



Delivering shock-responsive social protection in the Sahel

Activating the twin-track approach in the face of political disruption

Lessons from Niger

In the Sahel, governments are increasingly investing in social protection models that are agile, scalable, and responsive to the increasing frequency of shocks in the region, including those fueled by conflict, market disruptions, climate change, and political crises. The experience surrounding the 26 July 2023 coup d'état in Niger, which led to political and institutional disruptions and international sanctions, underlines the importance of having a dynamic delivery system to ensure that social assistance continues to reach the most vulnerable families, even during times of political instability.

As part of a joint project implemented in the Sahel by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), a 'twin-track approach' to delivering social cash transfers – providing support through both government systems and partners in an aligned manner – has enabled the most vulnerable families in Niger to receive regular and continued assistance, despite temporary disruptions to government social protection programmes and delivery systems.

Niger at the crossroads of covariate shocks

Niger, much like other countries in the Sahel, faces a poly-crisis shaped by a wide range of structural challenges. Over the last decade, the country has experienced increasingly frequent and overlapping crises, including conflict, violence and insecurity, rising inflation, and climate shocks, such as droughts and floods.

The negative impacts of these crises are manifested on several fronts, including a disruption of access to basic social services, a disruption of livelihoods, and increased food insecurity and malnutrition, together deepening multidimensional poverty.

Due to the protracted and cyclical nature of some of these shocks, the most vulnerable families are stuck in a chronic state of vulnerability. These families struggle to cope with, and recover from, a variety of shocks, which erode their capacity to build resilience over time. This is compounded by a high reliance on costly humanitarian responses and chronically low social protection coverage.

While the number of people requiring support is growing, their needs are becoming increasingly more complex and requiring longer term interventions. This makes it challenging to tackle at scale through emergency responses alone. As such, there have been strong calls to increase levels of investment in social protection systems, acknowledging these as a proven resilience building and poverty reduction tool, fit for purpose to effectively respond to dynamic and protracted crises, while addressing critical drivers of vulnerability, ensuring that no one is left behind.

With support from the World Bank, the Government of Niger implements a safety net project (Wadata Talaka), but coverage remains limited and there is no national strategy in place for its expansion. Chronic under-investment in social protection not only limits critical support necessary to enable families to build greater resilience over time, but also limits the system's capacity to react to shocks. This is a barrier to proactively implementing effective measures to anticipate and mitigate negative impacts – a critical need in Niger's poly-crisis context.

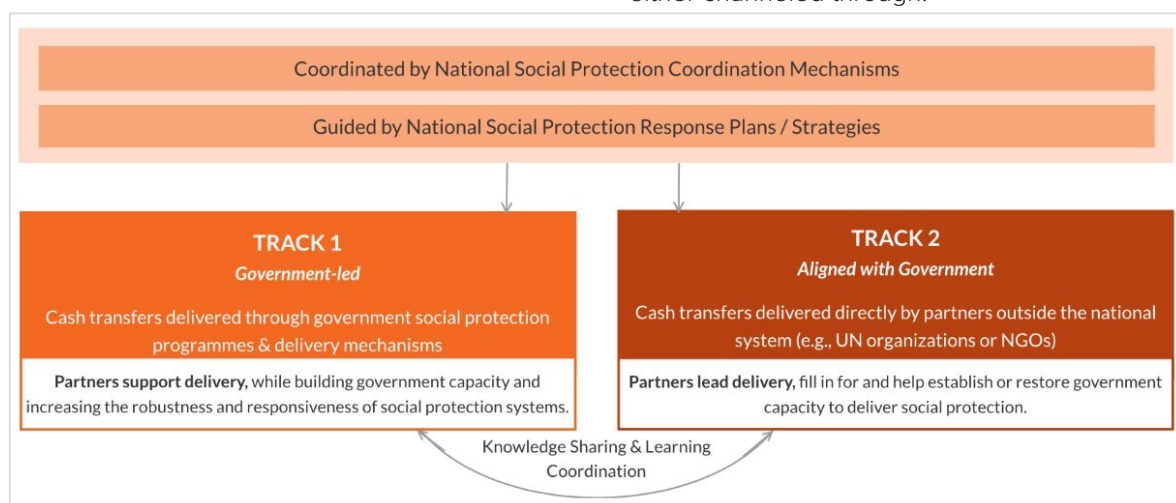
The case for a 'twin-track' approach¹

Given the complex institutional and operational environment in the Sahel, UNICEF and WFP have worked collaboratively with the Governments of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to develop the twin-track approach to deliver social protection in the region.

The approach has been developed and piloted since 2020 as part of the joint UNICEF-WFP project 'Responding to COVID-19 through Social Protection Systems in the Sahel – Towards addressing the Socioeconomic Impacts of Multiple Shocks', financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ), through the KfW Development Bank.

Twin-track delivery through national systems and partners provides enhanced delivery opportunities to reach the most vulnerable

The twin-track approach is designed to ensure consistency in delivery through, or in alignment with, national systems. Under this approach, the expansion of social protection coverage is either channeled through:



¹ WFP and UNICEF. 2023. *All the right tracks: delivering shock-responsive social protection. Lessons from the COVID-19 response.*

- existing national programmes and delivery systems (**Track 1**) and/or,
- other partners (such as NGOs or UN partners) whenever government systems are disrupted, saturated, or where access is constrained (**Track 2**).

Both tracks are implemented in alignment with the government’s national social protection programmes, priorities, and response plans, and both are used to reinforce national system capacity. The twin-track is designed to facilitate support to national systems and avoid fragmentation. Their alignment with national programmes and priorities also enables partners to build on the building blocks of national systems.

In fragile settings, the twin track plays an important role in expanding the reach of social protection, with the potential of bridging the gap between humanitarian and social protection responses, offering a framework for redirecting resources more effectively. This approach can also ensure continued assistance when national delivery systems face disruption.

Leveraging a twin-track approach in Niger

Needs of the most vulnerable outpace current government response capacities

The current socio-political crisis in Niger compounded an already dire humanitarian situation where the population was facing extremely high levels of vulnerability and food insecurity.

By the time of the July 2023 coup d’état, 52 per cent of the population was already living in extreme poverty. The prevalence of stunting (chronic malnutrition) and wasting (acute malnutrition) in children under five was also alarmingly high, stagnating since 2018 at 45 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively.

Projections for the June-August 2024 lean season² estimated 3.2 million people (14 per cent of the population) would face crisis levels of acute food insecurity. This meant they were unable to consume adequate or sufficient food, were seeing their livelihoods suffer, and needed urgent assistance.

Leveraging Track 2 to reach highly vulnerable families and ensuring continuity of assistance following the July 2023 coup d’état

Prior to the coup d’état, existing social cash transfers delivered via established government systems (Track 1) had very limited coverage, providing limited support compared with the magnitude of poverty and chronic vulnerability in the country. However, since 2020, the Joint Project’s leverage of the twin-track approach had enabled an expansion of coverage, particularly of shorter-term social protection interventions in response to shocks.

Following the coup d’état, payments through the Wadata Talaka project were suspended and most regular social assistance support from the government stopped. The Joint Project fully switched to direct implementation by partners (Track 2).

Through Track 2, the Joint Project has continued financing and delivering drought response cash transfers (i.e. *cash sécheresse* over 12 months), traditionally delivered by the Safety Net Unit (*Cellule Filets Sociaux – CFS*) of the National Mechanism for Prevention and Management of Food Crisis (*Dispositif National de Prévention et de Gestion des Crises Alimentaires – DNGCPA*). This response ensured that, despite the halting of the national program, benefits kept reaching vulnerable families in need, providing vital support during a particularly challenging period.

Activating Track 2 transfers by building on existing capacities in the Joint Project

Even with a full pivot to Track 2 delivery after the coup d’état, design and operational strengths already developed through both Track 1 and Track 2 delivery were maintained.

Since the start of the Joint Project, WFP had been delivering cash transfers via Track 2 to communities in hard-to-reach areas not yet served by the government, while UNICEF had been supporting the government to deliver social assistance through the national system (Track 1). When delivery through the national system was no longer possible, UNICEF built on a combination of its own and partners’ strengths to implement direct payments. This included linking with experienced partners on the ground

² IPC/CH June-August 2024 estimates project 3,231,825 people experiencing crisis levels of acute food insecurity and above. This includes a more than doubling of the projected population in CH/IPC 4 (emergency), compared to June-August 2023 levels. https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/ch/Fiche_Com_CH_Nov2023.pdf

who had been supporting the government in the delivery of the safety net to ensure a seamless adoption of existing targeting and enrollment protocols. UNICEF was also able to activate the HOPE data management system to securely manage cash transfer beneficiary data.

Importantly under the umbrella of this Joint Project, UNICEF was also able to leverage WFP's Track 2 operational experience and contracts with financial service providers to fast-track contracting for direct delivery of cash transfers (including in hard-to-reach areas). UNICEF also made use of WFP's hotline to complement the three-layer community feedback and grievance redressal mechanism set up across regions, communes, and villages. Regular coordination and exchange meetings between WFP and UNICEF further ensured having aligned methodologies and approaches between the two agencies, as well as with national response plans and priorities.

All the right tracks: an agile social protection response in fragile contexts

With all cash delivery functions under the Joint Project in Niger now implemented directly by UNICEF and WFP, effectively the Joint Project has been able to support continuity of delivery of social protection, despite system's disruption and the subsequent sanctions that affected funding flows and supply chains. The Joint Project continues an active dialogue with authorities, with systems strengthening activities also continuing at the technical level, including with the CFS.

Mutually reinforcing tracks

It is important to note that both tracks work together – as a continuum – to support a flexible approach to the delivery of social protection. This enables complementary

delivery channels to extend coverage and the flexibility to switch from one track to the other, as needed. This dynamic approach to delivery is particularly suited in contexts like Niger and the Sahel where there is a need to manage capacity constraints and security and access issues.

While Track 1 is an essential approach for building government capacity and increasing the robustness and responsiveness of social protection systems, Track 2 can fill in for and help establish, expand or restore, the capacity to delivery social assistance. In this respect, the twin-track approach is part of the shock-responsive social protection toolbox, allowing systems to scale up or down, as needed, ensuring flexibility in the expansion and the continuation of coverage.

The experience from Niger shows how fitting the twin-track approach is to support a much-needed expansion of social protection programmes in fragile contexts, helping increase coverage to address current needs. As part of a well-designed system, it can also support delivery of social protection at scale. The twin-track approach is laying a forward-looking foundation, such that Track 1 can be ultimately reinforced and more viably and confidently expanded.

While in fragile contexts Track 2 can ensure continuity, and even increase of, social assistance delivery, the twin-track approach can also be leveraged in more stable systems. Indeed, robust national systems may wish to leverage a twin-track approach for a temporary scale up of shock-responsive coverage, or to ensure continuity during local system failures brought about by natural disasters, localized conflict, or other disruptions. Due to its potential and dynamic uses, the twin-track approach is a model that creates opportunities for many different actors to support national social protection systems.

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