

Evidence on Social Protection in Contexts of Fragility and Forced Displacement

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FROM RIGOROUS EVIDENCE TO ACTION: KEY LESSONS FOR COORDINATING RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Rigorous research in humanitarian settings is possible when researchers and programmers work together, particularly in the early stages when responses to humanitarian challenges are designed. Six new rigorous research studies from five countries: Ecuador, Mali, Niger, Lebanon and Yemen illustrate this point.

A unified approach is required to achieve a well-coordinated evidence generation strategy that aligns with financing cycles and builds on and feeds into programming. Increased coordination between donors, implementing partners, and researchers will facilitate more systematic evidence generation and ultimately effective and cost-efficient responses to humanitarian crises.

Enablers to improve research coordination in humanitarian contexts include:

- **An adequate space to present and discuss evidence.**
- **Understanding what research organizations can do in isolation and which research activities require a coordinated response.**

- **Improved coordination both within and between implementing partners and donors.**
- **Protected research funding (specially to safeguard ongoing research activities) when programmatic funds dwindle.**
- **Sufficient coordination for humanitarian actors to learn from development actors (and vice versa).**

Research will be relevant for programme design and policy responses to humanitarian crises if the following are met:

- There is a systematic accounting of what we are learning and there are adequate processes for evidence take-up by implementing partners.
- Researchers are humble about what can be learned; recognize that we all can – and need to – do better; and strive for generalizability and actionable policy lessons.

UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, in collaboration with the UNICEF Social Inclusion section, organized a [workshop](#) to bring together and foster an exchange between researchers and policy makers working on social protection in settings of fragility and forced displacement. The workshop took place on 7 and 8 June 2018 in Florence, Italy, following a commitment to

increase evidence generation at the [International Conference](#) on social protection in contexts of fragility and forced displacement held in Brussels in September 2017. Vulnerable populations face ongoing and new crises. An estimated 65 million faced forced displacement in 2015¹. There is an increasing need to design and implement effective, sustainable social

¹ UNHCR, 2016, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015*.

protection systems to ensure their basic survival and human development. Context-specific research is needed to inform policy and practice. However, there is little rigorous evidence to date to facilitate design and implementation of social protection systems in such settings.² This workshop was intended as a contribution towards filling evidence gaps, and sought to initiate a joint discussion between researchers and practitioners to identify priority research gaps, and strategize opportunities together, to generate further future evidence.

Day 1 of the workshop focused on expanding the evidence base, with six research presentations of new rigorous quantitative evidence focused on social protection in humanitarian settings. The studies were identified through a call for papers and vetted through a detailed review process. They represent the work of 20 authors from over 12 institutions, including UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, the World Bank, the International Food Policy Research Institute, American Institutes for Research, and various universities. The studies are representative of a range of geographical settings and typologies of social protection programming, and focus on three main themes:

1. Comparisons between effectiveness of different delivery modalities (e.g. cash versus in-kind, or school feeding versus general food distribution);
2. Evaluations and implications of targeting choices (including universal reforms); and
3. Impacts of programmes targeted at refugees and host communities.

Researchers presented not only on the research design and results, but also drew out policy implications and evidence gaps or challenges identified while conducting the studies. The first group of papers shows the diverse impacts of different implementation modalities, including the sometimes unexpected (positive and negative) consequences of programming (see *Boxes 1-3*). For example, Brück et al. found that assets-based programming had a positive effect on child nutrition in Niger, while the traditional preventative food aid for malnutrition did not (see *Box 1*). Schwab compares the effects of cash versus food distribution to households in rural Yemen during the ‘lean season’ and finds only modest productive impacts of both modalities (see *Box 2*). Likewise, Aurino et al. found that while school feeding succeeded in increasing measures of children’s education in Mali, general food distribution did not (see *Box 3*). These papers are unique as they are the first known comparisons of such programme delivery modalities examined within fragile and emergency settings. The papers clearly show that the type of

economic transfer or benefit does matter, and that optimizing the implementation modality can be critical for programme success. Since little research is available across contexts to draw out design lessons, researchers and practitioners agreed on the need to be open to learning opportunities in future humanitarian programming. Some aspects highlighted included the need to be modest in the formulation of theories of change for humanitarian programmes; it is important to be aware of the limitations of our understanding even in well-studied contexts. Moreover, there is a need to be comprehensive in evaluation approaches, capturing wide-ranging programme effects including both intended and unintended consequences – particularly around gender and intra-household dynamics.

Box 1: Assets for alimentation? The nutritional impact of assets-based programming in Niger

[Tilman Brück, Oscar Dias Botia, Neil Ferguson, Jérôme Ouédraogo, Zacharias Ziegelhoefer]

A recent strand of aid programming aims to develop household assets by removing the stresses associated with meeting basic nutritional needs. However, it is also possible that such programmes can boost nutrition in recipient households, by encouraging further investment in diet. To test this hypothesis, the authors study the World Food Programme’s Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) in Niger, a conflict-affected, low income country with a high share of malnourishment. Under PRRO, a household could receive: 1) food aid to prevent malnutrition, 2) both preventive food aid and ‘food for assets’ assistance, or 3) no assistance (the control group). When provided alone, food aid has no nutritional impact, relative to receiving no assistance at all. However, there is a pronounced positive effect when preventive food aid is paired with assets-based programming, over and above the effect which stems from greater household assets. The authors conclude that assets-based programmes deliver positive nutritional spill-overs and have potential to interact positively with more nutrition-focused programming.

[[Working paper](#); [Presentation](#)]

² Doocy, S and Tappis, H, 2016, *Cash-based approaches in humanitarian emergencies: a systematic review*, 3ie Systematic Review Report 28. London: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie).

Box 2: Comparing the productive effects of cash and food transfers in a crisis setting: Evidence from a randomized experiment in Yemen

[Benjamin Schwab]

The productive impacts of transfer programmes have received increased attention. However little is known about such effects in emergency and crisis settings. Even less is known about whether transfer type – a food basket or a cash grant – influences the productive potential of such transfers. Theory suggests that, while cash transfers can relieve liquidity constraints associated with investments, subsidized food provision, by acting as a form of insurance, may prevent households from retreating to conservative income-generating strategies during volatile periods. Using a randomized field experiment in Yemen, this study contrasts the effects of transfer modalities delivered during a lean season. The results demonstrate a modest productive impact of both modalities and suggest a role for both liquidity and price risk channels. Cash transfer recipients invested relatively more in activities with higher liquidity requirements (livestock), while food recipients incorporated higher-return crops into their agricultural portfolios. [[Working paper](#); [Presentation](#)]

Box 3: School feeding or general food redistribution? Quasi-experimental evidence on the educational impacts of emergency food assistance during conflict in Mali

[Elisabetta Aurino, Jean-Pierre Tranchant, Amadou Sekou Diallo, Aulo Gelli]

The authors investigate the effects of emergency school feeding and general food distribution (GFD) on children's schooling during conflict in Mali. Impacts on child enrolment, absenteeism and attainment were examined via quasi-experimental techniques. Results indicate school feeding led to increases in enrolment by 11 percentage points and to about an additional half-year of completed schooling. Attendance among boys residing in households receiving GFD, however, declined by about 20 per cent over the comparison group. One possible explanation comes from adjustments in child labour. School feeding leads to lower participation and time spent in work among girls, while GFD raised child labour, particularly among boys. Further analysis shows that impacts also vary by conflict intensity, suggesting programme design modification may be justified in contexts of fragility. The educational implications of food assistance should be considered when planning humanitarian responses. [[Working paper](#); [Presentation](#)]

The second theme around targeting highlights the need to better understand dynamics and vulnerabilities among populations. This is the case when such vulnerabilities accrue from poverty and conflict over time. Schnitzer presented sobering evidence showing that methods we currently use to identify beneficiaries in both development and humanitarian settings perform poorly and have significant drawbacks (*see Box 4*). Promising initiatives that move towards more inclusive and comprehensive operations within targeting exercises, in particular unified databases (single registries) and technological improvements to allow the integration of multiple beneficiary lists, are welcome innovations to the challenges of targeting in fragile settings.

Box 4: How to target households in adaptive social protection systems? Evidence from humanitarian and development approaches in Niger

[Pascale Schnitzer]

The methods used to identify beneficiaries of programmes aiming to address persistent poverty and shocks are subject to frequent policy debates. Relying on panel data from Niger, this paper analyses the performance of different targeting methods that are widely used by development and humanitarian actors and explores how they can be applied as part of an adaptive social protection (ASP) system. The methods include proxy-means testing (PMT), household economy analysis (HEA), geographical targeting, and combined methods. Results show that PMT performs better in identifying persistently poor households, while HEA performs better in identifying transiently food insecure households. Geographical targeting is particularly efficient in responding to food crises, which tend to be largely covariate in nature. Combinations of geographical, PMT, and HEA approaches may be used as part of an efficient and scalable ASP system. Results motivate the consolidation of data across programmes, which can support the application of alternative targeting methods tailored to programme-specific objectives. [[Working paper](#); [Presentation](#)]

The final set of presentations focused on social protection responses within refugee hosting settings, exemplified by two different contexts (*see Boxes 5 and 6*). Valli et al. showed that economic transfers (cash, food and vouchers) to Colombian refugees and poor Ecuadorians in Northern Ecuador increased measures of social cohesion. These increases, however, were almost exclusively driven by the refugee sample (*see Box 5*). In Lebanon, de Hoop et al. examined the impacts of a cash transfer for

education of Syrian refugees, finding increases in attendance as well as other beneficial impacts – however enrolment was limited by supply-side constraints (see Box 6). Both studies demonstrate the importance of understanding contextual factors during the design and implementation phases of programming. For example, it is possible that small design features including messaging, and joint targeting of Colombians and Ecuadorians, were responsible for social cohesion impacts, which were explicitly built into programme implementation. Likewise, positive trends in education among Syrian refugees, paired with limited supply of second shift schools, may have dampened or masked positive impacts of the cash transfer on enrolment during the evaluation period of the No Lost Generation programme.

Box 5: Economic transfers and social cohesion in a refugee-hosting setting

[Elsa Valli, Amber Peterman, Melissa Hidrobo]

There is increasing interest in understanding if social protection is able to foster social cohesion, particularly between refugees and host communities. Using an experimental evaluation of transfers, including provision of cash, food and food vouchers to Colombian refugees and poor Ecuadorians in urban and peri-urban areas, we examine if transfers resulted in changes in social cohesion measures. The evaluation was a cluster-randomized control trial examining a short-term programme implemented over six months by WFP. The analysis examines six aggregate dimensions of social cohesion, derived from 33 individual indicators, in addition to an overall index of social cohesion. Overall results suggest that the programme contributed to the integration of Colombians into the hosting community through increases in personal agency, attitudes that accept diversity, confidence in institutions, and social participation, while having no impact, however, on the Ecuadorian population. The programme had no negative impact on the indicators or domains analysed. Although it was not possible to specifically identify mechanisms, the authors hypothesize that these impacts are driven by joint targeting, messaging around social inclusion and interaction between nationalities at mandated monthly nutrition trainings.

[[Working paper](#); [Presentation](#)]

Box 6: No Lost Generation: Supporting the school participation of displaced Syrian children in Lebanon

[Jacobus De Hoop, Mitchell Morey, David Seidenfeld]

This paper documents the impact of a cash transfer programme – an initiative of the Government of Lebanon, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), widely known as the No Lost Generation Programme (NLG) and, locally, as Min Ila (‘from to’) – on the school participation of displaced Syrian children in Lebanon. The programme provides cash to children who are enrolled in the afternoon shift of a public primary school. It was designed to cover the cost of commuting to school and to compensate households for income forgone if children attend school instead of working; two critical barriers to child school participation. The authors rely on a geographical regression discontinuity design that compares children living in two pilot governorates with children living in two neighbouring governorates, to identify the impact of the programme half way into the first year of operations (the 2016/17 school year). Results indicate limited programme effects on school enrolment, but substantive impacts on school attendance among the enrolled children, which increased by 0.5 days to 0.7 days per week – an improvement of about 20 per cent over the control group. School enrolment among Syrian children rose rapidly across all of Lebanon’s governorates during the period of the evaluation, resulting in supply side capacity constraints that appear to have dampened positive impacts on enrolment.

[[Working paper](#); [Presentation](#)]

The first day concluded with a panel of donors and international cooperation partners including EU-ECHO, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the German Development Agency (GIZ). The panellists reflected on what, in their view, were the most innovative and promising examples of social protection programming in humanitarian contexts, and shared their funding priorities and priority evidence gaps. Discussions focused on identification of success stories, coordination mechanisms across donors, implementation and research, prioritization of research topics, as well as mechanisms for incentivizing research within already complex landscapes. Common themes included a need for research that is truly multi-disciplinary and bridges the ‘humanitarian-development divide’. Research on social protection without a humanitarian lens was not considered useful for humanitarian actors. Another theme was the importance of timing for research in humanitarian contexts.

The usefulness of research findings that are published two to three years after the research is undertaken, may be limited. To shorten timelines, study durations may need to be adjusted and preparatory work should be done (if possible) before an emergency occurs. A careful uptake process is of critical importance if research is to feed into humanitarian programming. If these issues are considered, successful research is possible even in challenging contexts, as illustrated by promising examples of operational research that looks at ‘shock-responsive’ social protection. Some priorities for future research were mentioned, including related to the potential of social protection to foster social cohesion and contribute to stabilization of societies and state-building.

Day 2 explored opportunities to push the evidence frontier through an exchange between UNICEF delegates, donors, partner agencies and researchers. The day opened with five UN agencies, who gave overviews of ongoing initiatives for evidence generation in humanitarian settings. This was followed by plenary discussions. Presentations by UNICEF, [UNHCR](#), [FAO](#), [WFP](#) and the [World Bank](#) highlighted the extensive work being carried out within fragile settings by the UN agencies and the need to coordinate and share data and lessons learned for global benefit.

The morning sessions also included detailed feedback from UNICEF Country Offices, who provided a field perspective on their ongoing social protection initiatives in humanitarian contexts and reflections on research and knowledge gaps faced during implementation. Presentations from [Cameroon](#), [Lebanon](#), [Jordan](#), [Madagascar](#), [Malawi](#), [Nepal](#), and [Nigeria](#), highlighted the multiple complexities in implementing both social protection programmes and research in a complex environment. For example, countries face not only compressed timelines in responding to emergencies, but research also faces ethical and design complexities in such situations. Despite the challenges, there is an increasing imperative to learn from experiences to optimize positive investments and avoid poor programming. This is particularly necessary across different timelines – before, during and after disaster or displacement – to bridge humanitarian and development divides.

The last session included brainstorming in break out groups on topics related to priorities in evidence generation, use of administrative data for future research, coordination between donors, practitioners and researchers and leveraging lessons from operational research. Originating from these groups and drawing on discussions throughout the workshop, a preliminary set of research priorities was compiled, which represents only a fraction of evidence and knowledge gaps to date.³ Preliminary findings of these discussions are displayed below in *Boxes 7-9*. Participants in the group discussions were invited to summarize their conclusions in blog posts.

Box 7: Coordination between donors, practitioners and researchers

Coordinating evidence generation with programming and financing is both critical and challenging in humanitarian contexts. A unified approach is necessary to achieve a well-coordinated evidence generation strategy that (i) aligns with financing cycles and (ii) builds on and feeds into programming. Discussion participants indicated a need to learn from successful examples and acknowledge from the start that we all can do – and need to do – better. Discussion participants identified several ‘enablers’ required to achieve improved coordination, including:

- An adequate space in which to present and discuss evidence, is critical. Simplified and short discussions are neither sufficient to accurately coordinate evidence generation with programming nor for evidence to feed into programmatic decisions.
- With increasing demand for responding to challenging emergencies, it is important to understand what research organizations can do in isolation and which research activities require a coordinated response.
- Improved coordination both within and between implementing partners and donors is important in the development of a coherent evidence generation strategy related to social protection in humanitarian settings.
- Resources for coordination of donors and for evaluation and evidence generation should be protected (specially to safeguard ongoing research activities) when programmatic funds dwindle.
- Sufficient coordination to allow for humanitarian actors to learn from development actors (and vice versa) is critical, especially in protracted crisis settings.

³ Woodward, A., Griekspoor, A., Doocy, S., Spiegel, P., and Savage, K. 2018. Research agenda-setting on cash programming for health and nutrition in humanitarian settings. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3(7): 1-12.

Box 8: Use of administrative data for research

This discussion started from the premise that in humanitarian settings, survey data is often scarce and unreliable. In these situations, administrative data – such as those collected for programming purposes or as part of service delivery – can potentially serve as an alternative source of information for systematic research efforts. Administrative data have several strengths and weaknesses as compared to survey data. One strength is that administrative data are available at zero additional cost and do not require additional data collection activities. Another strength, when used for evaluations of program effectiveness, is that administrative data often cover the universe of programme beneficiaries (while survey data typically cover only a subset). Weaknesses of administrative data may include challenges in linking across administrative datasets for research purposes and comparatively weak data collection designs. Importantly though, it may be possible to address many of these weaknesses through early collaboration and coordination between researchers and implementing partners. Designing the collection of administrative data to serve the dual purpose of feeding into programmatic decisions and evidence generation could in some occasions be a low hanging fruit that merits further exploration. The participants in this breakout session prepared a [blog describing the discussion in more detail](#).

Box 9: Learning from operations

Beyond the types of rigorous quantitative research discussed on day one, several opportunities for further learning from operations were identified. Two avenues for learning from programme operations in a specific country or context were discussed. First, short feedback loops are important to improve programme implementation in complex, rapidly changing environments. Techniques such as real-time monitoring, scenario planning, and context monitoring were discussed as potential options to shorten feedback loops. Second, to build capacity and enhance learning at the national level, national counterparts need to be in the driving seat. As an element of this, national counterparts should be enabled to learn quickly from failure through rapid feedback loops. Opportunities for learning *across* settings were identified too. In particular, in addition to documenting impact, research should focus on operational aspects and processes, to better understand not only whether different programmatic approaches are effective, but also why and how.

There are opportunities for better use of existing evidence, making sure it feeds into policy making and programme design. These opportunities include: translation of research into actionable and easily accessible lessons, capturing experiences of field teams through stories (learning by analogy), and improved organization of communities of practice to allow for open and frank discussion of challenges and failure.

Box 10: Research priorities

The following themes were identified as priorities for future research:

- **Know your client:** Deepen our understanding of dynamic experience of poverty and conflict among key target populations and across diverse cultural contexts, including behavioural and coping strategies to sharpen our targeting approaches for diverse social protection responses;
- **Impacts and cost effectiveness:** Continue to explore trade-offs in effectiveness and efficiency of different programming modalities and benefit levels going beyond standard outcomes and including intra-household dynamics, paired with exploration of associated costs, impacts of bundled programmes and added value of system linkages. The overall goal of such an evidence base is to understand not only if programmes work, but why and how they work, in order to draw common lessons for programme design.
- **Sharpen understanding of time horizons and linkages with development:** Explore the effects of programmes and beneficiary responses over longer timelines, in particular, a better understanding of what happens after short-term emergency interventions end. Include inquiry into what features of interventions facilitate linkages between humanitarian response and long-term social protection systems.
- **Invest in methodological learning:** Conducting research in fragile settings requires flexible and innovative methods – while striving to maintain methodological rigour. More needs to be done to develop, use and publicize light touch and innovative methods to conduct research in an ethical manner in such settings. This may include use of administrative data, investment in measurement of new or important concepts (e.g. social cohesion) and use of qualitative methodologies to build the evidence base.

There was agreement that social protection can always be done better – and that investments in evidence are key to making improvements. Participants agreed that the investment in global knowledge must be placed before institutional boundaries, as successful collaborations across the donors, implementers and researchers often require explicit coordination and alignment of incentives. Finally, it is not enough to simply produce evidence or programme learning, it must be made policy actionable and shared with the larger stakeholder community to facilitate improved decision-making and investments on the part of global actors. We must continue to build the evidence base, share it, and apply it.

For more information, see the [workshop webpage](#). Here you can download the agenda, participant list, working papers and blogs, and link to the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti's [Research Watch](#) on social protection in humanitarian settings, containing expert interviews and multi-media products.