



SAHEL
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Building and maintaining social protection systems through a twin-track approach

An agile and flexible approach to delivering social protection programmes in contexts of fragility, shock and conflict

Developed by UNICEF and WFP as part of their support to governments in the Sahel in their efforts to build social protection systems, the 'twin-track approach' offers an inroad to strengthen social protection systems in the medium- to long-term, alongside flexibility and agility to address acute needs in the short run.

The [twin-track approach](#)¹ was developed as an operational strategy under the UNICEF-WFP 'Social Protection in the Sahel Joint Project' ([Sahel SP-JP](#))² implemented in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, and financed by the German Development Cooperation (BMZ) through the German Development Bank (KfW). These contexts are marked by nascent social protection systems, fragility and conflict, affecting the ability of governments to deepen and expand coverage.

Expanding coverage while building national systems

Through the twin-track approach, the aim is to increase coverage of social protection programmes – either in response to shocks or through regular safety nets – delivering, as much as possible, through existing government programmes and delivery systems (**Track 1** or

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

² UNICEF and WFP. 2020. *Responding to COVID-19 through Social Protection Systems in the Sahel Joint Project*. SocialProtection.Org Stakeholders Page.

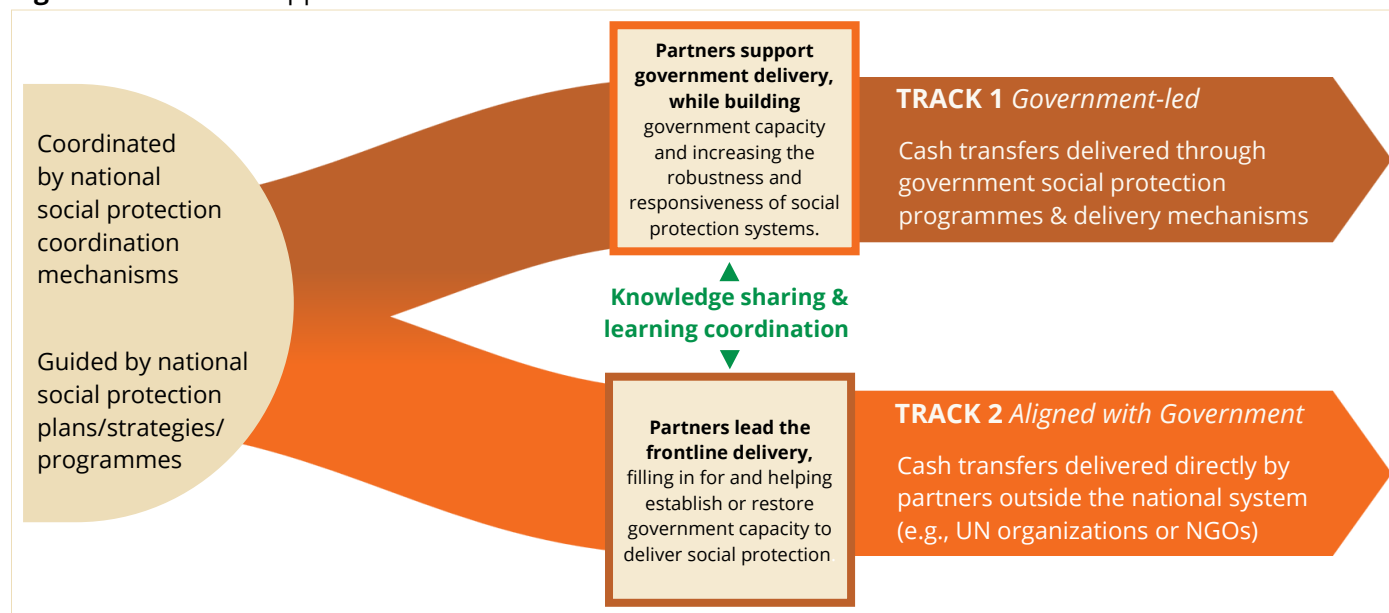
‘government track’). Where government capacities are saturated or disrupted, or where the government has no access to certain areas, including due to security constraints, benefit delivery remains coordinated under government mechanisms but takes place outside of the national system, using implementing partners, including the UN, NGOs and their partners (**Track 2 or ‘aligned track’**).

In the Sahel, the delivery of social protection benefits and services through the twin-track approach is implemented hand-in-hand with systems strengthening initiatives. As such, the

twin-track approach also entails laying a foundation, so that Track 1 can be ultimately reinforced and more viably and confidently expanded, all while Track 2 ensures continuity in the immediate and short terms.

Amidst rising needs, channelling all support through the national system is not always feasible – at least not in the short term. The twin-track approach should be considered as a viable tool in the shock-responsive social protection toolbox, allowing systems to scale horizontally or vertically, to respond to higher needs. In addition, the approach can help avoid disruptions in delivery of routine programmes, following a shock.

Figure 1. Twin-Track approach



Mutually reinforcing tracks

It is important to consider both tracks as working together 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 is particularly relevant to fragile contexts where there is a need to manage capacity constraints and security and access limitations while aiming to meet current and longer-term needs in fluid operational contexts.

In practice, the twin-track approach effectively covers a broad spectrum of operational arrangements, and identifying the right

combination of each track depends on a careful assessment of government operational and financial capacities and the reach of national systems.

The scale and timing of the response also needs to be considered, together with an understanding of access issues in areas affected by a shock. The availability of existing delivery mechanisms, information and protocols for registration and enrolment, staffing at central and subnational level, and the available human resource and expertise to scale up the various functions must also be duly considered.

Lessons from Niger

The [experience from Niger](#),³ leveraging the twin-track approach following the disruption of national systems and delivery mechanisms on the heels of the 2023 *coup d'état*, shows how social protection coverage was maintained after payments through the national safety net project were suspended. At that time, all payments were transferred through the parallel track.

Prioritizing and building on existing systems

Using a twin-track approach can be an effective way to avoid using parallel humanitarian responses to fill social protection gaps. It prioritizes working with governments on their existing systems and working together to improve them as needed, without creating parallel or ad hoc targeting, delivery, payment and monitoring mechanisms every time there is a need for scaled up or expanded support.

Drivers of success and key principles:

Political will and national leadership are essential for social protection at large, and particularly to ensure the alignment of a twin-track approach to avoid uncoordinated, fragmented interventions. Government-led coordination plays a central role in the decision-making process and

parameters to follow different combinations of Track 1 and Track 2 response and the protocols to transition from one track to the other.

National plans and strategies provide the overall framework for decision-making on design features, including on transfer amounts, duration of support, entry points for the identification of vulnerable groups, and selection criteria, as well as for operational implementation. Leveraging pre-established tools to guide decisions on delivery is key, preventing parallel delivery structures and programmes.

Where available, a recently updated and adequately populated **social registry** can further facilitate the use of a common tool and methodology to select recipient households for both tracks.

The institutionalization of **national safety net programmes** also facilitates a twin-track response, as existing delivery mechanisms for selection, enrolment, payment or grievances can be leveraged.

Reinforcing national system capacities is an overarching goal. Continuous national system capacity assessments and adjustments using both tracks can inform capacity building needs in the long term, putting in place the conditions for progressively increasing Track 1 delivery at scale.

Box 1. How does the twin-track differ from 'third-party implementation' ?

Third party implementation (TPI) is a common **operational modality** used in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, whereby the government or the donor/financial institution directly contracts a trusted partner (UN agency or NGO for instance) to deliver all or parts of social protection benefits. A **twin-track approach** is not a synonym for third-party implementation. Instead, it refers to a specific approach to deliver simultaneously through, and in alignment with, national systems (and can thus include TPI as an operational modality within the overall delivery approach).



³ WFP and UNICEF. 2024. *Delivering shock-responsive social protection in the Sahel: Activating the twin-track approach in the face of political disruption (Lessons from Niger)*.