British Virgin Islands

The Journey Towards a Strengthened and
Shock-Responsive Social Protection System

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April 2024

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About the World Food Programme

Reaching nearly 150 million people in over 120 countries each year, the World Food Programme is the world's largest humanitarian organization saving lives in emergencies and using food assistance to build a pathway to peace, stability and prosperity, for people recovering from conflict, disasters and the impact of climate change.

The WFP Caribbean Multi-Country Office works with national, regional and international partners to strengthen the region's resilience to the climate crisis, and other risks. WFP adopts a systems-focused approach as part of its capacity strengthening efforts through research and advocacy, digitalization, human resource development, south-south cooperation, and by investing in critical infrastructure and assets. WFP works with partners to provide direct assistance to populations impacted by shocks when events surpass national and regional capacities.

These investments place the most vulnerable people at the centre of efforts to minimize the combined impacts of climate, economic and other shocks on the Caribbean. WFP Caribbean's multi-country strategic plan supports 22 countries and territories across the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean through leveraging its expertise in vulnerability analysis and mapping; end-to-end supply chain management; shock-responsive social protection; food systems strengthening and climate risk financing.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Social protection – referring to a set of policies and programmes - plays a critical role in preventing and protecting people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their lifecycles. Such measures include social insurance, social assistance, and social care services. Social protection programmes, and the administrative and delivery systems underpinning them, can also be used to reach people with assistance during disasters, economic crises, or other major shocks. Referred to as "shock-responsive social protection," the support often takes the form of cash transfers for two reasons. Firstly, it has been widely documented for over a decade that giving people money in the aftermath of crises and shocks can be an effective way of enabling them to meet diverse needs. Secondly, most governments have social assistance programmes providing vulnerable people with cash transfers, creating an opportunity to use those same processes and systems to efficiently reach people in times of disaster or crisis. Research in the Caribbean and globally has established the importance of social protection which is 'shock-responsive'; highlighting the importance of **strengthening routine systems** and preparing them in advance to be able to respond to shocks.

The experience of the British Virgin Islands offers practical lessons that can inform the efforts of governments and development partners in the Caribbean and beyond. Since the devastating aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, the Government of the Virgin Islands has been on a path to strengthen its social protection systems. This journey, while spurred by a crisis, has evolved into a strategic roadmap for resilience and efficiency. In essence, the events since 2017 have not only shaped the "responsive" side of social protection but have also been instrumental in crafting a proactive and robust social protection blueprint for the future, characterized by adaptability, transparency and efficiency.

The transformation was underpinned by **programmatic reform**. A key element was to step back and rethink the design and implementation of social assistance, identifying where processes and systems needed clarification and modification; this included all aspects: from registration to targeting and progressing to delivery. The World Food Programme (WFP) worked in close partnership with the Social Development Department of the Ministry of Health and Social Development on this important journey. WFP provided broad technical assistance, commencing with a comprehensive assessment of the existing Public Assistance Programme (PAP) followed by the development and implementation of Standard Operating Procedures as well as advances in the data and information management systems. A large focus continues to be effective data and information digitalization,[1] and simultaneous capacity enhancements to ensure that the processes and technologies developed are adopted by different units and at their own pace. These efforts were conducted in close coordination with policy and strategy support from UNICEF, drew upon the global experiences of both agencies, and were complemented by the deep knowledge and experience of the Social Development Department.

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[1] Digitalization refers to developing processes and changing workflows to improve manual systems. Through digitalization, digital technologies and digitized data are utilized to enable or improve processes whereas Digitization refers to the process of converting analog objects into digital format. An example of this would be document scanning, where text from physical paper is converted into PDF or other digital formats, which are then stored in the computer.

The paper focuses on the lessons that have been learned by WFP and the Social Development Department on this journey to date. It begins by briefly outlining the experience of cash transfers in response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, which revealed opportunities to enhance routine systems. Part two provides a description of WFP's support and partnership with the government, which began in the aftermath of the Hurricane response, deepened during COVID-19 with the design and implementation of a grant programme, transitioned into strengthening routine systems and then accelerated with more fundamental efforts on programmatic and system reform. The third part identifies key takeaways from the comprehensive set of activities. The final section concludes with forward-looking steps for continuing system strengthening and adaptability in the face of future shocks. Practical lessons are highlighted throughout this brief to inform future efforts in the British Virgin Islands and beyond.

Part 1: A first for emergency cash transfers

In 2017, the back-to-back Category 5 Hurricanes Irma and Maria caused a humanitarian crisis in the Caribbean. In the aftermath of the impacts in the British Virgin Islands, the BVI Red Cross (BVIRC) and British Red Cross (BRC), together with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) developed of a joint cash response plan, known as the Joint Cash Platform. This was supported by the Ministry of Health and Social Development. The plan involved the distribution of cash grants to meet the basic needs of the hurricane-affected population. Although the government did not provide funding, the Social Development Department was heavily involved in the programme design and implementation, mobilizing over 50 social workers and government agents for registration and community engagement.

Implemented in 2017 and 2018, the Joint Cash Platform overcame initial reluctance by the government for cash transfers. By utilizing an innovative application process, with clear targeting criteria, a new digital registration tool and verification mechanisms, the **government's initial concerns were alleviated**. In the process, the Joint Cash Platform introduced the Social Development Department to more efficient and transparent ways of targeting and delivering cash grants to beneficiaries. The joint programme had more advanced processes compared to the routine social assistance programme, which was managed through a paper-based system and lacked clear and systematic targeting processes. Though it did not immediately lead to changes in routine social assistance, the Joint Cash Platform demonstrated the added value of clarifying protocols, processes and using a digital system to implement the programme. The experience informed and facilitated subsequent efforts to improve processes and systems in the following years, marking the beginning of a significant shift in how the Government viewed the operationalization of its social protection programmes.

The Joint Cash Platform experience during the Irma and Maria response resonated with operational and system strengthening work that WFP was taking forward in the region. During that same period WFP supported both hurricane responses in the Caribbean with humanitarian logistics and cash transfers through national social protection systems in Dominica. In 2018, WFP embarked on regional research and learning programme on shock-responsive social protection in the Caribbean. The experience in the British Virgin Islands embodied the type of shock-responsive social protection that WFP was **advocating for and supporting**. WFP contributed to the lessons learnt exercises taking place in the British Virgin Islands and linked the experience to the regional learning initiative. Representatives from both the Department of Disaster Management and the Ministry of Health and Social Development shared their experiences with other governments, for example at the High-Level Regional Symposium on Shock-Responsive Social Protection in the Caribbean in Turks and Caicos in 2019, organized by WFP and CDEMA. The Government expressed their interest in partnering with WFP to institutionalize shock-responsive social protection and to strengthen systems and capacities to respond to shocks. This journey and the lessons that have emerged to date are captured in the subsequent sections.

Part 2: From response to systemic support and shock responsiveness

Early engagement and the COVID-19 Response (2019-2021)

In early 2019 at the request of the Ministry of Health and Social Development, WFP carried out an assessment of social protection information management systems to identify opportunities in strengthening routine programming and emergency responses, focusing on the Social Development Department's Social Assistance programme. The assessment explored the ecosystem of how data was collected and used for registration, targeting and delivery. **Building on the digitalization** efforts that materialised during the Irma and Maria response, the assessment identified protocols, resources, staffing, and tools to improve routine programming, particularly in the areas of data, information management and targeting. WFP drew on its technical capacities and experience working with the Government of Haiti to develop information management systems. While that experience was on a much larger scale, the same principles applied of the importance of understanding processes and needs and planning for sustainability.

Despite a promising start in 2019, the efforts to bolster the Social Assistance programme and make it more responsive to shocks were paused due to the shift in priorities necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unable to leverage the Social Assistance programme to respond to the pandemic, the Ministry of Health and Social Development, with support from WFP, developed a specific programme to address the emerging needs. This programme, called the Income Relief Support Programme, built on the experience and lessons from the Irma and Maria response, particularly concerning targeting and validation processes.

The Social Development Department's Income Relief Support Programme was designed to support households that were not part of other government initiatives established to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. This guided the initial targeting approach, which used the eligibility criteria of other programmes as exclusion criteria for the Income Relief Support Programme. However, many applicants who met some of the eligibility criteria of other programmes did not benefit from them and yet, did not qualify for the Income Relief Support Programme, despite having unmet needs. Addressing this issue necessitated revising the targeting criteria multiple times. While it was important to reduce potential exclusion errors, it created delays and frustrations, both for applicants and for social workers who had to run applications through new eligibility criteria, multiple times, while not having a full understanding of the reasons for the changes.

The initial vision was to use a single digital tool to register households through an open-source application (Kobo) that embedded an algorithm to automatically determine eligibility. However, this approach faced challenges as the targeting criteria underwent alterations. As the registrations were

underway, adapting the tool in real time to keep up with changes proved overly complicated, showing the limits of using the digital system for determining eligibility in real time while maintaining flexibility for changes. While the digital tool was used to collect data, the Social Workers analyzed the data to determine eligibility, namely through the Excel tool later developed to facilitate this process (see below). These dynamics showed the importance of **enabling flexibility to adapt systems** and processes, which during emergencies or new response measures may require separating the data collection step (registration) from the data transformation (the determination of eligibility).

After applicants were identified as meeting the selection criteria, the subsequent step involved the provision of supportive documentation to validate their eligibility status. The required documents depended on the specific situation of the applicant (for example, the last three pay slips for former employees or proof of business and income for self-employed individuals). However, clear guidance explaining the range of documentation needed for different circumstances was lacking, which sparked confusion for both social workers and applicants. It resulted in multiple touchpoints with applicants being requested to provide additional documentation, often causing frustration. This highlighted the importance of developing clear and written guidance documentation in the programme design phase for reference during implementation.

Given the wide range of information involved in the registration, much focus was on designing, digitizing, and piloting the registration tool. Some gaps emerged in documenting and outlining the subsequent processes that followed: data cleaning, analysis, transformation, and implementation (validation of applications, enrollment, delivery, monitoring of delivery). WFP supported the Social Development Department team in **creating a digital tool in Excel** to quickly address these gaps. The primary purposes of the tool were to compile, clean, and update information from Kobo; execute the evolving eligibility criteria; document the submission of supporting documentation; validate cases by supervisors; record payment details including bank account information; and track payment statuses.

The Excel tool, which was developed during the programme implementation, was able to help significantly to manage these processes but faced some challenges. One issue was the inability to automatically synchronize data from Kobo to Excel without losing or mixing-up manually entered information. This required manual copying of new registrations from Kobo to Excel, creating a cumbersome process of locating, ensuring deduplication, and entering new submissions manually. As the programme progressed, new columns were added to record evolving steps within the Excel tool. This highlighted the importance for future programmes of dedicating sufficient time, ahead of the implementation, to map the processes and understand the technical requirements of the system being developed. Time is required to develop and test the tools well ahead of their deployment, as this can **foresee bottlenecks during the implementation phase**. Maintaining tool flexibility can enable smooth execution, as adaptability is needed in the systems.

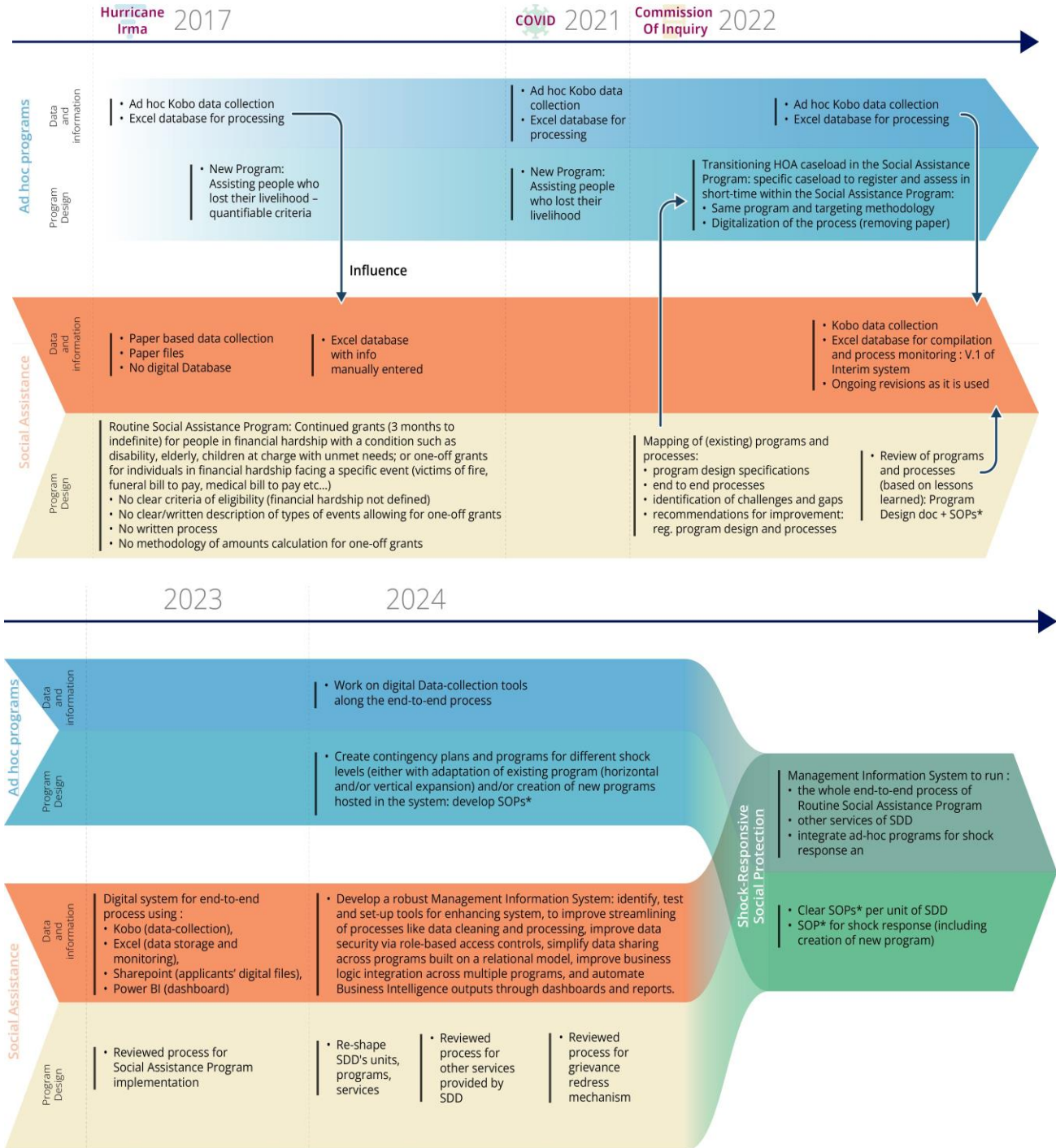# FIGURE 1: FROM RESPONDING TO SHOCKS TO SYSTEM STRENGTHENING

Figure 1 above depicts the different phases and expansion over time. This incorporates the initial, ad-hoc use of digital tools in response to the Irma Hurricane, through to the review and re-engineering of business protocols, establishment of basic digital tools for collection-processing-output.

Despite the challenges encountered, the use of such digital system still constituted a great advancement. Indeed, the entire routine system for social assistance was paper-based and intended to process around 15 to 20 new applications monthly. Using a digital system enabled the department to advance in the following areas:

- Increase significantly the number of cases processed

- Run analysis to do informed targeting modifications

- Facilitate the division of cases across the Social Workers (increase efficiency)

- Facilitate the monitoring of cases (quickly checking through the system the status of applications, or the progress of the overall caseload),

- Enable regular reporting (and more automated)

- Increase standardization for handling cases (reduce potential for bias)

This experience, while not without its challenges, was a valuable exposure to the importance of (1) having clear programme design elements in addition to business processes devised prior to any digitisation efforts; and (2) the importance of breaking down steps and creating corresponding tools along the business process to allow for flexibility. This is particularly important when it comes to emergency programmes, where design changes can be expected based on the analysis of the data. The Social Development Department and WFP convened an end-to-end process review, at the completion of the COVID-19 programme, which enabled these lessons to be drawn and analysed.

From Response to Routine Strengthening (2021-2022)

The COVID-19 experience underscored the importance of establishing clear and detailed processes, informed by the design of the programme. It also reaffirmed the significant benefits that digital data collection tools offer in enhancing efficiency and quality. With these lessons in mind, the focus of the WFP's technical support shifted back to the earlier objective of establishing information management processes for routine social assistance and in response to shocks. These efforts complemented support from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). in developing a comprehensive Social Protection Policy and Action Plan, as part of its renewed commitment to support social protection through the harmonizing of social assistance, sector integration and service delivery.

Based on the lessons from the COVID-19 programme, the Social Development Department and WFP determined that the first step in restarting the process was to review the design and protocols of the

social assistance programme. A comprehensive mapping of existing services and benefits provided under social assistance was conducted, complemented by an in-depth review of end-to-end business processes. WFP worked with the Social Development Department in both the mapping exercise and in pinpointing challenges encountered throughout the existing processes. A notable finding from this exercise was that many challenges stemmed from **ambiguities in the programme's design**, particularly concerning the definition of eligibility criteria. This finding emphasized the importance of standardizing and thoroughly documenting operating procedures, with a particular focus on refining and clarifying targeting mechanisms.

In 2022, while the detailed documentation and programme design recommendations were in the process of being developed, a Commission of Inquiry (COI) that had been established in 2021 released a report that once again shifted Government's priorities. The findings highlighted governance challenges with government assistance grants being distributed outside of the Social Development Department and the importance of strengthening social assistance systems and processes. It led to the discontinuation of a cash grant budget available to elected district representatives of the House of Assembly for assisting people in need. Instead, the budget and caseload associated with the grant were to be transitioned to the Social Development Department's social assistance programme, signifying a strategic move towards centralizing and streamlining social assistance efforts. This shift placed social policy reform at the forefront as a key instrument for enhancing good governance.

In order to support these fast-paced and high-profile social protection reforms, WFP and UNICEF provided operational and strategic support building on their ongoing policy and programmatic assistance. Drawing on the lessons from the COVID-19 programme, WFP supported the Social Development Department to rapidly develop an **interim digital registration process** and associated tools. These were instrumental in integrating the additional caseload of beneficiaries from the discontinued House of Assembly assistance grants into social assistance.

The tight timeline set by the COI only allowed for the rapid development of a set of digital tools d to address the immediate requirements of transitioning the caseload. While there was insufficient time to resolve some of the challenges identified in the process mapping – such as policy changes related to eligibility definition or supporting documentation – the interim system enabled the efficient registration and review of over 300 household applications in just a few months. This number is approximately twice the volume of applications usually processed and reviewed annually by the department, marking a **significant increase in operational efficiency**.

Shifting Routine Social Assistance - Paper to Digital (2023)

The development of the digital system for the House of Assembly's transitional grant presented a **valuable opportunity to refine** the newly reviewed end-to-end processes for the routine social assistance programme. It enabled the identification of areas for further improvement, particularly related to the use of MS Excel for data storage and processing. The main challenge lay in efficiently compiling all information from the registration process into this data store, as well as integrating additional information necessary for monitoring each case.

This began with a round of process reviews of the main social assistance programme and its various stages. This time the specific emphasis was on the steps following the initial data collection process (during registration). The review meticulously examined various stages, including:

- Update of data

- Data verification

- Status and sharing of supporting documentation

- Recommendation of specific service packages.

- Validation of the service package

- Monitoring of the delivery of the service package

The examination identified the need to build additional digital forms and subsequently **digitalize business processes** such as: the registration of the request for support and the assignment to a Social Worker, the data collection to constitute the application by the assigned Social Worker, the confirmation of the eligibility situation supported by the required documentation, the recommendation of a service package by the Social Worker, the validation of the service package by the Unit Head and then by the External Committee, the collection of the bank details to proceed with the payment (or other mechanism requirement), and the confirmation of the delivery by the Clerk in coordination with the Accounts Department. Forms were built in Kobo (open source tool), tested and updated, along with the development of an Excel file (as a database) to compile the information and therefore facilitate programme monitoring and reporting.

A key component of these efforts was the involvement of the BVI Health Services Authority (BVIHSA) team of developers, ensuring **local ownership and sustainability** of the system. In February 2023, the digital system for the social assistance programme was officially launched. From this point, all new applications were recorded using the digital system and all subsequent steps were also digitized. Throughout 2023, continuous improvements were made to the system as new challenges emerged, and guidance documents were created for different stakeholders based on their roles in the system. The development of guidance documents was key to making sure that processes were well understood and for development of institutional memory, for the future reference.

In November 2023, WFP supported the development of a dashboard to enhance data visualization and analysis. The dashboard allows multiple users to monitor different operational processes. Decision-makers can view the status of social assistance programme. The dashboard allows:

- Monitoring the progress of applications per social worker, tracking the various steps

- Capturing demographic information of applicants

- Recording details of validated grants and their distribution

- Documenting financial implications associated with the grants

The Social Development Department team expressed great enthusiasm when accessing the dashboard, as they recognized it was the first time they could access all the information in one place and in such a comprehensive way.

**FIGURE 2**: EXTRACTS OF THE DASHBOARD AS OF JANUARY 2024
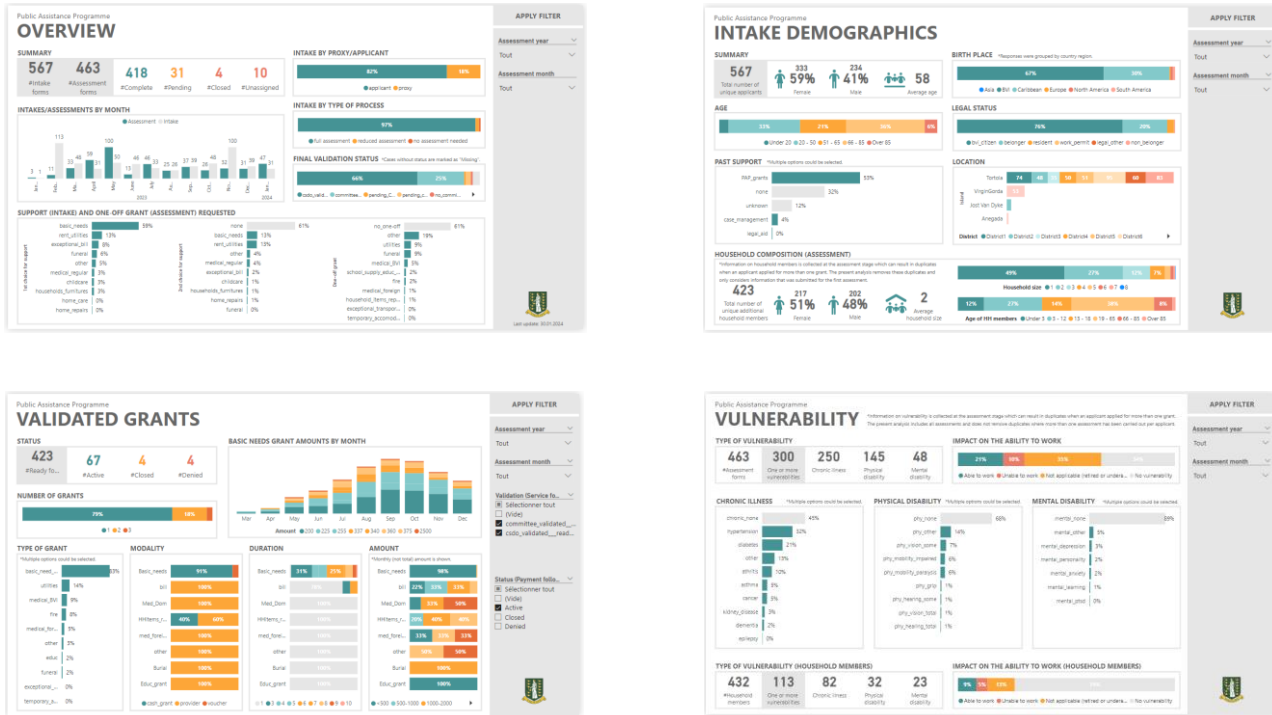
Part 3: Key Takeaways and Lessons

As outlined in the previous sections, the recent advancements in the social protection systems in the BVI were a direct result of various emergencies (hurricanes, COVID-19) and the need to become more transparent, efficient, and effective. It became quickly apparent that the programme had to evolve, as there were significant limitations on how existing systems could be used for an ever-changing situation.

The most significant learning was the revelation that an **end-to-end processes review and modification** was required. This even led to influencing policy at the macro level. Coupled with the Government's vision to move towards more transparent and digital processes, this impetus served as an entry point to improve the routine implementation and delivery of social assistance, ultimately leading to a more profound and sustainable transformation of the country's social protection structures. These combined efforts have spanned the policy, programme design and implementation levels, which are captured in Figure 2. The lessons in the rest of this section capture the learning garnered throughout this process to date.

FIGURE 3: CORE ELEMENTS OF A SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM
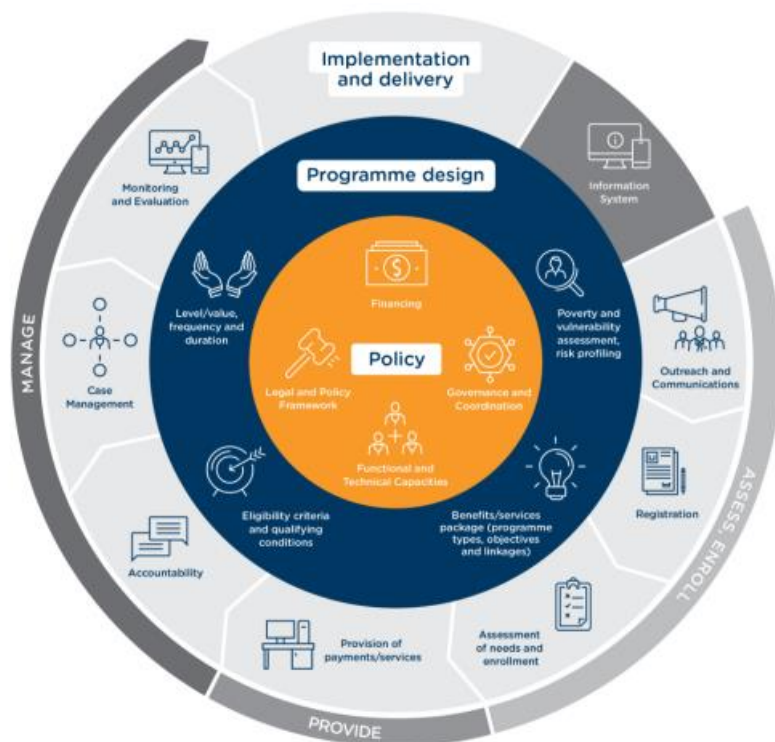
SOURCE: Barca, V., Jaramillo Mejia, J.G. (2023) 'Social Protection as a 'Solar' System', Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources (STAAR), DAI Global UK Ltd

Takeaway 1: Before digitizing, comprehensively map processes and roles.

The appropriate starting point to enhancing any system begins by assessing the "as is" situation. Through meticulous interviews with stakeholders, one can grasp how the process is conducted at each step, from raising the awareness of the public about social assistance, to the closure of the case once the beneficiary has exited the programme, and all the elements along that process, (e.g. registration, assessment, verifications, delivery of service and benefit and case management). An essential component of this understanding is mapping the flow of data from initial collection to its transformation for targeting, verification and delivery.

Roles and responsibilities along the end-to-end process were documented and clarified, where there were ambiguities. This creates a strong base for digitalization to build on and amplify efforts to enhance transparency and accountability. **Only after establishing this foundational knowledge and documentation of processes can one delve into proposing tools and technologies and subsequent digitalization efforts**. This approach ensures that digital enhancements are built upon solid, well-understood processes and protocols.

A fundamental issue identified during the process mapping was the lack of definition of key terms used during data collection and data transformation, which had not been clarified in the programme design. This issue is particularly important when such terms are used to define eligibility. For example, the term "financial hardship", if left without quantifiable and objective thresholds, leads to different interpretation by social workers whereby households of similar characteristics may be classified differently. Similarly, "vulnerability" needs to be defined by objective criteria. The definition of a "household" also is a key aspect as it defines the financial hardship level (total revenue is measured for all members of the household) and the grant amount (to cover the needs of all members). Whether a household consists of all individuals living under the same roof or only considers the nuclear family, can make a real difference for the eligibility of the household and the grant amount received.

The mapping of programme systems and processes identified by these gaps led to updating guidelines and processes to clarify these issues. Doing so will help ensure that all cases are treated equitably, rather than on a 'case-by-case' basis, therefore promoting harmonization of practices, equal treatment of cases and more objective implementation of protocols. Having clearly documented processes in place also increases efficiency by speeding up assessment processes and accountability by having well defined criteria visibly linked to the outcome of applications.

Takeaway 2: Digitalization can become the catalyst for deeper, sustainable transformation.

The comprehensive review conducted by the Social Development Department and WFP to develop a stronger system revealed gaps in programmatic design, as stated earlier. This discovery provided an opportunity to offer recommendations and implement business process changes, which influenced policy makers. This was led through a bottom-up approach, building processes that made sense to practitioners which eventually helped build a foundation of clarity, efficiency and objectivity that

influenced reforms. While the initial focus was on 'digitalization,' the deeper insights gained influenced policy changes at a broader level.

In September 2023, the foundation for significant reforms in social protection was laid, with a draft Social Protection Policy, which was circulated for initial consultations amongst Ministries and with key stakeholders. It is being reviewed for pre-approval by the Governor and Premier before it will be submitted for final approval by the Cabinet of the Virgin Islands by the end of the first Quarter 2024. This draft was prepared through technical support provided by a UNICEF Consultant and drew heavily from the Standard Operating Procedures of current practices and the recommendations for their improvement, a collaborative effort between the Social Development Department and WFP. While the initial focus of WFP's support was on 'digitalization', the deeper insights are influencing policy at a broader level. This bottom-up approach will enable reforms to address many of the practical challenges identified by the Social Development Department and WFP.

Central to these proposed reforms is a paradigm shift in the way grants are conceptualized. Instead of a fragmented system of grants, which not only consumes more resources but also has a paternalistic undertone, the recommendation is to adopt a holistic approach addressing basic needs comprehensively. Additionally, there is a push towards a more rights-based approach where eligibility is clear-cut and objective. This would mean for instance that, rather than relying on a committee's subjective interpretation of "financial hardship," these criteria would be based on tangible thresholds, utilizing data from a minimum expenditure basket. This would be complemented by revising grant amounts based on the actual minimum expenditure basket data and household income. Significantly, the draft also proposes the inclusion of non-nationals for specific grants and services.

While these changes are foundational, it was evident that many of the challenges identified could be addressed without waiting for overarching reforms. This has taken the form of defining "household," establishing financial hardship thresholds to guide Committee decisions, defining "vulnerability," and refining roles and responsibilities. The clarity on terms has **facilitated much greater transparency** and the equal treatment of cases by lessening ambiguity and subjectivity in the process.

At the heart of this evolution was the Government's commitment for sound governance structures, where clear processes driven by digitalization had a strong role to play in programme delivery. While digitalization started as a need at the implementation and delivery levels, it swiftly became the catalyst for a deeper, sustainable transformation of the Government's social protection framework.

Takeaway 3: System development requires a manageable, iterative approach.

Digital systems are complex and require considerable resources, effort, and skilled capacity. Developing a robust digital system demands a strategic, iterative approach founded on manageable building blocks.

Initially the Social Development Department team, supported by WFP, prioritized the use of simple off-the-shelf tools to test, implement and determine their logical usage case. The interim system developed in 2023 leveraged a basic data collection, open-source tool (Kobo) for data collection. It uses Excel for compiling data, which enabled the creation of an accessible database used by

management to monitor the programme implementation. Finally, the outputs are presented in a PowerBI dashboard for easy communication and understanding. This set of tools, built using open source and off-the-shelf software, was a useful real-life test to ensure all the data was collected, transformed and communicated at the right moment for decision making. The review of Standard Operating Procedures illuminated the path forward, clarifying data collection needs, timings, and decision points. By focusing on precision, the Department minimized redundancy and strengthened data-based decision-making, all while honoring data privacy principles.

This simple but not simplistic information system, launched in its most essential form, was designed for rapid development and complete ownership by subject matter specialists, with the support of the British Virgin Islands Health Services Authority on the tools. This enabled constant user feedback integration and **built-in flexibility to allow adaptation to changes in programme design** (in case of reform adoption). While its functions are relatively limited, its development prioritized user needs, setting the stage for a more comprehensive management information system in the future. The next phase will marry this simplicity with automation, security, scale-up capacities and standardization, supplemented by thorough documentation and user guides.

Takeaway 4: Government ownership is integral in realizing systemic change.

Ownership and initiative from the Government have been pivotal in driving the sustainability of the digital system. The Ministry of Health and Social Development took the lead in this endeavor, seeking collaboration with the Information and Technology Department of the BVI Health and Services Authority (BVIHSA). BVIHSA, recognizing the importance of the project, dedicated two of their experts to work on setting up the system. Their involvement was critical and further supported by the technical acumen provided by WFP in the form of an Information Systems Expert and Social Protection Consultant experienced with programme implementation. This collective effort resulted in the digitalization of the process, through the development of essential data collection and transformation tools covering the whole end-to-end process: intake and registration, assessment (including confirmation of necessary supportive documentation), creation of recommended service package (including grants amounts and duration), status of application, recording of validated service package, recording of delivered service.

The Social Development Department took full **ownership and management of these tools**, recognizing the huge added value of the system in terms of efficiency, transparency, equal treatment, monitoring and reporting capabilities. Through this endeavor, the Department has solidified a foundation that promises a more standardized, quantitative, and streamlined targeting process, and more efficient implementation.

Part 4: Adapting social assistance for a more resilient future

Drawing on the immense and practical experiences learned during the responses to Hurricanes Irma and Maria as well as COVID-19; WFP has collaborated closely with the Government of Virgin Islands to strengthen foundational blocks for social assistance and enhance routine social protection programming. WFP and UNICEF will continue these efforts and shift to enhancing shock responsiveness to ensure systems are better prepared to respond in the future. These efforts will focus on the following areas:

Enhanced information management systems

The current suite of tools (Kobo for data collection, Excel for data management, SharePoint for storage, and PowerBI for visualization) provides stable, accessible and efficient suite of digital tools that have greatly improved operations compared to the paper-based system. WFP will continue to work with the Social Development Department and BVIHSA to advance the functionality of systems even further into more scalable and flexible tools that will allow for the addition of other Social Development Department programmes and work streams. Working with the same team of developers from the Government to ensure the long-term sustainability of the system, WFP will support the enhancement of digital tools, into a platform that will allow improved streamlining of business processes such as data cleaning and processing, improved data security via role-based access controls, simpler data sharing across programmes built on a relational model, improved business logic integration across multiple programmes, and automated business intelligence outputs in the form of dashboards and reports. The intention is to leverage low-code platforms and technologies which require less time and effort to develop.

Enhanced linkages with other social assistance services

In 2024, work will continue, supported by UNICEF, to conduct a comprehensive review of the Social Development Department's structure. This review includes an examination of all other services offered by the Department beyond the Social Assistance programme (e.g. accompanying services for people with disabilities, protection measures for domestic violence victims, accompanying services for elderly persons etc.). The objective is to reorganize the Social Development Department into a better structured entity with additional units managing a smaller number of programmes and sub-programmes, each offering targeted support such as grants, accompaniment services, and assessments/reports. Furthermore, the work with UNICEF will entail a review of the existing process of each programme to identify challenges related to design and processes and to develop updated

programme design documents and standard operating procedures. Such documentation will enable the smooth integration of all the activities of the Social Development Department within the Management Information System, with the support of WFP. This will facilitate their implementation and the use of a holistic approach when addressing applicants' requests.

Stronger grievance redress mechanisms

With the support of UNICEF, the Social Development Department will conduct a review of their grievance redress mechanism, considering the diversity of types of grievances. Building on the analysis supported by UNICEF in 2022 that identified bottlenecks in processes, the work will identify gaps and challenges, and address these through the development of more efficient and transparent protocols. The aim is then to transfer the reviewed protocols into a digital system with the support of WFP (either the Social Development Department Management Information System if deemed relevant or a separate tool).

Built-in adaptability and responsiveness

Ensuring adaptability to shocks needs to be integrated into the processes of existing programmes. Working towards this aim means that these elements will need to be incorporated within the standard operating procedures. Shock-related elements (either pre-shock or post-shock) should be included within the routine data-collection tools to adapt services if needed. Standard operating procedures also should be developed for the creation of new/tailored programmes in case of shock, which can easily be plugged into the Management Information System. These will include flexible pre-design of new programmes for different types and levels of shock, their end-to-end process, and their step-by-step data-collection tools, compatible with the Management Information System, and roles and responsibilities of all actors. Interoperability with the routine social assistance programme (namely through facilitated data-sharing) will be a key element. Including emergency actors in the definition of the processes, such as the Department of Disaster Management and the Red Cross, will be essential to ensure coordination and avoid duplication of efforts.

Holistic and risk-layered financing

A key element for using social protection to respond to shocks is having predictable mechanisms to finance those efforts. WFP has worked with several governments in the Caribbean on measures to link disaster risk financing to social protection. The Ministry of Health and Social Development has expressed interest in identifying suitable disaster risk financing options and strengthening the link between social protection systems and finance instruments, to enable social protection systems to be activated more rapidly before and in response to emergencies. Multiple financial instruments are available to address hazards of varying intensities and frequencies and analysis is needed to further understand how to use these instruments complementarily, to ensure that investments and assets are protected and that resources reach those who need them the most in a timely manner. Combined with the other measures listed above, the British Virgin Islands can continue to chart an innovative path forward for stronger, more adaptable systems.

Photo credits

Cover page: PAP Dashboard viewed by Social Development Department Staff (credit: Fitsroy Randall Social Development Department)

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