

HPG Research Briefing



Agricultural rehabilitation Mapping the linkages between humanitarian relief, social protection and development

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Catherine Longley, Ian Christoplos and Tom Slaymaker

This Research Briefing addresses the question of how to support the livelihoods of rural people who have been affected by conflict. In particular, it explores how international actors might move beyond conventional seeds and tools interventions to address vulnerability and support the agricultural component of rural livelihoods in countries emerging from conflict.

Humanitarian agencies are increasingly interested in protecting and promoting livelihoods in protracted crises and post-conflict situations. Crop and livestock agriculture is often the cornerstone of rural livelihood strategies in post-conflict societies, and agricultural interventions form the basis of food security interventions. It is thus important to focus on agriculture. Yet current agricultural programming in countries emerging from conflict tends to consist of piecemeal, project-based approaches that are ill-suited to addressing the causes of vulnerability.

This Research Briefing outlines how agricultural rehabilitation can contribute to linking humanitarian assistance, social protection and longer-term development through the provision of effective support in ways that are consistent with core humanitarian prin-

ciples, as well as with livelihoods and rights-based approaches. The paper is based on lessons from Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, and draws its analysis from livelihoods work and social protection.

We argue that agricultural rehabilitation in countries emerging from conflict needs to go beyond seed aid and a focus on increasing agricultural production to enhance consumption, markets and institutions. Social protection and livelihood promotion allow for vulnerability to be addressed and, at a conceptual level, potentially provide a means for linking relief and development. But various challenges remain in practice, not least the risk that social protection may exacerbate the political and social inequalities that characterise chronic and post-conflict situations.

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Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399

E-mail: hpg@odi.org.uk
Websites: www.odi.org.uk/hpg
and www.odihpn.org

Agricultural production fares surprisingly well in the face of conflict. Despite the collapse of formal agricultural service delivery systems, farmers generally continue to access inputs and services through local social networks and – to some extent – private sector providers. The impact of conflict on production and markets is often highly uneven, and changing markets and market opportunities do not always follow conventional assumptions.

Agricultural production may be a cornerstone of rural livelihood strategies, yet rural people – especially the poorest and the most vulnerable – rely on a range of different livelihood activities for their survival. There is a growing realisation in rural development thinking that an increasing proportion of the rural poor earn most of their income outside of the homestead farm – if they own a farm at all. However, the ‘yeoman farmer fallacy’ – a belief that virtually all rural people rely on farming alone to make ends meet – continues to pervade much agricultural programming in countries emerging from conflict.

Box 1: Livelihoods and social protection

A *livelihoods approach* involves detailed analysis of the underlying causes of conflict and vulnerability (the extent to which a person or group is likely to be affected by adverse circumstances). Conflict creates new forms of vulnerability. In addition, more structural forms of vulnerability and social exclusion (e.g. those based on class or ethnic distinctions) that pre-existed a conflict may persist into the post-conflict period.

When applied to post-conflict situations, *social protection* can be defined as ‘acts and measures designed to protect people against socially unacceptable levels of risk and vulnerability’. The key to appropriate social protection mechanisms in post-conflict situations lies in an adequate definition (and understanding) of vulnerability, together with an understanding of the informal social protection mechanisms that already exist.

Addressing vulnerability also means *promoting livelihoods*. The term ‘livelihood promotion’ tends to be used as a shorthand for measures intended to encourage pro-poor growth – promoting asset accumulation (financial as well as social), helping to correct market failures, reducing inequalities and fostering social cohesion.

Post-conflict agricultural programming: a critique

Seed interventions

Emergency seed aid interventions often have little impact, prompting calls to move ‘beyond seeds and tools’. In Afghanistan, seed distributions were primarily promoted as a way to push new varieties on ‘ignorant’ farmers. Yet these distributions took place without the related extension activities, on-farm varietal trials and demonstrations that

would allow farmers to learn about these new varieties and make informed decisions. In Sierra Leone, concerns about a lack of regulation in the procurement and distribution of seeds and tools led to efforts to promote the local production of these inputs and the establishment of community seed banks. However, experience elsewhere with such approaches has provided few examples of successful and sustainable activities.

Non-seed inputs and agricultural services

Farmers need access to a wide range of inputs and services in order to produce effectively. The potential gains that can be achieved through one service, such as providing seed, may depend on access to other complementary inputs, such as fertilizer, water and pest control, extension advice, credit and market information services. Rather than attempting to coordinate all these different inputs and services, current agricultural development thinking suggests that interventions should create a market for the various inputs and services that farmers require, and should be designed in such a way that farmers are able to mix and match the different inputs and services that are available.

In practice, however, agricultural rehabilitation efforts tend to be piecemeal, project-based and supply-driven. The emphasis on micro-level or ‘community-based’ interventions distracts attention from institutional forms at meso and macro levels. Micro-credit projects, for example, often fail to make links with potential agricultural marketing channels. Similarly, popular extension approaches such as Farmer Field Schools fail to emphasise sufficiently the broader linkages with service providers or sources of new and appropriate technologies.

Promoting markets in the agricultural sector

The major role of the private sector in the provision of agricultural inputs and services is increasingly recognised. One strategy for stimulating demand is to provide beneficiaries with the resources (cash or vouchers) to purchase the inputs and services they require, in the hope that they will then become clients or customers of emerging service providers, rather than mere ‘beneficiaries’. But the evidence from voucher systems in Afghanistan and Sierra Leone suggests that the dominant role of the implementing NGOs still limits accountability between service providers and their clients. Aid agencies continue to distrust farmers’ ability to make their own decisions, and the research found little evidence of coherent strategies for market-oriented programming. Efforts to promote market systems and infrastructure tend to be localised, fragmented and poorly coordinated.

The failure to address vulnerability

Current post-conflict programming tends to consist of piecemeal, project-based approaches, with little evidence of coordinated strategy. The failure to anchor programming in a wider perspective is due to ‘crisis thinking’ and the yeoman farmer fallacy. Agencies fail to build upon the resilience, capacities and ingenuity of rural populations. Despite an emphasis on targeting ‘vulnerable groups’, current agricultural interventions are inadequate to address the causes of vulnerability in post-conflict situations. Such groups are seen

1 Common usage of the term ‘post-conflict’ does not necessarily imply absolute peace, and the distinction between ‘conflict’ and ‘post-conflict’ is often very unclear.

as passive ‘beneficiaries’, rather than as people actively struggling to manage complex livelihoods. In addition, given that the poorest households often own little land, interventions that are limited to own-account agricultural production are likely to benefit the better-off more than the poor, suggesting that additional efforts beyond farming are needed if vulnerability is to be reduced.

Addressing vulnerability through social protection and livelihood promotion

Social protection can be linked with promoting agricultural livelihoods either by infusing agricultural programmes with risk and vulnerability objectives (as in the first four intervention aims listed in Box 2), or by ensuring that social protection mechanisms are also ‘productivity enhancing’ (as for the last two points of Box 2). There is little practical evidence from the case study countries to suggest that social protection is being linked effectively to humanitarian action or livelihood promotion within the agricultural or food security sectors.

In Afghanistan, social protection is primarily seen as a means of ensuring a smooth transition from a chaotic and haphazard collection of relief projects implemented by NGOs to a more reliable, efficient and regularised system under government leadership, which protects the population as a whole, and particularly those affected by natural disasters. In practice, however, local government and local governance are still too weak to ensure efficient programming, or to guard against social protection mechanisms being co-opted by local elites.

In Sierra Leone, the National Social Action Project (NSAP) uses social funds to address vulnerability through building social capital, and to reduce poverty through community empowerment. But whether there is real understanding of the root causes of vulnerability in agrarian society is questionable, suggesting that the NSAP may be ill-equipped to tackle issues of vulnerability and inequity. A study of social fund programmes in north-eastern Brazil argues that the funds are least appropriate where inequality is significant (as it often is in post-conflict situations).² This suggests that, rather than reducing such asymmetries, social funds may in fact reinforce them.

Enhancing institutions

Institutions – both informal and formal – provide the primary entry point through which the aid community can support rural livelihoods in more sustainable ways. In supporting informal institutions, there are potential dangers that structural causes of poverty and vulnerability will be reinforced. In cases where particular institutions (such as chieftdom authorities in Sierra Leone, or land tenure structures in Southern Sudan) are regarded as a causal factor relating to the conflict, reform may be deemed necessary, but it must be accepted that institutional reform is both a sensitive issue and a very slow process.

In relation to formal institutions, post-war public sector reform in both Afghanistan and Sierra Leone has met with varying

levels of resistance among politicians and civil servants, raising the question of whether crisis can really be used to motivate effective change. Citizens’ expectations for effective service and input delivery may mean that plans for reform are accorded a lower priority by politicians keen to provide cheap services to their constituents and supporters. Actors with interests in pre-existing institutions are often quick to reassert their power by trying to rebuild institutions that were at the root of the original conflict, or were inherently dysfunctional. Although major reform is often necessary, the challenges involved must not be underestimated.

Civil society, the state and the private sector each has a role to play in the delivery of agricultural inputs and services, but there is no template as to what these roles should be. Policy documents emphasise the private sector, but there is little evidence of practical initiatives in the agricultural sector to promote private enterprises which do not turn them into mere channels for aid delivery. In post-conflict contexts, there is usually a plethora of NGOs providing heavily subsidised agricultural services and inputs, and a consequent risk of ‘crowding out’ private sector involvement. Rhetoric about ‘community-based’ or ‘community-driven’ interventions, ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ is commonplace. There is, however, little evidence that agencies are transferring their power to their community partners.

Policies and programming in post-conflict transitions

Effective agricultural aid programming must relate to three contextual transitions that occur as countries emerge from conflict.

- Security – from a situation in which there is insecurity involving high levels of violence to a more secure situation where there is relative tranquillity. It is important to note that the transition can also take place in the other direction (from tranquillity to violence).
- Livelihood strategies, markets and local institutions – this transition is often closely related to the local security context, and involves a shift from livelihood strategies that are asset-depleting (i.e. coping or survival strategies) to strategies that are asset-maintaining or asset-building (i.e. adaptive or accumulative strategies). This transition also involves the strengthening of markets and local institutions, made possible through increased levels of trust and collective action at local levels. Again, the transition in livelihood strategies and local institutions can also be reversed if security is not maintained.
- The nature of the state and formal institutions – this involves a political transition from a government that is absent, ineffective or illegitimate to one that is legitimate and effective, but which does not attempt to replace the private sector or civil society.

Although these three transitions are contextual, they should not be regarded as completely external to the changes that must be promoted through agricultural assistance. The ways in which assistance is programmed can either hinder or help each of these three transitions.

² Tendler, J. with R. Serrano (1999) ‘The Rise of Social Funds: What are they a model of?’ Draft report for the MIT/UNDP Decentralization Project, Management Development and Governance Division, UNDP.

Agricultural support in conflict and post-conflict situations should facilitate the transition from supply-led programming to the establishment of sustainable (market-driven) systems for service delivery, developed within a framework of broad-based efforts to protect and promote rural livelihoods. This transition can be broken down into a number of measures, as shown in Box 2.

Box 2: Measures to support a transition in agricultural programming to protect and promote rural livelihoods

- To ensure that vulnerable farmers have access to agricultural inputs and services (food for agriculture, seed, irrigation, pest control, animal health, microfinance, extension), either through direct distribution or interventions designed to stimulate choice, such as cash or vouchers.
- To increase agricultural production through access to appropriate technology.
- To increase rural incomes through the promotion of produce and labour markets.
- To establish the capacity, structures and institutions necessary for the sustainable delivery of inputs and services.
- To address vulnerability and social inequality through social protection and livelihood promotion.
- To promote the reforms necessary to address the structural causes of vulnerability.

Interventions represented by each of these steps are already being implemented in many conflict and post-conflict situations. Thus, we are not suggesting a dramatic change (though more effort needs to be placed on promoting markets for agricultural goods and services), only that these interventions are regarded as part of a broader transition, and that there is greater emphasis on addressing issues of vulnerability and institution-building. Although the links between social protection, market development and pro-poor agriculture-based growth need to be explored much more fully before these elements can be combined into a viable policy framework, the concept of transition offers a strategic vision for overcoming the projectised nature of agricultural interventions. Such a transition necessarily requires attention to strengthening institutional capacities at all levels (community, agency, government, private sector), a fundamental shift in the role of NGOs, from implementers to facilitators, and clarity and consensus on the functions of the state as a regulatory body.

In general, much greater emphasis should be placed on needs assessment and impact monitoring to enable a move towards empirically informed strategies with realistic, shared objectives. In particular, in planning and designing interventions, the aims of the measures highlighted in Box 2 must be assessed in relation to each of the three contextual aspects described above, in order to determine their overall appropriateness, as well as the specific approaches and principles to be followed. Such an assessment may usefully highlight contradictions in

the design of potential approaches, thus ensuring that the strategic vision is applied in a consistent manner.

Agencies working at the interface between humanitarianism, social protection and agriculture-based interventions must strive to follow principled approaches. If humanitarianism is defined by the objective of saving lives and a strict adherence to humanitarian principles, then what is commonly referred to as 'agricultural rehabilitation' should not be seen as humanitarian. However, that is not to say that it cannot be principled, since principles from rights-based and livelihoods approaches (particularly accountability and the need for multi-level³ interventions) have also been found to be necessary.

Conclusions

At a conceptual level, the idea of positioning social protection at the centre of rehabilitation efforts is attractive as it avoids the relief-to-development terminology that has often discouraged an understanding of the reality of multiple transitions. The need to identify coherent strategies for moving from a chaotic and haphazard collection of relief projects to a more reliable and regularised system is widely recognised, but evidence from Afghanistan and Sierra Leone suggests that there is a long way to go before the concept of social protection can be translated into a practical framework for action in post-conflict settings.

A central focus of social protection in post-conflict agricultural support should be on mitigating risk and reducing vulnerability, but both remain poorly understood in post-conflict settings, and agricultural experts tend to be poorly equipped to address vulnerability. Ensuring that formal social protection mechanisms do not inadvertently undermine or 'erode' existing informal mechanisms is another key concern. Finally, power imbalances are often particularly acute in countries emerging from conflict, and there is a danger that these may be exacerbated if political economy considerations are not given adequate attention. How to address such structural inequalities remains one of the most important challenges facing social protection in countries emerging from conflict.

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Catherine Longley is a Research Fellow with HPG. She works in collaboration with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Nairobi. Ian Christoplos is a researcher at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and an independent consultant. Tom Slaymaker is a Research Fellow at ODI.

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³ Ensuring that interventions are informed by micro-level analysis and support an effective enabling environment, and that macro-level structures and processes support people to build upon their own strengths.