Executive summary

Integrating assistance to the displaced into a social protection system in Cameroon

An ideal, but in whose interests?

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Building the Evidence on Forced Displacement

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Key messages

- Social protection programmes that only offer assistance for a short time (e.g., 2 years), such as in Cameroon, do not provide a true safety net. Although ideally displaced people would be assisted through state social protection structures, people in protracted displacement need a safety net on which they can rely, which such programmes cannot provide.

- Conditionality in the provision of international financing for social protection can lead to displaced people being included among its recipients, as in Cameroon. However, for state structures to be a main vehicle for assisting the displaced, government would have to take on the responsibility for the welfare of the displaced. This is quite different and there is currently no incentive for this in Cameroon, especially when social protection for citizens is not (yet) a priority. Nor are there incentives for humanitarian agencies to hand over to the Government that responsibility – and those resources.

- Equalising transfer values of emergency assistance with social protection transfers has become a common option for humanitarian agencies wanting to advance integration. For displaced people, though, it risks giving inappropriate levels of support, since their needs are rarely the same as those of the host population. Though it is tempting for humanitarian actors to focus on the only alignment that they can control, humanitarian and social protection actors should be focusing on more difficult challenges, if the objective is a social protection system that can also address the needs of people affected by displacement or other crises.

- The preconditions for coherence between social protection and humanitarian aid are currently absent in Cameroon. Progress first needs to be made towards a common approach to understanding and assessing poverty, need and vulnerability, and transparency, both within and between the humanitarian and social protection sectors. Greater coherence in approaches to implementing a national social protection policy is also a priority.

Executive summary

There is growing investment in national social protection systems for addressing the needs of people affected by crisis, rather than channelling support through entirely parallel humanitarian systems. This has combined with a decade-long movement to adopt longer-term development approaches to protracted displacement, resulting in significant interest in the greater use of social protection for supporting the needs of forcibly displaced people. ODI has undertaken a three-country study, in Greece, Colombia and Cameroon, to analyse the potential for greater connections between humanitarian assistance to displaced populations and national social protection systems.

This paper looks at two case study sites in Cameroon. East region is home to some 300,000 refugees fleeing conflict in the Central African Republic. While around a quarter are in managed camps, the majority live in host communities. In Far North region, Boko Haram violence has displaced over 100,000 Nigerian refugees, alongside over 300,000 registered IDPs.[1]

Social protection is still very nascent in Cameroon. A national policy was agreed in 2017 but has not been formally approved by the government. This policy explicitly includes displaced people as a priority group for social assistance. There is very little provision of social insurance (e.g., pensions), especially for the rural poor. The Ministry for Social Welfare (MINAS) runs ad hoc assistance projects for vulnerable groups (e.g., disabled, orphans) when it has funds, but it is poorly resourced. The World Bank began supporting a programme called a 'safety net' (PFS) in 2013, and coverage has gradually expanded, including to areas with large displaced populations. The current phase is eventually expected to reach 200,000 households (less than 10% of those living below the poverty line nationally). PFS includes both unconditional cash transfers in a 'graduation-style' programme (TMO) and cash-for-work (THIMO). TMO provides around $26 per household per month for two years, with additional annual grants of around $140; THIMO pays around $2.25 a day for a maximum of 60 days per year. TMO is targeted on poverty using a proxy means test, with predetermined quotas of recipients in an administrative area. There is no entitlement to social assistance, which makes it neither predictable nor dependable (the characteristics of a safety net).

The majority of humanitarian assistance for the material needs of displaced people is channelled through the World Food Programme (WFP). Because of resource constraints, the number of recipients and the value of transfers have been progressively reduced in recent years. The vast majority of aid is given as in-kind food aid, with some receiving e-vouchers redeemable for food at a restricted number of outlets. A small minority receive cash transfers. Transfers were halved in 2020, and voucher and cash transfers are currently set at $8 per person per month, around 20% higher for a household of six than TMO, when also considering the annual grant. In 2018, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began piloting a Transitional Safety Net (TSN), designed to mirror the levels and duration of support

1 A third displacement crisis, caused by political conflict in North-West and South-West regions, was not part of the study, because where a state is a party to a conflict, there are additional complications in supporting the state to address the needs of people affected by that conflict.

offered by TMO, for displaced households not identified as being among the most vulnerable. Money is paid through mobile phone transfers.

The analytical framework for this project identified 16 potential 'connection points' where social protection and humanitarian systems may be aligned, support each other or be integrated – or remain unconnected. Connection points include the areas of finance, legal frameworks, targeting, registration, transfer design, payment systems and feedback mechanisms. No connections are made at any of these points between humanitarian aid to the displaced and social protection programmes apart from TSN, where there is alignment at one connection point (transfer design).

There are two reasons for this lack of connection: very different objectives of the two forms of assistance, and complex systems of incentives which do not make it in the main actors' interests. PFS is intended to be a short 'push' to help people out of poverty; humanitarian assistance looks to ensure that all crisis-affected people can continue to meet their minimum needs. The conception behind PFS – one-off short-term support to a limited number of households – makes it hard to find compatibility with a system for ensuring continuous support for all those unable to meet their minimum needs. This incompatibility runs through how programmes conceive of eligibility, targeting, transfer values and the duration of support.

The institutional incentive structure also makes connection difficult to achieve. The challenge is greater than just finding connection between social protection and humanitarian assistance, as if they were two coherent systems. The current incentive structure does not drive greater coherence within either 'system'. In the domain of social protection, this is seen in a lack of coordination between ministries, with the Ministry for Social Welfare establishing a social registry based on vulnerability, but with no connection to the main social assistance programme, PFS, which is run by the Ministry of Planning (MINEPAT). Because MINEPAT is the gatekeeping ministry to such resources, there is no internal incentive driving it to hand over or share responsibility with MINAS. Similarly, the incentive structure in the humanitarian sector does not drive greater coherence among humanitarian actors, who may share overall missions but who are also competitors for donor resources. The incentive system exacerbates lack of transparency, for instance around assessment, targeting and eligibility, and information sharing.

There are also no incentives either for the state to take over responsibility for the welfare of the displaced from largely international humanitarian agencies, or for humanitarian agencies to pass on that responsibility and hand over authority and responsibility for the allocation of those resources.

The paper also analyses the potential impact of changing the relationship between humanitarian assistance to the displaced and social protection, looking at the question from six perspectives:

1. Effectiveness in meeting the needs of the displaced
2. Effectiveness in meeting the needs of the host population
3. Equity
4. Cost and efficiency
5. Accountability and acceptability to all stakeholders
6. Sustainability

The very limited coverage, quota-based targeting, short-term nature and lower transfer values of current social assistance all mean that alignment

at the connection points around programme design (including targeting and transfer design) would adversely affect the displaced, who have greater poverty and (often) greater constraints on independent livelihoods. There are unlikely to be any advantages to the displaced in their assistance being channelled through social protection structures, even if it were possible to do this. Relations between the communities, which are good, are unlikely to be affected, since there is in any case little knowledge about the nature and levels of need that other people receive. There is potentially a longer-term benefit in their being included on the new social registry, though its relationship to actual social protection benefits is still unknown.

There are clear advantages for the displaced in the government taking greater responsibility for their welfare, and playing a much greater role in humanitarian assistance would be evidence of this. However, the government's limited involvement currently is not the cause of the problem: it is a symptom of a deeper reluctance to take responsibility, for which it has no incentive.

Host populations recognise their interest in displaced people receiving adequate assistance because of the risks that desperation drives crime, and because of the benefits of economic interactions. The latter would be improved if humanitarian assistance adopted the social protection transfer modality of cash. There are no other obvious implications for host populations in other changes in alignment.

It is difficult to make judgements about equity because of the lack of information, exacerbated by a lack of transparency, about levels of poverty and livelihood insecurity of either the displaced or host populations. Rates of poverty and its depth are generally greater among the displaced, though presumably with much variation. Equity will not be served by equalising the levels and duration of assistance.

Significant cost savings for donors are likely if humanitarian assistance were channelled through social protection (PFS), but there is insufficient evidence to be able to compare the quality of implementation, particularly regarding the extent of exclusion error. It is likely that a move to cash transfers would be an alternative way of making some cost reductions, though such analysis was beyond the scope of this research project.

There is generally a trust deficit across both the humanitarian and social protection systems. A joint effort to improve the accountability of both systems to recipient populations might be beneficial, but it is difficult to see how this could be achieved in the short or medium term. Although humanitarian donors are not all happy with the degree of transparency in the humanitarian system, their hesitation to trust government with discretion in using funds for the welfare of the displaced is of higher order. Although the government of Cameroon is also dissatisfied with transparency in the humanitarian system it appears to tolerate it, in exchange for international agencies taking responsibility for the welfare of the displaced. A change in linkages between humanitarian assistance and social protection alignment would be largely irrelevant to achieving a much-needed improvement in accountability and acceptance.

For as long as both social protection and humanitarian assistance are largely funded by international donors, arguments for sustainability are of limited relevance. The main current social protection programme, PFS, functions as a project, not a structural safety net, and is therefore making only a limited contribution to

a sustainable social protection system, especially since social protection will not be a priority for the government in the next decade. Considering sustainability for the recipients rather than for the system, it is difficult to see how aligning support for the displaced with PFS can reduce their dependence on external aid.

Displaced people need a safety net. Although the PFS is called a safety net (‘*filets sociaux*’), it does not function as one. The clear conclusion is thus that the possibility for benefits from greater connection between humanitarian and social protection assistance remains distant, as is the possibility of greater connections being achieved. The preconditions for achieving this are also distant: these start with collaboration among humanitarian actors and collaboration across ministries working on social protection. Progress will be needed in three domains: a coherent vision and strategy dealing with the kinds and levels of assistance to which people will have an entitlement in which circumstances; structures and processes that can identify and assess the needs and vulnerabilities of displaced and host populations in the same terms; and a radical change in the relationships between the organisations currently working on both social protection and humanitarian assistance in Cameroon. System incentives do not currently drive greater coherence or collaboration.

Although an ideal social protection system, able to respond to the different and changing needs of people with different difficulties and vulnerabilities, would also protect displaced people, this remains a distant possibility in Cameroon. Counter-intuitively, concentrating on finding areas for practical alignment between social protection and (humanitarian) support for the displaced is not the best way to work towards that ideal. Aligning the value or duration of transfers is not relevant to achieving any meaningful objectives and will have little or no impact on social cohesion, but it risks unfairness and lack of equity in treating people who have particular needs, and greater constraints in achieving independent livelihoods, as a result of forced displacement.

Progress should rather be looked for by first establishing preconditions for greater connection which are also of value in themselves, even if they do not serve as building blocks of greater future connection. Coherence, coordination and transparency are needed in the way in which vulnerability and poverty are analysed and assessed within the humanitarian and social protection sectors. More developmental approaches should be adopted for supporting displaced populations, including a major move to cash rather than vouchers or in-kind assistance. An analysis of poverty in Cameroon that also considers the situation of the displaced and host communities together is a necessary basis for developing strategies for improving the livelihoods of both groups.

The study also draws out wider policy implications of relevance beyond Cameroon. A social protection system has to be able to function as a genuine safety net before it can replace humanitarian assistance for displaced populations. This means that it would have to be rights- or entitlement-based, so that those in need of it can rely on it, for as long as they need it.

Such a social protection system must also have the capacity to identify and assess the needs of potentially large numbers of new clients very quickly, and to give different benefit levels to people in different circumstances. These are political decisions which countries must make

for themselves and cannot simply be pushed as technical recommendations by those offering external finance.

Discussion about the integration of social protection and humanitarian assistance has focused on cash transfers (social assistance). Integration is also important in service delivery, and the forcibly displaced need to be fully integrated in mechanisms for protecting rights, including freedom of movement, the right to work, access to land on reasonable terms, the right to open a bank account and documentation guaranteeing these rights.

As in Cameroon, refugees are often concentrated in areas of greater poverty and marginalisation. Fears about humanitarian aid harming social cohesion are increased by the high levels of need among the host population. Government and development partners should be concerned with ensuring that development investments are adequately targeted in such areas.

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About this publication

The overall aim of this project is to improve understanding of mechanisms for greater coherence between social protection programmes and humanitarian assistance. By providing clearer guidance about when, how and why different connections between them might be considered, the project aims to develop the theory, evidence base and operational guidance on how social protection and humanitarian systems can work together to meet the needs of those affected by displacement crises, including not only the displaced but also vulnerable households in their host communities. The research is grounded in three countries with a total of six study sites, presenting different situations of displacement and humanitarian response: Greece (Athens and Ioannina), Colombia (Bogotá and Cúcuta) and Cameroon (Far North and East regions). The project is led

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