the procedures applied, as well as visible gaps (for example, no segregation of duties or controls over who can access data). These would need to be improved and standardised to form the foundation of a future registry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following:

- Establish 5-7 data fields common to all programmes, to improve verification of identity until a national system is developed.
- Strengthen registration and enrolment of vulnerable groups through common vulnerability criteria and quality standards for their identification and registration.
- Adopt a unique identifier for individuals and households, based on biometrics and allowing for

³ UNFPA's 2014 population estimate 12.3 million Somalis.

⁴ And also included as a variable in the four major ID systems used by the government of Somalia, according to the World Bank's study on ID systems in Somalia: name, surname, age and gender and mobile contact.

⁵ This aligns with findings of the EU study and the draft social protection policy.

⁶ While the report notes that the ability of a social registry to be used effectively for shock response depends on whether the data is accurate and up-to-date, nevertheless it is one potentially highly useful function of such a registry, which must be considered.

deduplication between humanitarian actors, until a foundational ID system becomes available⁷.

- Assess feasibility of adapting registration and enrolment practices to improve the potential for shock responses at scale – such as collecting data on broader populations in high-risk locations, pre-identifying vulnerable households for assistance ex-ante, and verifying vulnerability status of those in existing registries post-disaster.
- Improve management and security of personal data, including through protocols adhering to best practices for data protection and that limit access to or control the sharing of data.

NEXT STEPS

The focus of this study is hugely relevant to the current policy environment in Somalia. The assignment objectively compares existing approaches and proposes options that build upon strengths and similarities and overcome bottlenecks which it is hoped can advance harmonisation and data sharing. It provides concrete recommendations for a way forward. Findings are already informing complementary studies of WFP's partners and wider actors⁸. Once validated, the results should lead to a jointly agreed action plan between stakeholders, which will determine whether the outcome is a single platform, a collaborative approach to system consolidation or the continuation of 'business as usual'.

Any steps to select a functional ID should coordinate with the World Bank's plans to support the development of a household registry and any resulting legal framework governing civil registration in Somalia.

LESSONS LEARNED

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

- Vested interests create disincentives to progress with building joint systems. There are competing platforms operating in Somalia that organisations have invested heavily in and may understandably be reluctant to relinquish. Furthermore, moves to consolidate data and systems can be perceived as creating winners and losers. Attempts to bridge the gap must be mindful of this.
- Humanitarian agencies have roles to play in this transition if they can adapt their traditional role as 'implementers' to embrace roles as 'enablers'. For example, actors maintaining data management systems and household lists for the foundation for any social registry could support system development and capacity-building. This may require shifts in mindsets on the function of operational agencies, and changes to funding arrangements.
- It is important to allow sufficient time to fully understand the issues and challenges, consider solutions and establish consensus between stakeholders.

⁷ Note - this may not necessarily equate to biometric authentication at the point of transaction, which would require biometric technology to be integrated with the private sectors' mobile money platforms and their agents, which may be counter-productive to the aim of timely assistance at scale.

⁸ Such as DFID Somalia's planned study on data management, and plans of the NGO Cash Consortium to deduplicate beneficiary records and discuss common use of biometric data, which are recommendations from the TA report.

Acknowledgement

This technical assistance consultancy was led by Paul von Kittlitz, WFP SCOPE Business Services. This country case study was drafted by Gabrielle Smith, independent consultant. WFP is indebted to the efforts of WFP Somalia and its country partners who supported this initiative: Liljana Jovceva and Ruby Khan (WFP); Asha Sawyer (FAO); Mark Agoya (DFID); Johann Heffnick (ECHO); Danielle Trotter (UNICEF) and Maniza Naqvi (World Bank). WFP also extends thanks to the SPIAC-B members (World Bank, DFID, ECHO, UNICEF, WFP, FAO) who acted as Technical Advisory Group to the TA Facility at global level.

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