



Governance and Institutions for Adaptive Social Protection

A review of the evidence and knowledge gaps

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Abstract

As part of the Adaptive Social Protection: Evidence for Child Outcomes (ASPECT) research programme initiated by UNICEF and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (GIZ), this report investigates the latest evidence and knowledge gaps related to governance and institutional arrangements for Adaptive Social Protection (ASP). ASP aims to help vulnerable households and communities prepare for, cope with, and adapt to covariate shocks such as natural disasters, economic crises, pandemics, conflicts, and forced displacement. Through better integration of social protection, disaster risk management, and climate change adaptation policies and programming, ASP seeks to build resilience among the most vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and refugees.

The study focuses on four key areas of social protection governance and institutions: legal and policy frameworks, horizontal coordination between sectors and organisations, decentralisation and vertical coordination, and human resources. The methodology involved a comprehensive literature review, expert consultations, and an online survey of UNICEF personnel.

Key findings highlight the critical role of pre-established institutional arrangements in preparedness and response, the importance of effective inter-sectoral policy and organisational coordination, and the need for robust procedures and human resource strategies to manage and deliver social protection in crisis situations. Despite advancements, significant knowledge gaps remain including in relation to:

- ▶ current practices in integration of disaster and climate risk at the policy level;
- ▶ understanding the barriers to and enablers of greater policy integration and closer coordination across social protection, disaster risk management, climate change, and humanitarian sectors, including political economy factors;
- ▶ financial, ethical, and system wide barriers to greater cooperation across the humanitarian development nexus;
- ▶ understanding the pre-requisites and necessary adaptations for effective vertical coordination for delivery and expansion of social protection
- ▶ how to better assess, establish, strengthen, and maintain staff capacities for ASP in fragile and crisis contexts.

The report concludes with recommendations for future research to address these gaps and enhance the effectiveness of social protection systems in shock, fragile, and humanitarian contexts, aiming to inform policy makers, practitioners, and researchers engaged in this field.

About ASPECT

Adaptive Social Protection: Evidence for Child Outcomes in Fragile Settings (ASPECT) is a thematically focused five-year research project nested within the evaluation partnership between the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the UNICEF Evaluation Office. It is a collaborative effort between the UNICEF Evaluation Office, the Programme Group Social Policy Section, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, and the Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ASP	Adaptive social protection
CCC	Core commitments to children in humanitarian action
CCD	Collaborative cash network
CVA	Cash and voucher assistance
CWG	Cash working group
DRF	Disaster risk finance
DRM	Disaster risk management
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
EWS	Early warning system
FCAS	Fragile and Conflict Affected States / Situations
HCT	Humanitarian cash transfer
IASC	Inter-agency standing committee
IN-SCT	Integrated nutrition social cash transfer
MIRA	Multi-sector initial rapid assessment
MOU	Memorandum of understanding
NAP	National adaptation plan
NDC	Nationally determines contribution
PDNA	Post-disaster needs assessment
PSNP	Productive safety net program
PWP	Public works programme
SOP	Standard operating procedure
SPIAC-B	Social protection inter-agency cooperation board

1. Introduction

People around the world are increasingly affected by interrelated and often catastrophic covariate shocks, such as natural disasters, economic crises, pandemics, conflicts and forced displacement. Those already living in poverty or those that are vulnerable based on other characteristics such as age, disability, gender, and refugee status, are often left even worse off during and after those events.

In fragile and humanitarian contexts, adaptive social protection (ASP) is critical to help households and communities prepare for, cope with, and adapt to covariate shocks and stressors, including those exacerbated by climate change.¹ Over the long term, ASP can provide a pathway to a more resilient state for households that may otherwise lack the resources to move out of chronically vulnerable situations.

Fragile and humanitarian contexts present some of the greatest challenges in establishing and maintaining effective social protection systems. They can be characterised by weak governance, low state capacity, political instability, limited resources and, in some cases, violence and physical insecurity (UNICEF, 2018). To be effective, social protection systems and programmes must integrate disaster and climate risks into policy frameworks, governance and financing mechanisms, programme design, and operational systems.



Adaptability from the institutional perspective is a complex endeavour. Response by design means being prepared. Pre-established institutional arrangements are the backbone of preparedness” (Johnson & Walker, 2021, p.78).

Through a literature review and consultation with experts and practitioners, this report examines the latest evidence and identifies key knowledge gaps related to effective governance and institutional arrangements for ASP. The study addresses four broad research questions related to different areas of ASP governance and institutions:

- ▶ What is known about the extent, effectiveness, and barriers to the integration of disaster and climate risk analysis and response into social protection policy, and the integration of social protection into disaster risk management, humanitarian, and climate change policy?
- ▶ What is known about the approaches and enabling and constraining factors for effective horizontal coordination between social protection, climate change, disaster risk management, and humanitarian actors for the design and delivery of social protection in fragile and humanitarian contexts?

1 “Adaptive” social protection refers to social protection systems (including governance) or programmes that have been intentionally designed or modified to ensure service continuity, scale-up, or support household resilience in fragile or shock-affected contexts. Social protection systems that have not been designed in this way may nevertheless have impacts on household resilience. In this paper, “adaptive” is synonymous with the term “shock-responsive”.

- ▶ What is known about the approaches and enabling and constraining factors for effective vertical coordination to enable management and delivery of social protection in fragile and humanitarian contexts?
- ▶ What is known about the approaches and enabling and constraining factors to ensure adequate human resource capacities and skills for the management and delivery of social protection in fragile and humanitarian contexts?

The literature review encompassed both peer-reviewed and grey literature pertinent to the governance of ASP and published within the last decade. The search strategy entailed a database search of Google Scholar employing various relevant search terms, a snowballing technique based on references within the identified literature, and a targeted exploration of the websites of institutions active in the ASP domain.² Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 expert informants from major international agencies, donors, and research institutes. Furthermore, an online survey was administered to UNICEF personnel regarding priority research areas for ASP, yielding 75 responses.

The findings of this report are relevant to policy makers, practitioners, and researchers working in the ASP space and will help to inform the future research agenda of the Adaptive Social Protection: Evidence for Child Outcomes (ASPECT) research programme.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows: Section 2 delves into the role of legal and policy frameworks, with a focus on social protection, disaster risk management, humanitarian, and climate change sectors. Section 3 scrutinises the evidence on horizontal coordination, examining the concepts and frameworks available for analysing coordination, along with the roles of both organisational and operational coordination. Section 4 explores what is understood about the role of decentralisation and processes of vertical coordination for ASP. Section 5 evaluates the challenges associated with human resources for ASP and approaches to strengthening capacity. Section 6 concludes by summarising the findings and highlighting key areas identified for future research.

2 Search terms included: “adaptive social protection”, “shock-responsive social protection”, “social protection” in fragile and conflict contexts, “social protection” and climate change adaptation, “social protection” and disaster risk management, “social protection” and resilience. Targeted website searches included: IDS – BASIC, ODI, OPM, SPACE, UNICEF Innocenti, UNICEF Evaluation Database, World Bank, WFP.

2. Legal and Policy Frameworks for ASP

Effective governance and coordination of adaptive social protection (ASP) begin with harmonisation and integration within and between the relevant sectors at the policy level.

Numerous policy and guidance documents in the ASP literature identify the need to integrate disaster and climate risk and vulnerability analysis, programming options, and coordination arrangements into social protection laws, policies, and operational documents (see, for example, O'Brien, 2018a; TRANSFORM, 2020; Barca *et al.*, 2020; UNICEF, 2019; Bowen, *et al.*, 2020). Equally important is the integration of social protection into disaster risk management (DRM), humanitarian, and climate policies and ensuring that gender, age, and disability-specific needs have been considered (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024).

This section examines what the literature says about the extent to which ASP approaches are integrated into legal and policy frameworks across the social protection, DRM, humanitarian, and climate change sectors, how this shapes the effectiveness of social protection, what is currently overlooked, and what is known about the barriers to integration.



2.1 Social protection laws

Key Takeaways: The literature indicates that embedding social protection rights and programmes in law is crucial for extending coverage and ensuring sustainable financing in fragile and humanitarian contexts. However, further research is needed to understand how social protection laws may enable or constrain the adoption of ASP approaches, particularly in disaster response contexts.

Embedding the right to social protection and social protection programmes in national law is a critical foundation for extending coverage, strengthening systems, and ensuring sustainable financing (TRANSFORM, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Several studies examining social protection responses to the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide concluded that social protection systems established in law with high coverage provide a stronger foundation for shock response (Gentilini, 2022; Beazley *et al.*, 2021c; Bastagli & Lowe, 2021). However, in many cases, there was still a need to introduce new, temporary legislation to facilitate the expansion of social protection programmes in response to the pandemic (Bastagli & Lowe, 2021). Further research may be useful to understand the extent to which these temporary measures have led to more sustainable adaptations to social protection laws to allow them to respond to future crises.

There is also evidence that having a basis in law is important for ensuring the continuity of social protection during complex crises involving conflict. In Yemen, for example, following the onset of conflict in 2014 and the collapse of state services, the World Bank justified financing an emergency cash transfer programme using the existing registry of the national cash transfer with the long-term objective that it would be returned to state institutions, because

it was based in national law (EPRI, 2021c). At the same time, O'Brien *et al.* (2018) observed that the laws governing social protection can constrain the development of ASP in different ways. Although the Philippines has a well-established DRM framework, policymakers were concerned that the Pantawid CCT may not be a sound basis for disaster response because it was not enshrined in law, making it vulnerable to changing policy priorities. In contrast, in Lesotho, the social pension was considered by some policymakers to be too complex to link to DRM precisely because it is enshrined in law. These apparently contradictory concerns suggest the need to examine the ways that social protection laws enable or constrain the adoption of ASP approaches in different contexts, especially disaster response.



2.2 Social protection policies and frameworks

Key Takeaways: The importance of integrating disaster and climate risk into social protection policies is widely recognised. However, there is little evidence of standard practice across countries and adaptive measures often lack depth or are entirely absent. Despite some progress, there is a need for research into current approaches and emerging best practices for integrating disaster and climate risk into social protection policy and how to overcome technical and political economy barriers to integration.

Several other research gaps in relation to social protection policy need to be addressed.

- ⇒ Collating best practices for integrating gender and inclusion into ASP policy and practice and for enhancing cross-sectoral integration to meet holistic and longer-term needs of vulnerable groups such as children, during shocks.
- ⇒ Interrogating and addressing the perceived trade-offs between ASP approaches and building and strengthening basic social protection systems in highly fragile contexts.
- ⇒ Understanding how to develop more conflict-sensitive policies and how to overcome the legal and social cohesion barriers to extending social protection to refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people.

ASP requires the integration of disaster and climate risk and programming into sector-wide social protection policies and frameworks. A growing number of countries are showcasing greater degrees of integrating disaster and climate risk into social protection policy, offering an opportunity for research into current approaches and how these are translated into practice through institutional arrangements, financing, and operational mechanisms (see Box 1).

Box 1. Integrating Disaster and Climate Risk into Social Protection Policy

Zambia and Madagascar have integrated shock response into their social protection sector strategies, establishing a collective policy direction, programmatic options for shock response linked with the social protection system, and outlining the roles and responsibilities for actors within and outside government, including humanitarian actors (Smith, 2021). The Caribbean state of Anguilla endorsed a new Social Protection Policy, Action Plan, and Framework in 2019, which includes a strong focus on 'integrating social protection into climate change adaptation planning and programming' and 'disaster preparedness and response', aiming to prevent households from falling into poverty due to shocks and to safeguard the social protection system itself from being undermined by disasters (Beazley *et al.*, 2020).

However, the integration of disaster and climate risk and programming within social protection policy is far from a standardized approach and often lacks depth or is entirely absent. Expert informants noted that in many countries, shock-responsive measures are tokenistic, lacking clear objectives, responsibilities, and institutional linkages, and measures were not developed collaboratively with other ministries. This has implications for the ability of social protection to respond to shocks. In a study of six countries, Beazley *et al.* (2021b) found that the lack of policy frameworks for sector-wide ASP was one of the main constraining factors in delivering more effective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. One expert informant noted that many African countries only introduced their first social protection policy approximately 10 years ago, and these are now due for reform, providing opportunities to enhance the integration of disaster and climate risk. However, even relatively new policies, such as Botswana's National Social Protection Framework endorsed in 2020, fail to substantially integrate "adaptive" approaches, suggesting that significant barriers still exist in many contexts (Bowen *et al.*, 2022).

The literature suggests that there are several barriers to integrating disaster and climate risk into social protection policies, including a limited conceptualisation of ASP, concerns over policy overload, technical barriers, and political economy factors.

Limited conceptualisations of ASP

The concept of ASP was introduced more than 15 years ago, focusing attention on the role of social protection in supporting household resilience (Davies *et al.*, 2008). However, research and programming on ASP has tended to overlook the longer-term dimensions of resilience related to preparedness (or 'anticipatory capacity') and adaptation (or 'adaptive capacity'). Expert informants noted that, while the ASP and SRSP policy frameworks of major international agencies incorporate this broad definition of the role of social protection in relation to resilience, in practice, most policy research and programming focuses on disaster response. Concepts such as design tweaks, horizontal and vertical expansion, and piggybacking are commonly used and applied (see, for example, O'Brien *et al.*, 2018; European Commission, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). However, several expert informants noted the lack of attention paid to ensuring the continuity of "routine" social protection during major shocks including the use of alignment approaches (involving external actors implementing social protection designed to align with current or potential future national systems), especially in fragile contexts and protracted crises. Moreover, while there is a growing body of evidence on how social protection can bolster resilience and prevent maladaptation in the context of climate change (see, for example, Costella & Ivaschenko 2015; Winder Rossi *et al.*, 2017; Solórzano & Cárdenas 2019; Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Costella *et al.*, 2023), much less is said about whether and how preparedness and adaptation objectives can be effectively integrated into social protection policies and frameworks (Aleksandrova, 2019; Costella *et al.*, 2023).

Policy overload

Concerns are raised within the literature and among expert informants that the ASP agenda risks creating policy overload that distracts from focusing on getting the basics right of social protection systems and programming. In a review of social protection programmes that focus on resilience, Ulrichs and Slater (2016) note that while more ambitious objectives can result in positive wishful thinking that creates momentum around programme development and implementation, social protection design and implementation features and the outcomes they produce often do not differ greatly between programmes with diverse

objectives. They conclude that it may be more important to focus on delivering programmes well and providing reliable, efficient, and effective delivery mechanisms, rather than changing programme objectives. Similarly, some expert informants observed that focusing too much on what they perceive as additional “adaptive” measures can distract from the fundamental priority of reducing fragmentation and expanding coverage of basic social assistance, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. However, other experts noted that integrating adaptive approaches into social protection systems was vital to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness in the context of increasing shocks and stressors.

These varied viewpoints suggest there is a need to interrogate and address the perceived trade-offs between ASP approaches and building and strengthening basic social protection systems, and to demonstrate how the two approaches are not necessarily in conflict with each other. This could involve more contextualised analysis of how to integrate different approaches in different contexts and exploring cases where ASP policies have been built on more robust and evidence-based theories of change.

Knowledge and technical challenges

Integrating disaster and climate risk programming approaches into social protection is a technical and often complex process that requires the convergence of different disciplines. Solórzano & Cárdenes (2019) highlight the lack of mutual knowledge among actors from historically separate sectors and the insufficient availability of data for risk analysis. In addition, there is typically a low level of capacity for analysis and policy development in lower-income countries, which is compounded by the heightened challenge of working across sectors (Beazley & Williams, 2021).

Moreover, it remains unclear how to frame the notion and objectives of social protection policies concerning climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction, with these three disciplines generally applied separately by governments (Aleksandrova, 2019). One expert informant noted that integrating climate change adaptation into social protection policy is challenging when the distinction in the social protection sector’s response to this challenge has not been clearly defined. This echoes a broader demand among some survey respondents of the need for better risk analysis to inform policy design and for guidance on how to integrate climate change adaptation and other resilience objectives into social protection policy.

Political economy factors

The literature points to a range of factors related to the ideologies and interests of the different actors involved in ASP that constrain the development of adaptive approaches.

First, broader ideologies about the role of social protection may be a barrier to ASP. In many countries, senior policy makers still have a strong perception of social protection as a non-productive handout, which limits overall investment in the sector (Johnson & Walker, 2022). The European Commission (2019) also notes the need to ask how national governments view (potentially) affected populations, especially in conflict contexts, and whether they are seen as deserving. Similarly, expert informants noted the lack of political will in many countries to invest in and expand social assistance, especially cash transfers, often based on misperceptions about their impacts. Differing underlying ideologies of international agencies that inform approaches to social protection objectives and design can also constrain cooperation around developing ASP. Expert informants noted that the

policy space for social protection is often taken up by inter-agency debates over targeting – typically poverty versus life-cycle approaches.

Second, governments may have little political motivation to invest in ASP systems. Longhurst *et al.* (2021) observe that there can be a lack of incentive to invest in developing ASP when the political gains are unclear and the opportunity costs of making long-term investments may seem high. This perception is affected by factors such as recency bias (the cognitive tendency to give greater importance to recent events), especially in contexts where shocks are less frequent, fiscal pressure, and election cycles. In fragile contexts and protracted crises, where humanitarian assistance has become an entrenched part of the national response, governments may prefer to maintain reliance on external support. Longhurst *et al.* (2021) note that one way to overcome these disincentives is to ensure that ASP is integrated into long-term financial and political planning. There may also be value in examining the policy processes and political economy within countries that have moved from repeated humanitarian cycles to more predictable support through national systems.

Third, inter-ministerial politics can create barriers to establishing social protection as part of the national disaster and climate response architecture. Integrating social protection into national disaster response may absorb a substantial amount of the available resources, shifting them away from other ministries and encroaching on existing areas of responsibility (Johnson & Walker, 2022). The European Commission (2019) notes that it is critical to understand, and strategically manage, the different mandates, levels of authority, influence and incentives of different actors and how this affects willingness and ability to work together. Some expert informants noted that the mandates of different ministries are often quite specific, and they often want to avoid stepping on each other's toes.

Overall, these challenges warrant a much deeper investigation into the political economy factors that constrain development of ASP approaches with social protection policy and how to overcome them.

Gender and inclusion

ASP policy should also integrate a gender lens and consider the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including children. Holmes (2019) notes that, in relation to gender, this should start from considering gendered needs in disaster and climate risk assessments to gain a better understanding of local gendered power dynamics. Perezniето and Holmes (2023) provide detailed guidance on how to integrate gender within ASP at the policy level, including first assessing legal and policy frameworks for discrimination and identifying gaps that can be addressed through policy change. Where there are recurrent or predictable shocks, integrating or developing a specific gender action plan is recommended. UNICEF Innocenti (2024) shows that integrating gender into “routine” social protection policy is a political process. However, there is scope for further research into how these dynamics play out more specifically in relation to ASP policy and the extent to which gender is being integrated in practice.

The evidence on child-sensitive social protection in shock contexts is limited (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023). The Integrated Nutrition and Social Cash Transfer (IN-SCT) pilot programme in Ethiopia provides some insights into the importance of cross-sectoral policy integration to support multi-sector programming in a context of recurrent seasonal shocks (see Box 2). Beyond this, the literature provides little insight into the ways in which policies integrate linkages between social protection and other social sectors to support more holistic and longer-term needs of vulnerable groups, such as children, in the context

of shocks. This may be due to the limited extent to which this has been done in practice, with most approaches to ASP focusing on vertical and horizontal expansion of cash transfer programmes. Nevertheless, some lessons might be drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic responses across Eastern Europe, where one expert informant noted that multi-sector, integrated responses were the norm.

Box 2. Policy Integration for Child-Sensitive Programming in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), designed to respond to recurrent seasonal shocks, is embedded within multiple sector policies, including the National Social Protection Policy (2014), the National Nutrition Strategy (2008), the National Nutrition Programme (2016), and the Food Security Programme (2014). This level of policy integration was seen as an important enabler of political commitment to the Integrated Nutrition and Social Cash Transfer (IN-SCT) pilot programme, which was designed to integrate a range of health and nutrition services with the PSNP public works and direct support components to meet the specific needs of children during lean seasons (Kebede *et al.*, 2021).

Conflict and displacement contexts

Several expert informants noted that the social protection sector is not very adept at developing conflict-sensitive social protection policy. The literature also indicates that conflict is largely overlooked or treated as a one-dimensional risk in social protection policies (Harvey & Mohamed, 2022; Birch *et al.*, 2023). Harvey and Mohamed (2022) examined 13 policies in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS), mostly in Africa, and found that, while there were some references to conflict and the role of humanitarian aid, there was generally a high level of disconnect. They note that conflict impacts are disregarded or minimised, including the role of armed groups, (the lack of) territorial control, excluded populations, and the prolonged presence of humanitarian aid. Moreover, Slater (2022) notes that the literature on FCAS does not discuss the role of legal and policy frameworks in sustaining social protection. These gaps in the literature call for more analysis of the social protection policy processes in FCAS to understand why conflict risks tend to be disregarded and how to better incorporate them into policy framing, objectives, and programming approaches.

Reflecting on the global policy priority of working with national social protection systems, some expert informants felt international organisations sometimes need to be more realistic about working with national systems in fragile and conflict contexts. This may require greater flexibility in programming approaches and challenging current understandings of what ASP means in these contexts, including greater use of twin-track and "alignment" approaches. Experts noted that donors and other international agencies can have different motivations for implementing social protection through parallel systems and working with quasi-governmental institutions including efficiency due to limited state capacity, risk management and the need to keep the state at arm's length, and the potential for integration (back) into national systems in the long term. However, one expert informant noted that evidence is limited regarding whether alignment approaches lead to more sustainable integration into national systems in the longer term in post-conflict contexts, and what happens when tensions start to increase over "shared sovereignty" over the programme.

The literature indicates that refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people (IDPs) still tend to be excluded from national social protection programmes (Sabates-Wheeler, 2019). An expert informant noted that in Eastern European countries grappling with the Ukrainian refugee crises, legal restrictions pose the most significant barrier to including refugees in social protection. Longhurst and Slater (2022) suggest that global policy shifts and funding, such as the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), and the World Bank International Development Association (IDA) refugee sub-window, may be altering the debate about eligibility for social protection. There is also some evidence of these shifts occurring in practice. In Ethiopia, for example, PSNP regulations related to registration and payroll were modified to allow access to citizens who had been internally displaced due to the conflict (Mathers *et al.*, 2023a).

However, little is known about the extent to which social protection policies explicitly recognise and extend assistance to refugees and IDPs, either directly or through coordination with international and non-governmental actors. Further evidence would also be useful on how other laws related to refugee and asylum seeker rights may determine what can be done within the domain of social protection, and how to navigate the social and political tensions that arise when displaced populations are perceived to receive more support than host communities (European Commission, 2019).



2.3 Disaster risk management policy

Key Takeaways: While there is increasing recognition of the potential role of social protection in crisis contexts within disaster risk management (DRM) frameworks, actual integration efforts remain limited. Research gaps exist concerning the effectiveness of different pathways to integration in different contexts and the technical and political barriers to integration of social protection within disaster management (DM) and disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies.

Establishing a clear role for social protection in national disaster risk management (DRM) frameworks is one of the basic institutional underpinnings of ASP (Johnson & Walker, 2022). At the global level, there is increasing recognition of the role of social protection in crisis contexts, as seen in various international commitments (European Commission, 2019). O'Brien *et al.* (2018) suggest that, in an ideal scenario, a well-coordinated social protection sector will feed into a disaster management platform that coordinates a response. However, while it is common for countries to have a DRM policy or framework in place, examples of integrating social protection as a response mechanism are limited (UNICEF East Asia and Pacific, 2023; Johnson & Walker 2022; Beazley & Williams, 2021; Bowen *et al.*, 2022; Costella & Ivaschenko, 2015; Beazley *et al.*, 2020). Expert informants noted that, while social protection policies are to some extent incorporating disaster and climate risk, this is rarely reciprocal. In many cases, this may be due to the absence of a proven social protection programme or policy framework (Johnson and Walker, 2022).

Several country cases suggest that there can be different pathways to integration of social protection within DRM policies and frameworks (see Box 3), including (i) increasing convergence between two maturing sectors (the Philippines), (ii) increasing use of social protection during repeated crises (Malawi), (iii) alignment around common objectives (Kenya), (iv) instrumental use of social protection operational systems (Pakistan). These varied but limited number of cases suggest there would be value in investigating the different pathways through which greater integration has occurred to inform reforms in other contexts.

Box 3. Pathways to Integration of Social Protection into National DRM Systems

Integration of social protection into national DRM systems can occur gradually, evolving through increased collaboration across sectors during subsequent crises. For example, in the Philippines, leveraging a well-established social protection system and comprehensive DRM legislation, sectors have progressively interlinked over time through an iterative process informed by lessons learned from each emergency response (Bowen, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2017). Another contributing factor is the presence of a single government agency, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), tasked with delivering both social protection and disaster response services. In Malawi, the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) was not initially designed to address covariate shocks but later became an integral component of the national disaster response mechanism following years of expansion in response to seasonal droughts (EPRI, 2021a). The SCTP is now embedded within the National Disaster Recovery Framework and automatically contributes to crisis response efforts.

Integration can also occur through alignment around common objectives, particularly in regions prone to recurrent and predictable weather-related shocks. In Kenya, for instance, ASP evolved from the government's commitment to tackling poverty and vulnerability as both a cause and consequence of drought emergencies. A framework established by the government, known as "Ending Drought Emergencies," laid the groundwork for the Hunger Safety Net Programme (Bowen *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, some DRM policies incorporate elements of the social protection system to bolster disaster response efforts. In Pakistan, the national socioeconomic registry, originally established to support social protection initiatives, also aids in disaster planning and response (Johnson & Walker, 2022).

O'Brien *et al.* (2018) also note the importance of improving policy coherence within each sector individually on the basis that cross-sectoral collaboration is more feasible when external actors know how the sector is structured and who they need to engage with.

The politics of disaster management also matter for integration of social protection. Expert informants noted that DRM actors have traditionally focused on infrastructure and assets which are highly visible products of policy responses. Social protection, on the other hand, typically involves cash transfers, which are less visible in terms of results. DRM actors may also prioritise planning for large scale risks, whereas expert and survey respondents noted that there could be greater long-term impact if social protection is geared towards supporting households exposed to more frequent, localised, lower-impact shocks, to prevent communities from being left behind. This suggests the need for social protection actors to better understand how disasters are framed in DRM policy for different types of shocks to understand how to integrate social protection as a response option that also aligns with the principles and goals of DRM actors.

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) is related to but distinct from disaster management, with a focus on predicting and mitigating disaster risks and impacts before they occur, through longer-term measures. DRR is therefore closely related to climate change adaptation. Social protection can contribute towards DRR through its role in supporting household preparedness and livelihood adaptation and through building disaster-resilient assets as an output of public works programmes (PWP). In some countries, DRR and DRM are combined under a single policy or framework and ministerial or departmental mandate. The primary international DRR policy, the Sendai Framework, provides guidance to countries on enhancing DRR

measures. However, the Sendai Framework makes only a passing reference to developing social safety nets as a contribution to investing in DRR for resilience, and at the global and regional, but not national, level (Sendai Framework, 2015). Overall, the literature says very little about integration of social protection within DRR policies or frameworks.



2.4 Humanitarian policy

Key Takeaways: Despite global commitments, frameworks, and guidance for better integration between humanitarian assistance and social protection, especially in protracted crises, considerable barriers to linking humanitarian action and social protection remain. There is a need for a better understanding of the bottlenecks related to humanitarian financing and coordination systems, and for empirical evidence on the real and perceived conflicts between humanitarian principles and the social protection system strengthening agenda.

Social protection and disaster management are governed by national policies and frameworks. In contrast, international humanitarian action is guided by its own set of policies, principles, and frameworks, but may also fall under government legislation and guidance regulating how humanitarian actors can operate within the country.

There is now a widely accepted need for better integration of short-term humanitarian assistance and longer-term development interventions, including social protection (Ulrichs & Sabates-Wheeler, 2018), and for social protection and humanitarian actors to collaborate on joint long-term visions and multi-year programming based on joint analysis and common objectives, especially in contexts of protracted crisis (European Commission, 2019). Ulrichs and Sabates-Wheeler (2018) propose that humanitarian action should be viewed as part of a contiguuum with national development programmes and sectors, recognising that in many protracted crises and fragile contexts, these two sets of actors and approaches work alongside each other.

At the international level, major donors and humanitarian organisations have committed to increasing the use of cash-based programming and, where appropriate, ensuring it is delivered through or aligned with national social protection systems (Grand Bargain, 2017; Smith, 2021). Similar commitments have also been made in relation to refugee situations (UNGA, 2016), and humanitarian actors are increasingly required to demonstrate the rationale for *not* using existing national systems to provide assistance (McCord *et al.*, 2021). Donors and humanitarian agencies have also developed guidance on linking social protection and humanitarian cash transfers, both unilaterally and through inter-agency cooperation (see Box 4). Considering these developments, Harvey and Mohamed (2022) conclude that the “official policies, strategies, and approaches of donors are therefore... strongly supportive of social protection and increasingly focused on SRSP and efforts to shift delivery of routine social assistance from humanitarian to social protection systems.”

Box 4. Integration of Social Protection and Humanitarian Action among International Agencies

UNICEF's Core Commitments to Children (CCC) in humanitarian action outline principles and approaches for the use of humanitarian cash transfers (HCT) and social protection in response to crises and the linkages between them (UNICEF, 2020). WFP, traditionally a humanitarian actor, has recently published a social protection strategy (Harvey & Mohamed, 2022). According to one expert informant, WFP now makes a clear and strong link between improved food security and resilience and reduced humanitarian need, with national social protection systems as a core policy approach.

Coordinated guidance is also emerging, with the recent publication of the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board's (SPIAC-B) common principles for linking humanitarian assistance and social protection (SPIAC-B, 2023). The Collaborative Cash Delivery (CCD) Network, a coalition of 14 of the largest international NGOs active in humanitarian response and cash programming, has developed principles and frameworks for NGOs to respond to shocks using social protection, with a primary focus on the role of NGOs as a gap filler in terms of "last mile" and "inclusion" (CCD, 2021).

To some extent, enhanced integration of social protection and humanitarian action is happening in practice. One expert informant noted that, while the humanitarian system itself has been slower to adopt more integrated approaches, the agenda is slowly starting to shift, as evidenced by the inter-agency standing committee (IASC) guidance on working across the nexus through the global clusters, published in 2023. Moreover, a review of Humanitarian Response Plans commissioned by UNOCHA in 2020 revealed that 18 out of 23 plans mentioned some form of link to social protection mechanisms (UNOCHA, 2020). While some linkages were clearly limited, others had initiated regular collaboration with social protection actors, were assessing the links between humanitarian CVA and social protection, adapting the implementation of CVA based on the national social protection system, or were supporting the design and implementation of new adaptive social protection systems (McCord *et al.*, 2021). However, incidents of channelling humanitarian funds directly through social protection systems remain limited.

Examples of national-level joint response frameworks for social protection and humanitarian action are also emerging. In Albania, the government collaborated with UN partners to develop a framework for delivering cash assistance to vulnerable families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring harmonisation between government and externally implemented programmes (Smith, 2021). In Madagascar, during the COVID-19 pandemic, having a unified response strategy aligned with the government helped humanitarian actors mobilise additional resources and establish new local partnerships (Austin & Barca, 2021). Moreover, they were able to deliver cash assistance more rapidly, within four weeks after the beginning of the lockdown in areas where no cash transfer or social registry had existed prior to the pandemic. However, these approaches remain ad-hoc rather than standardised and integrated within the wider humanitarian system and countries rarely have formal policies governing humanitarian action (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018).

Despite global commitments and emergent best practices, there are still considerable barriers to linking humanitarian action and social protection related to the nature of the humanitarian system. Longhurst and Slater (2022b) point out that humanitarian financing models have not fundamentally changed, limiting the ability of humanitarian actors to engage

with national social protection systems. Moreover, social protection as a sector tends to remain excluded from the humanitarian coordination system (IASC, 2015a) (see the section on Coordination) and from inter-agency humanitarian needs assessments, including the Multi-Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA) and Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA).

In addition, there remains considerable debate on when and whether to connect humanitarian assistance to social protection systems which reveals deep divides on key issues, especially where government capacity is low, complicity in conflict is high, or where refugees or IDPs represent a sizable share of the population (Seyfert *et al.*, 2019). These issues relate to core principles, such as the potential conflict between the need for independence in humanitarian action and the lead role of national governments in social protection (European Commission, 2019), and programmatic trade-offs such as speed of response versus coverage, and the practicalities of linking operational systems. However, Longhurst and Slater (2022a) suggest that there are many problem statements made in the literature about the challenges of linking humanitarian action with social protection but very little empirical evidence underpinning these debates. This points to the need for more in-depth research regarding the bottlenecks that prevent greater integration of social protection within humanitarian approaches and better alignment of humanitarian programming with the social protection system strengthening agenda.



2.5 Climate change policy

Key Takeaways: There is growing recognition of the need to integrate social protection into climate change policies at national and sub-national levels to contribute to climate action goals, but the extent to which this is happening in practice is limited. Research gaps remain in understanding the barriers to greater integration, especially why social protection remains a blind spot among climate change actors despite an emerging credible body of evidence generated within the climate sector.

An emerging body of literature highlights the increasing importance of integrating social protection into national or sub-national climate change policies. This is important both to ensure that the policy environment is conducive to investing in “climate-proofing” social protection systems so that they are robust to the increasing pressures placed upon them by climate-related impacts, and so that social protection systems and programmes can more effectively contribute to the goals of climate action (Aleksandrova, 2021; Mathers *et al.*, 2025). To this end, climate-responsive social protection objectives should be mainstreamed into Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) and National Adaptation Plans (NAP) as these facilitate harmonised national-level action on climate change including planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Aleksandrova, 2019). However, a UNFCCC Secretariat review (2022) of NDCs found that just 4% of countries had identified social protection as necessary to facilitate the introduction of climate mitigation measures and that 28% recognised the unequal impacts of climate change on different groups and the need to ensure just transition, including through a “consultation process” for social protection. A review of NAPs by Mathers *et al.* (2025) shows that less than 30% of NAPs make a reference to social protection. Where they do, social protection is identified as a mechanism to build resilience and adaptive capacity of vulnerable groups or to support disaster management.

These analyses of NDCs and NAPs suggest that there are barriers to integrating social protection within climate change policy at the national level. One expert informant noted that within the climate sector, evidence on the impacts of social protection is still perceived as being very weak. At the global level, policy discussions about climate change and DRR still focus on the physical environment, geography, and assets; although social protection is starting to get more recognition among DRR actors. At the national level, social protection is still a major blind spot within ministries responsible for climate change policy. However, the climate sector has produced some authoritative evidence on the role of social protection in contributing to resilience of the most vulnerable populations (see, for example: IPCC, 2022; Otchere and Handa, 2022). This suggests that other barriers exist, beyond the availability of credible body evidence.

To enhance policy integration, Mathers *et al.* (2025) highlights several approaches that can be taken by the social protection sector:

- ▶ strengthen understanding, coordination, and information sharing between social protection and climate change actors;
- ▶ focus on ensuring complementarity without overloading sectors with additional goals;
- ▶ understanding climate sector policy processes;
- ▶ identifying the appropriate approaches and entry points, whether through mainstreaming, contributing to specific climate objectives, or supporting cross-cutting objectives such as climate justice.

However, overall, the literature provides little insight into the barriers, including political economy factors, to integrating social protection into climate policy and how to overcome them.

A further concern is that there may be a tension between addressing climate change goals through social protection instruments and the broader principles of social protection. Kundo *et al.* (2021) warn that current approaches to social protection and climate adaptation that largely focus on 'climate-smart targeting' or 'extending coverage' may contradict rights-based approaches to social protection and point out that there is little understanding of the political economy surrounding the development of mainstreaming climate into social protection. Similarly, one expert informant noted that Payment for Eco-System (PES) service approaches that utilise social protection type instruments, such as cash transfers, should not be considered as social protection, given the different objectives and conditional nature of the payments.

3. Horizontal Coordination for ASP

Broadly, coordination for social protection entails “the alignment and harmonisation of all stakeholder activities in a coherent and holistic way to reach clearly identified and shared objectives” (TRANSFORM, 2017). Functionally, coordination is delineated along horizontal and vertical axes:

- ▶ horizontal coordination occurs between institutions and organisations at the same hierarchical level,
- ▶ vertical coordination transpires along the hierarchy of structure, such as between central and local government.

This section delves into what is known about horizontal coordination for ASP, focusing first on common concepts and frameworks for assessing approaches to coordination, organisational coordination, operational coordination, and finally coordination with the humanitarian sector. Section 3 explores vertical coordination.



3.1 Concepts and frameworks for horizontal coordination

Key Takeaways: Horizontal coordination for social protection can be understood in relation to levels of the system (sectors, programmes, administrative systems), purpose (strategic, technical), and function (information exchange, planning etc.). However, there are a lack of established concepts or frameworks for analysing the factors that promote effective ASP coordination in different contexts.

The literature generally divides horizontal coordination into three levels:

- ▶ coordination between sectors for the harmonisation or integration of policy, strategy, and regulations (discussed in Section 2);
- ▶ coordination between programmes for the harmonisation or integration of objectives and design features, and;
- ▶ coordination between administrative systems for the harmonisation or integration of operational functions and systems to support implementation (TRANSFORM, 2017; O’Brien *et al.*, 2018; Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2021).

Coordination purpose is generally associated with either strategic (higher level) or technical (lower level) aims and objectives. However, Slater *et al.* (2022) point out that the strategic-technical distinction often cuts across specific programmatic issues, and most of the literature on the topic rarely makes the distinction clear. Smith (2021) considers the relationship between form, function, and resources, describing coordination as being on a continuum from simpler arrangements for information and knowledge sharing to more complex arrangements that require collaboration in relation to design, delivery systems, and resources, noting that the greater the degree of integration, the greater the investments needed in terms of time, resources, and relationships.

These broad characteristics notwithstanding, there are no frameworks to elucidate what constitutes effective coordination. Slater (2019) notes that while there are many statements in the social protection literature about the importance of effective coordination, there is much less evidence about what mechanisms and systems are most effective in practice, warning that, in some circumstances, there may simply be too many actors to coordinate in a meaningful way. Moreover, the primary purpose of coordination may differ depending on the perspective of the actors involved, making it difficult to develop a single coherent framework. For example, social protection ministries are concerned with the harmonious functioning of parts to achieve effective results, donors tend to view coordination from an efficiency perspective, whereas humanitarian actors are primarily concerned with issues of coverage and avoiding duplication. This prompts the need for research into approaches and typologies that could aid assessment of coordination structures, mechanisms, and practices for ASP to identify the most effective approaches in any given context.



3.2 Organisational coordination

Key Takeaways: The evidence highlights the critical importance of organisational coordination for ASP, emphasizing its range of functions at different levels of the system and the diverse range of mechanisms that exist. Challenges include the complexity of working across distinct sectors, institutional weaknesses, exclusion of decentralised and non-state actors, and the lack of incentives for different actors to coordinate. Best practices involve promoting intersectoral understanding, preparedness, investing in operational collaboration, and fostering strong leadership. Several research gaps exist including:

- ⇒ understanding the levels of investment that are made in ASP coordination systems, structures, and expertise;
- ⇒ identifying the optimal coordination structures in different contexts and understanding the political economy of coordination between DRM and social protection, including in relation to leadership;
- ⇒ highlighting best practices for coordination of multisectoral responses and integrated programming, especially in crisis contexts.

Organisational coordination for ASP relates to the structures and mechanisms facilitating interaction among individuals representing their respective organisations. Coordination between organisations serves various purposes, including strategic oversight, joint planning, defining roles and responsibilities, information exchange, technical processes, data analysis, and monitoring (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018). Coordination mechanisms come in diverse forms, involving different actors depending on their objectives, such as alliances, committees, conferences, working groups, and management teams (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018; Smith, 2021).

Organisational coordination mechanisms for disaster response are typically led by the ministry or relevant body overseeing DRM, with coordination bodies existing at various levels for strategic, management, and operational purposes. Beazley *et al.* (2019; 2021) observe that social protection actors are often sidelined from DRM structures, partly due to the poorly defined role of social protection in disaster response. This highlights the need for social protection actors to comprehend and actively engage with these groups.

Outside the DRM system, various other coordination forums relevant to ASP may exist that involve different combinations of actors, including high-level task forces, donor coordination groups, programme steering committees, inter-agency task forces, and cash working groups within the UN cluster system (Smith, 2021). Slater (2019) points out that the array of actors involved in ASP depends on factors such as the type of crisis, sectoral needs, actor capacities, and existing systems and procedures. As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all model for coordination. Expert informants and practitioner survey respondents expressed the need to evaluate successful approaches and develop typologies to refine coordination structures in different contexts, including the optimal composition of coordination groups, form and function, and the role of sub-working group structures.

Barriers to effective coordination

The literature highlights a range of technical, institutional, and political factors that hinder more effective coordination for ASP.

First, there is a broad consensus that the primary “coordination challenge” for ASP relates to the sheer number of government and external actors involved, each with different mandates, specialisations, and working methods (O’Brien *et al.*, 2018; European Commission, 2019; Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2021). Coordination for social protection during stable periods is already inherently complex due to the multi-dimensional nature of vulnerabilities and fragmentation across ministries (TRANSFORM, 2017) and is intensified for ASP that has different objectives and priorities, particularly in crisis contexts. Despite substantial conceptual overlap between the functions of social protection, DRM, DRR, and climate change, divergent sectoral terminologies and approaches present barriers to coordination (O’Brien *et al.*, 2018; Costella *et al.*, 2017; Solórzano & Cárdenes, 2019).

Second, coordination is often undermined by institutional weaknesses related to a lack of technical capacity and resources within the ministries responsible for DRM and social protection. Poor delineation of roles and responsibilities at the policy level leads to overlaps between national coordination mechanisms and sectoral agencies, resulting in slow decision-making, especially with the influx of new actors (Beazley, 2017a; Barca *et al.*, 2019; European Commission, 2019; UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). While institutional weaknesses are common across lower-income countries, the problem is acute in fragile and conflict affected situations (FCAS) (European Commission, 2019). Longhurst and Slater (2022a) note that almost all fragile contexts possess central institutions with core systems that could be built upon. However, this requires substantial assistance from external actors who are more likely to invest in establishing parallel mechanisms. This is especially true of conflict contexts where stakeholders may be biased, predatory, have weak capacity, or exist in opposition to the state, leading to low levels of trust and a lack of shared vision (Slater, 2019). Given the fundamental importance yet acknowledged difficulty of coordination for ASP, a lack of attention is paid to whether sufficient investment is being made in improving coordination systems and practices.

Third, challenges often arise from the division between social protection and humanitarian governance and coordination systems (Longhurst & Slater, 2022). This issue is explored in more details in Section 3.4 on humanitarian coordination. However, Slater (2019) observes that the problem is exacerbated in displacement contexts, where displaced individuals and host communities are supported by separate funding and programmes. This results, in part, from social protection approaches that prioritise rights and entitlements in national law, thus neglecting refugees. There is a need to better understand

approaches that facilitate increased harmonisation and coordination of social protection in refugee contexts.

Fourth, the political economy of disaster response can result in weak incentives to engage in coordination. Different actors may feel that coordination and collaboration will result in a loss of influence and visibility or a reduction in overall budgets (Longhurst & Slater, 2022), especially where roles and responsibilities are not well defined (Smith, 2021). Beazley *et al.* (2019) observe that poor coordination between DRM and social protection actors can occur even when the same ministry is responsible for both due to imbalances in budgets and power structures. Actors with the largest budgets may perceive coordination as requiring substantial effort for little reward (Smith, 2021). These findings resonate with the experiences of expert informants and practitioners who note that in some regions, there is very little interaction between social protection and DRM, even when they are within the same ministry due to the existence of different mandates and a lack of incentive to collaborate. Slater *et al.* (2022) note that the research to date has focused too much on the technical issues of coordination to the neglect of the ‘backstage’ processes of negotiation and decision-making. When coordination fails, it is therefore not known the extent to which this was due to information asymmetries, principal-agent problems, or collective action failures. Further research could be useful to better understand the political economy of coordination for ASP within different governance contexts and to identify the benefits to different actors of investing in coordination.

Fifth, several studies find that there is often insufficient space in ASP coordination mechanisms for decentralised government actors, civil society, and organisations representing excluded groups, including gender inclusion actors such as women’s groups and women’s ministers (Barca *et al.*, 2019; Slater, 2019; Holmes, 2019; Smith, 2021). Barca *et al.* (2019) note that without formal mechanisms to engage, efforts to include these actors are inconsistent and can have implications for the adequacy and efficacy of initiatives.

Best practices for more effective coordination

The evidence on organisational coordination for ASP tends to focus on three key areas of best practice: intersectoral relationship building, institutionalisation (or preparedness), and leadership.

First, there is broad consensus that the foundation for improved coordination is to promote better understanding among the varied actors involved in ASP and to reconcile, or at least to mitigate, fundamental differences (O’Brien *et al.*, 2018; Costella *et al.*, 2017; Slater, 2019; Solórzano & Cárdenes 2019; Smith, 2021; Mathers, 2023b). Smith (2021) frames this challenge as one of “bridging physical, technical and ideological silos ... to develop common ground, collective end goals and shared ways of working that leverage comparative advantages of each.” Several approaches have proven effective in the past to overcome these differences including national dialogue on the linkages between the sectors, targeted training, South-South learning, field visits, and development of common frameworks and strategies to work towards common goals (O’Brien *et al.*, 2018; Solórzano & Cárdenes, 2019; Mathers *et al.*, 2023b). Smith (2021) notes that working collaboratively across sectors and between government, donors, and other external actors, requires compromise and points to the importance of the skill sets of those appointed to lead coordination. However, there are gaps in the literature regarding who tends to be appointed to coordination positions, especially within government bureaucracies, and what can be done to enhance their effectiveness.

Second, institutionalising coordination arrangements for ASP is imperative before crises occur. This involves establishing legal regulations, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) that outline common goals and outcomes in the short, medium, and long term, and the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders (European Commission, 2019; Slater, 2019; Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Barca *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2021). Expert informants highlight the importance of defining common objectives to facilitate collaboration among different actors, supported by earmarked resources and action plans. Bowen *et al.* (2020) underscore the potential of national standards and coordination frameworks to enhance collaboration in ASP across diverse stakeholders. For instance, in Ethiopia, the government brought together the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) and Humanitarian Food Assistance into a unified framework, delineating common objectives, parameters, roles, and responsibilities.

The literature identifies several best practices regarding the nature of organisational coordination mechanisms that can be adopted in advance of crises. These include the necessity for appropriate forums for information exchange and strategic functions (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018), involving actors from various sectors (Bowen *et al.*, 2020), and integrating local actors into ASP planning and accountability mechanisms (Smith, 2021). Smith (2021) observes that establishing active coordination mechanisms in advance fosters relationship-building and trust among ASP actors over time. However, due to the diverse contexts in which coordination occurs, there is a lack of consistent guidance on the specific structures of coordination mechanisms.

Third, horizontal coordination is often required in relation to specific elements of programme design and operations. An important lesson from the literature is that stronger operational coordination through activities such as joint feasibility assessments, early warning systems, disaster risk finance, and data and information systems involving social protection, DRM, and humanitarian actors can lead to better overall policy coherence (Smith 2021). However, while DRM processes and mechanisms such as contingency plans, early warning systems (EWS), and post-disaster needs assessments offer opportunities for social protection actors to engage and enhance coordination, these options are often underexplored (O'Brien *et al.* 2018).

Fourth, a significant focus of the literature on ASP coordination concerns the importance of effective leadership. Several authors emphasise the importance of strong leadership from a central national agency or ministry for effective disaster response coordination (Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Beazley *et al.*, 2019). O'Brien *et al.* (2018) highlight that such agencies often demonstrate the strongest internal policy coherence. Beazley *et al.* (2019) illustrate this with the example of Nicaragua's national disaster agency, which operates under the Presidency and is integrated across all line ministries, showcasing a comprehensive approach to shock response. Solórzano & Cárdenes (2019) underline the significance of robust central leadership for broader climate change coordination. In Mexico, for instance, the National Climate Change System coordinates efforts across federal ministries and institutions through mechanisms like the Inter-secretarial Climate Change Commission (CICC), which aligns actions across various sectors including finance, environment, economy, agriculture, health, and development.

However, the literature often mentions the necessity of strong leadership without delving into its implications. For instance, as discussed in Section 2.2, social protection is frequently excluded from DRM policies and strategies. Bowen *et al.* (2020) observe that the ministry responsible for social protection significantly influences coordination effectiveness. Strong central ministries may possess greater political influence and resources and likely have stronger ties to DRM efforts, albeit with less focus on core social protection goals. Conversely, social ministry staff may prioritise routine social protection objectives but might have weaker connections to central power structures for disaster response. Further research could shed light on how the political dynamics surrounding leadership influence the effectiveness of coordination for ASP.

Finally, there is some evidence of the need to enhance coordination for child-sensitive approaches to ASP in crisis contexts, particularly for integrated programming involving multiple other sectors (see Box 5) (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). Several lessons emerge from the evidence on horizontal coordination of frontline services, including the importance of both inter-sectoral committees and individuals working across sectors with clear roles and responsibilities, adequate resourcing and training, avoiding overloading frontline workers (often social workers), especially when they have responsibility for both cash transfer delivery and case management work, and ensuring strong communications with complementary service providers. These examples notwithstanding, evidence on coordination for multisectoral responses and integrated programming remains limited.

Box 5. Coordination for Integrated Child-Sensitive Social Protection in Crisis Contexts

In Ethiopia, robust multi-sector coordination through the National Nutrition Task Force, which included ministries responsible for social protection, health, agriculture, and other sectors, was cited as a crucial enabling factor for designing and implementing the pilot integrated nutrition social cash transfer programme (Kebede *et al.*, 2021). Strong coordination is also essential for frontline providers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state government of Kerala in India established round-the-clock “control rooms” to coordinate the multi-sectoral response, including comprehensive healthcare, food relief, home feeding, income and employment support, as well as psychosocial support for children with anxiety and special needs (Holmes & Hunt, 2021).



3.3 Coordination with and within the humanitarian sector

Key Takeaways: Coordination with and within the humanitarian sector for effective ASP, particularly in shock contexts and protracted crises, pose additional challenges. These include the sheer number of actors involved, the exclusion of social protection from humanitarian coordination mechanisms, insufficient engagement with government actors, and internal coordination problems within both sectors. Promising approaches identified in the literature include adapting national disaster management and other high-level mechanisms, joint response strategies, and donor incentivization. Several gaps in understanding exist including:

- ⇒ how to incentivise greater coordination across the nexus at country and local levels
- ⇒ the potential role of donors in promoting more effective coordination
- ⇒ understanding the political factors that hinder reform of the humanitarian coordination architecture to better align with national systems.

As discussed in Section 2.5, the past decade has seen global and national policy shifts towards greater harmonisation of social protection and humanitarian assistance, creating increased demand and expectations for coordination between social protection and humanitarian actors and within the humanitarian sector. Identifying the most effective mechanisms for better coordination with the humanitarian sector remains one of the most pressing questions among ASP practitioner survey respondents.

At the country level, coordination of international humanitarian interventions is carried out through Humanitarian Country Teams, comprised of senior leadership from international organizations and sometimes donors, and the cluster system. The cluster system is the mechanism for sector-based planning and implementation and discussions with state and non-state actors. Clusters are sometimes government-led but are often hybrid or lack active government leadership altogether. Bowen *et al.* (2020) observe that coordination is a perennial challenge within the humanitarian system itself with some estimates identifying 4,480 actors from international and national NGOs, civil society, and others active globally.

Barriers to effective horizontal coordination

First, one of the fundamental challenges of coordination for ASP is that the international humanitarian coordination system was not designed to accommodate linkages to social protection systems (Smith, 2021). Despite increasing policy commitments to better coordination the sectors, social protection is excluded from humanitarian coordination with no social protection cluster (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). Moreover, cash coordination emerged within the humanitarian system in an ad-hoc manner and has struggled to move from primarily a technical concern to one that is more strategic (Slater *et al.*, 2022). Smith (2021) observes that this means there is no accountability for improving coordination of humanitarian response linked with social protection as there are no lines of responsibility defined, rendering the global commitments to improving coordination “somewhat toothless”. Further research into cases where incentives have been put in place at the country level to forge stronger linkages between the sectors could be helpful.

Second, the humanitarian coordination system does not provide sufficient space for engagement with government actors. This means that humanitarian actors often lack adequate knowledge of government systems, capacities, responsibilities, and constraints (Smith, 2021). Drawing on experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic, Beazely *et al.* (2021) observe that when government does not take a lead in coordination with non-government actors,

this often results in duplication of efforts and divergence in programming approaches. Without direction from government, there can also be a proliferation of coordination mechanisms that lead to further fragmentation and limit the potential to collaborate more strategically to achieve more holistic and longer-term outcomes.

Third, both the humanitarian and social protection sectors face internal sectoral coordination problems, which makes it difficult to identify what the specific coordination challenge is and whether it relates to challenges within one or the other sector, or both (Slater *et al.*, 2022). This highlights the need to better understand the barriers that governments face in interacting with the international humanitarian system and how to enhance government involvement and leadership.

Best practices for more effective horizontal coordination

The literature on humanitarian and nexus coordination identifies several approaches to promote better coordination between social protection and humanitarian actors.

First, is the importance of establishing different high-level mechanisms to support joint response. These can include adaptation of national disaster management mechanisms to incorporate social protection, joint response strategies, leveraging donor coordination groups, high-level task forces, and integration of social protection within the mandates of Cash Working Groups (CWG) (Smith, 2021). Experiences from responding to the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that joint response strategies do not need to be too prescriptive, with key principles setting out the vision and areas of collaboration for social protection and humanitarian cash actors (*ibid.*).

Second, donors can play an enhanced role as convenors in protracted crises and in contexts where governments fail to provide coordination and their ability to incentivise coordination through funding strategies and instruments (Smith, 2021). Moreover, some donors have started to develop internal strategies that promote greater harmonisation between their social protection and humanitarian portfolios, such as the European Commission's nexus strategy in the Middle East and North Africa region. In the context of refugees, Hagen-Zanker and Both (2021) find that there is better integration of refugee assistance and national social protection systems where humanitarian, development and government actors have strong, positive, and long-established relationships. This implies the need to establish platforms for interaction over the long term, even when collaboration and integration may seem a distant prospect.

Third, as discussed in Section 3.3, coordination can also focus on specific operational components of programmes. Seyfert *et al.* (2019) note that improving operational coordination between humanitarian actors and social protection requires going beyond the binary choice of working with government systems or not. Collaborations may emerge around select programmatic functions where government and external actors establish actionable, operational partnerships for the delivery of ASP.

Fourth, within the humanitarian system, there are a range of possible models for improved cash coordination (Steets & Rupert, 2017). These include enhanced inter-cluster coordination, independent CWGs, intra-cluster coordination, and creation of a separate cash cluster. Some positive experiences are emerging from Ethiopia, where the humanitarian-focused CWG at both federal and regional levels have been strengthened and include active involvement of government actors (Mathers *et al.*, 2023a). As a result, one regional government developed a Humanitarian Cash Transfer Guide which has improved coordination between

cash actors and the PSNP and led to a more equitable geographic distribution of support, and improved programme design harmonisation. There may be value in collating a range of case studies that highlight effective models of cash coordination that promote engagement and cooperation with government.

Fifth, improving sectoral integration between humanitarian cash and social protection programming requires greater flexibility in funding and grant agreements that allow for longer-term programming (Aurino & Giunti, 2019). Cluster leads also need to take specific responsibility for removing cross-sectoral barriers. However, how much these approaches have been tested in practice and how they relate to enhanced coordination between humanitarian actors and national social protection systems is uncertain.

Despite the potential of these different approaches to enhance coordination across the nexus, Steets and Ruppert (2017) note that more ambitious structural changes such as a wider reform of humanitarian coordination architecture are required to more closely link humanitarian cash and voucher assistance with longer-term, government-led solutions. Further research could examine the political factors and incentives that maintain the status quo within the coordination architecture and where the entry points may be to enhance linkages and coordination with national social protection systems.

4. Vertical Coordination for ASP

In the social protection literature, vertical coordination is defined as the distribution of responsibilities between actors at different levels (central, mid, and local) and the mechanisms through which this occurs in relation to the stages of the social protection delivery chain (TRANSFORM, 2017; Smith, 2021; Johnson & Walker, 2022). TRANSFORM (2017) describes the function of vertical coordination as reconciling policy and administrative levels through top-down systems (e.g., regulations, guidance, monitoring, budget allocations) and bottom-up systems (e.g., feedback and reporting). In decentralised contexts, Johnson and Walker (2022) observe that the main difference is that decentralised states or provinces may have a role in financing and leading implementation.

This section first examines what the literature says about the role of decentralisation in relation to ASP and then focuses on vertical processes and systems for programme implementation.



4.1 Decentralisation

Key Takeaways: While it is understood that vertical coordination for ASP is shaped by broader government structures and the extent and nature of decentralisation, there is relatively little evidence on how different models of decentralisation shape the governance and implementation of ASP programmes, especially when responding to large scale shocks.

There is some consensus in the literature that the nature of vertical coordination for ASP will be shaped by broader government structures and the extent of decentralisation, and that there can be pros and cons in all contexts (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018; Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Johnson & Walker, 2022). However, expert informants noted that external actors often assume there is a homogeneous, centralised approach to social protection within countries, and that the same approaches can be applied in contexts with vastly different governance structures.

Several issues are identified in the literature in relation to how decentralisation shapes approaches to ASP. First, decentralised structures can be inconsistent across sectors, often with centrally managed social protection programmes but decentralised DRM. For example, in Pakistan, DRM is decentralised to provincial governments whereas the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) remains a centrally managed programme. O'Brien *et al.* (2018) cite the example of the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan. There were differences of opinion as to whether vertical expansion of the national cash transfer programme, Pantawid, should be managed centrally or devolved to local government. Some stakeholders felt it was important that local government had a role, whereas others felt that a centralised approach would lead to greater consistency. O'Brien *et al.* (2018) conclude that centralised management may appear to be more efficient in reducing the number of actors involved but may not always be possible or desirable, noting that involvement of all levels of government is crucial to ensure support for implementation.

Second, challenges can arise when the relationship between central and federal states are not well defined, often in countries that have recently adopted a federal system (Birch *et al.*, 2023). In Somalia, for example, political gridlock delayed implementation of operational and coordination structures for the *Baxnaano* safety net programme. In contrast, Kenya's devolution is more advanced, and Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) officials learned the need to engage carefully with powerbrokers at all local levels of government to agree programme design parameters such as targeting.

Third, in decentralised contexts, there can be regional inconsistencies in capacity to finance and deliver ASP programmes. Equalisation mechanisms therefore need to be put in place to mitigate the risk of unequal implementation between administrative units (Barca *et al.*, 2017; Bowen *et al.*, 2020).

These broad issues notwithstanding, there is relatively little evidence on how different models of decentralisation shape the governance and implementation of adaptive social protection programmes, especially when responding to large scale shocks.



4.2 Vertical processes and systems

Key Takeaways: Vertical coordination for social protection involves distributing responsibilities across different administrative levels and ensuring effective decision-making processes, communications, and resource flow. Effective vertical coordination requires clearly defined roles, streamlined coordination structures, robust institutional structures, and institutionalized guidelines for programme operations. However, there is a lack of detailed analysis and assessment of vertical coordination processes in ASP, indicating a need for further research that learns from process evaluations and the experiences of front-line staff, to understand what constitutes effective operational guidance.

Beyond the broader delineations of responsibility between different levels of government, vertical coordination for ASP encompasses decision-making processes, as well as the flow of information and resources. A review by UNICEF Innocenti (2024) analysing social protection programmes across various crisis contexts reveals a consistent pattern of weak vertical coordination, even within systems boasting robust governance structures and central-level coordination mechanisms. Several factors identified in the literature contribute to this constraint.

Barriers to effective vertical coordination

First, a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities poses a significant challenge. For instance, Nepal's social assistance system faced difficulties responding to the 2015 earthquakes as it was the first time it was utilized for such a purpose, with no standard operating procedures (SOPs) for disaster response in place. Implementation delays ensued due to challenges in timing fund transfers and inadequate guidance from central to local actors (Merttens *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, district and local officials felt sidelined in programme design decisions, leading to limited coordination awareness among frontline implementers.

Second, programmes with built-in mechanisms for post-shock expansion can encounter coordination challenges due to ineffective communication, monitoring, and oversight. In Kenya, for example, confusion among payment agents regarding emergency payment

regulations for drought-affected households and poor communication among stakeholders resulted in local leaders being uninformed about planned interventions, thus hindering beneficiary outreach (Farhat *et al.*, 2017).

Third, insufficient resource allocation to administrative functions exacerbates vertical coordination issues. In Indonesia, responsibility for implementing the Bantuan Langsung Tunai cash transfer following economic shocks was distributed across multiple ministries and agencies, yet administrative support was inadequate, leading to unclear roles and responsibilities within multi-ministry teams (World Bank, 2012). This problem is compounded by the limited capacity of local government units, which may need to manage multiple shock response actions from various ministries (Johnson & Walker, 2021).

Best practices for more effective vertical coordination

Effective vertical coordination in social protection requires clearly defined roles and responsibilities across administrative layers, streamlined coordination structures, mandates and capacities for coordination mechanisms, development of operational guidance, and incentivizing cooperation within the system (TRANSFORM, 2017). The ASP literature emphasises two areas for effective vertical coordination in shock contexts: robust institutional structures and institutionalized guidelines for programme operations.

First, strong institutional structures and management controls are essential (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). The Philippines provides an illustrative example, with well-established disaster management structures facilitating effective integration of disaster response efforts (Bowen, 2015). During the social protection response to Typhoon Haiyan, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) collaborated with local governments, utilizing the Disaster Affected Family Assistance Card to register affected households and track post-disaster relief services, including social protection payments and humanitarian aid.

Second, effective vertical coordination requires clear institutional guidelines that define roles and responsibilities for programme delivery (Barca *et al.*, 2019; Bowen *et al.*, 2020). For instance, the Dominican Republic has developed a comprehensive protocol outlining the roles of various sectors in response to climatic shocks, facilitating coordinated action across different stages of disaster management (Beazley & Willams, 2021). However, operational manuals and SOPs for ASP are often lacking or limited to major flagship programmes, as noted in the case of other Caribbean countries (Barca *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, and compared to horizontal coordination, the ASP literature pays limited attention to issues of vertical coordination and there is a lack of granularity in the assessment and analysis of vertical processes for programme delivery. Expert informants note that there is still a lack of understanding about what good operational guidance looks like for ASP, for both maintaining routine provision during shocks and crises and for rapid response. Useful insights could potentially be found from the process evaluation literature and by learning directly from front-line staff within government institutions, quasi-governmental bodies and international agencies involved in direct implementation.

5. Human Resources for ASP

Key Takeaways: Human resource capacity is a significant challenge in delivering social protection, particularly during large-scale shocks, with evidence highlighting staffing shortages, heavy burdens on frontline workers, and reliance on often overburdened community volunteers. The literature highlights the importance of assessing and enhancing capacity and investing in surge capacity procedures and integrated training. However, knowledge gaps exist in relation to:

- ⇒ how to analyse and improve and sustain capacities over time, especially in decentralized contexts;
- ⇒ approaches to working in partnership with non-state actors for social protection delivery in contexts with weak state capacity.

Human resource capacity is commonly cited as a major challenge in delivering social protection, especially when responding to large-scale shocks (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018; Barca *et al.*, 2019; Bowen, 2020; Lowe *et al.*, 2021; Bastagli & Lowe, 2021; UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). Understanding how to assess and enhance capacity, especially of front-line workers in fragile contexts, was a clear priority expressed by practitioner survey respondents. This section examines what the literature says about the human resource related challenges in managing and delivering ASP and the approaches to enhancing human resource capacities in different contexts.

Challenges in human resources for ASP

Lowe *et al.* (2021) highlight the multiple dimensions of staffing requirements for ASP, including administrative and technical skills, human resource availability, ability to conduct outreach, and levels of credibility and trust. During major crises, additional burden is placed on staff when more people need support, fewer personnel are available, and there is a more complex and demanding operating environment (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018). Large-scale shocks also affect the provision of routine social protection. For example, Bastagli and Lowe (2021) found that in South Africa, newly eligible beneficiaries, including mothers of newborns, were unable to register for the Child Support Grant due to disruptions in staff availability.

The burden on front-line staff can be particularly heavy, especially when delivery systems are resource-intensive, such as manual payment modalities, and when they have a range of responsibilities (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018; Bowen *et al.*, 2020; UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). One expert informant noted that local government is where most of the work happens for delivering social protection, but they have the least capacity. UNICEF Innocenti (2024) shows that front-line staff in programmes aiming to provide access to a more holistic range of services, typically social workers responsible for individual case management, are particularly overburdened during shocks and are often provided with only limited support.

An additional challenge is that many social protection programmes rely on community volunteers for outreach and other services, who are themselves most likely to be directly affected by crises (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018). Expert informants noted that in countries with low state capacity, there is often an assumption that there will be a pool of community-level workers or volunteers that can support implementation. However, expectations about their capacities and incentives to support programming are generally too optimistic.

While front-line capacity is undoubtedly important, there is little focus in the literature on central government and strategic and management personnel, beyond a recognition that staff often lack expertise in other related sectors. For example, Costella *et al.* (2023) found that social protection agencies in the Pacific Island Country region lack skills, knowledge, and experience on how to integrate DRM and climate change adaptation into programmes and systems. Johnson and Walker (2022) note that there is also a need to ensure that adequate resources and skilled personnel are allocated to coordination duties; however, as noted earlier, this is often not done in practice.

A major capacity constraint in responding to shocks is that routine programmes are often inadequately staffed in the first place (Barca *et al.*, 2019; Longhurst & Slater, 2022). This resonates with the perspective of expert informants who noted that local staff capacity for ASP is not just about shock response and the need for surge capacity but is about building the foundational capacity to deliver social protection.

The literature suggests that underinvestment in human resources can have different underlying causes depending on the context. In some cases, especially low-income countries, capacity gaps can be exacerbated by public sector recruitment freezes and staff rotation policies (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018). Human resource constraints can be intensified in decentralised contexts due to the lower capacities of staff and limited budgets at the local level (*ibid.*). One expert informant noted international support to ASP approaches also tends to focus on capacity building at the central level, neglecting front-line organisations.

Conflict can further exacerbate human resources for social protection and place additional requirements on staff capabilities. Longhurst and Slater (2022) note that during and after conflict, it can take a long time to restore human resource capacities and point to the dilemma of international actors who want to start rebuilding national capacities but need to engage non-governmental actors to deliver services. In the context of conflict, Birch *et al.* (2023) note that careful management and deployment of staff require investment in their selection, training, and incentives, valuing their experience and skills which develop over time, as well as paying attention to clan, ethnic, and other identities, and impacts on political dynamics and personal safety.

Best practices for enhancing human resource capacities for ASP

The literature points to several approaches to enhance human resource capacities for ASP, including assessment, establishing surge capacity, and staff training.

First, the literature on shock response recognises the importance of undertaking a thorough capacity assessment across different sectors and institutions to understand capacity constraints in terms of future surges in need. This also requires understanding inconsistencies in capacity to respond across different states in decentralised contexts and adequately reflecting different needs within legislative and policy frameworks (Bowen *et al.*, 2020). However, while there is some evidence of the challenges in relation to human resources for ASP, the literature on how to analyse and enhance capacities is thin (Slater *et al.*, 2022).

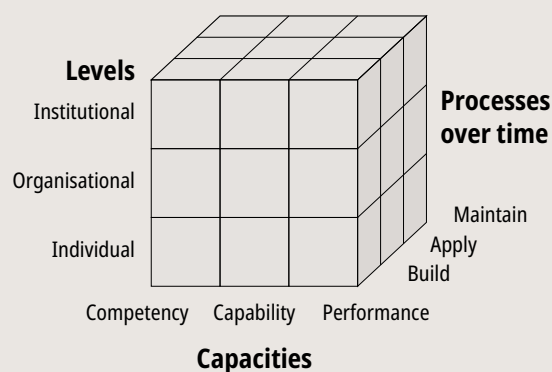
Slater *et al.* (2022) suggest the need for better analytical frameworks for assessing capacity needs. One approach is to differentiate between capacity creation, utilisation, and retention, to develop appropriate strategies that lead to more stability and sustainability in human resources (Kardan *et al.*, 2017). This approach forms the basis of the capacity cube, a new analytical approach to assess how to ensure national social protection systems can be sustained during times of crisis (see Box 6 and Figure 1).

Box 6. The Capacity Cube

Slater (2024) has developed a new analytical tool known as the “capacity cube” to support analysis of how to ensure national social protection systems can be sustained during times of crisis. The three-dimensional approach provides a more nuanced and granular view of capacity needs and constraints by distinguishing the level of analysis (individual, organisational, or system), how capacity needs change over time (building, applying, and maintaining), and the difference between capacity (what a person can do in a standardised environment), capability (what they can do in their day-to-day environment), and performance (what actually can be done under different circumstances and constraints).

This approach can help to diagnose the threats to actual staff performance more effectively and identify where to focus efforts to build or maintain capacity, whether through training, resources, systems enhancements and so on. To date, most attention has been paid to building individual capability, at the expense of other dimensions of capacity. Some early findings have been presented on the application of the capacity cube to programmes in Nigeria, Syria, and Iraq (Slater, 2024b), but there is not yet a substantial body of evidence on its application.

Figure 1. The Capacity Cube (Slater, 2024)



Second, when responding to shocks, the delivery capacity of ASP programmes needs to expand and contract, which requires contingency procedures for surge capacity. The literature points to several sources of surge capacity including horizontally from other areas that are not affected by the crisis, vertically from higher levels of government, or collaboratively by hiring temporary staff or working with partners (Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Barca *et al.*, 2020). In Ecuador, for example, DRM has been decentralised to the local level, but the national guidelines stipulate that when a shock exceeds local capacities, higher levels of government provide support (Beazley, 2017b). However, contingency human resource capacities for ASP are often not established (Beazley & Williams, 2021). There is little evidence on the extent to which surge capacities have been institutionalised and how effective they are in practice. Lessons could potentially be drawn from other contexts where governments have mobilised large numbers of additional staff, such as for elections.

Third, the literature also notes that capacity building for ASP should be integrated into regular training programmes and operational procedures (Johnson & Walker, 2022; Barca *et al.*, 2020). This should include high-level training on strategic issues such as early action, preparedness, coordination, and mid and lower-level training on strategy implementation. Holmes (2019) points out that skills and knowledge on gender and inclusive programming requires specific attention in planning and preparation including analysis of internal gender capacity needs, training, ensuring gender balance, and engaging gender ministries in ASP programming. In addition, human resource capacities should be enhanced through the establishment of SOPs, protocols, best practice and standards, stock taking and learning exercises, and through enhancing operational and logistics systems and capabilities (Barca *et al.*, 2020). Expert informants also noted the need to better understand the role of digital

technology in supporting front-line staff, whether it is enhancing or replacing their role, and the implications of this.

Finally, capacity building approaches of international organisations tend to focus on national social protection systems, however, there are many countries and contexts where state capacity is just not there. Expert informants highlighted the need to look at how international actors can work with alternative local actors such as CSOs and religious institutions for the delivery of social protection, especially in the humanitarian space. Further evidence would be helpful in bringing together experiences in this area.

6. Conclusions and the Future Research Agenda

This report has examined the latest evidence and expert and practitioner insights into approaches, drivers, and bottlenecks to effective governance and institutions for adaptive social protection (ASP).

The following summarises the findings regarding what is known about each aspect of governance, the key gaps in knowledge, and potential questions that could form a future research agenda.

Social protection laws

The literature shows that embedding social protection rights and programmes in national law is crucial for extending coverage and ensuring sustainable financing in fragile and humanitarian contexts. However, temporary legislation is often necessary to expand social protection in crises, raising questions about long-term adaptability. While laws can ensure the continuity of social protection, they can also constrain the development of ASP approaches. Further research is needed to understand how social protection laws enable or hinder the adoption of ASP approaches, particularly in disaster response contexts.

Potential research questions:

- **How do provisions in social protection laws enable or constrain ASP, especially in reaching disaster affected populations and refugees and internally displaced people?**

Social protection policy

The evidence suggests that while there is growing recognition of the importance of integrating disaster and climate risk into social protection policies, significant challenges persist in doing so as standard practice. Many policies exhibit tokenistic integration of adaptive measures, lacking clear objectives and institutional linkages, which hampers effective responses to shocks. Additionally, limited conceptualizations of ASP, concerns over policy overload, technical barriers, and political economy factors pose significant obstacles. Despite some progress, there is a need for further research into current approaches to integration, including how to effectively incorporate preparedness and adaptation objectives into social protection policies and frameworks.

There are several other research gaps that need to be addressed. For instance, there is a lack of understanding regarding how to integrate gender and inclusion considerations into ASP policies and practices, particularly in relation to gendered needs in disaster and climate risk assessments. Furthermore, the literature provides limited insight into the integration of social protection with other sectors to meet the holistic and longer-term needs of vulnerable groups, such as children, during shocks. There is a need to interrogate and address the perceived trade-offs between ASP approaches and building and strengthening

basic social protection systems, and to demonstrate how the two approaches are not necessarily in conflict with each other. Similarly, the social protection sector's ability to develop conflict-sensitive policies remains underdeveloped, with conflict often overlooked or treated as a one-dimensional risks. Moreover, there is a need for more evidence on how to extend social protection assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people, including navigating legal and political complexities and addressing tensions between displaced populations and host communities.

Potential research questions:

- **What are the current approaches and emerging best practices to integrating disaster and climate risk, including conflict, into social protection policies and frameworks?**
- **What are the technical and political economy barriers to integrating disaster and climate risk into social protection policies and frameworks and how can these be overcome?**
- **How are gender-responsive and age-sensitive measures considered within adaptive aspects of social protection policies and frameworks?**
- **How do social protection policy makers and practitioners understand the concept of “adaptive” social protection, and how do these perceptions hinder or enable applying a disaster and climate risk lens to policy development?**

Disaster risk management policy

While there is evidence of an increasing recognition of the role of social protection in crisis contexts within disaster risk management (DRM) frameworks, actual integration efforts remain limited. In some contexts, there is simply an absence of a proven social protection programme. However, other barriers include a lack of policy coherence within the respective sectors, technical barriers, and political economy factors related to risk and resource ownership. Nevertheless, examples from specific country cases suggest various pathways to integration, including convergence between sectors, increased use of social protection during crises, alignment around common objectives, and instrumental use of social protection operational systems.

Research gaps exist concerning the effectiveness of these integration pathways and whether social protection always needs to respond to crises within a wider DRM framework. Moreover, the politics of disaster management and the integration of social protection into disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies remain underexplored areas.

Potential research questions:

- **What are the different pathways and the technical and political enabling factors to integrating social protection within DRRM policy?**

Humanitarian sector policy

The need for better integration between humanitarian assistance and longer-term development interventions, including social protection, especially in protracted crisis contexts, is now well founded. Major donors and humanitarian organizations have committed to increasing the use of cash-based programming and aligning it with national social protection systems. However, despite global frameworks and practices, considerable barriers to linking humanitarian action and social protection remain, including historical humanitarian financing models and the exclusion of social protection from humanitarian coordination systems. Debates persist on when and how to connect humanitarian assistance to social protection, highlighting the need for more empirical research to understand bottlenecks and to align humanitarian programming with the social protection system strengthening agendas.

Potential research questions:

- **What are the financing bottlenecks to linking humanitarian action and social protection and how can these be reformed to create greater incentives for working across the humanitarian-development nexus?**
- **How do real and perceived conflicts between humanitarian principles and developmental approaches to social protection systems limit greater linking across the nexus, and how and in which circumstances can these be overcome?**

Climate change policy

There is growing recognition of the need to integrate social protection into climate change policies at national and sub-national levels to contribute to climate action goals. However, major barriers exist, including limited acknowledgment of social protection within climate policies and weak evidence on its impacts. While there is a call for better coordination and understanding between social protection and climate change actors, research gaps remain in understanding technical barriers and how to overcome them. Additionally, there is a lack of analysis regarding the potential contradictions between current approaches to social protection and climate adaptation and the political economy surrounding the integration of climate into social protection policies.

Potential research questions:

- **How can the social protection sector engage more closely with the climate change sector and ensure that the potential of social protection to contribute to climate goals is recognised and integrated into policy?**

Horizontal coordination

The evidence highlights the critical importance of organisational coordination for ASP, emphasizing its role in facilitating information exchange, decision-making, and collective action across diverse stakeholders. Challenges include the complexity of coordinating across sectors, institutional weaknesses, and political economy considerations. Best practices involve promoting intersectoral understanding, institutionalising coordination mechanisms, and fostering strong leadership. However, there is a lack of established concepts or frameworks for analysing the effectiveness of ASP coordination. Moreover, research gaps persist in understanding the appointment and effectiveness of coordination leaders, the structures of coordination mechanisms, and the implications of political dynamics on coordination effectiveness. Additionally, there is limited evidence on coordination for multisectoral responses and integrated programming, especially in crisis contexts.

Potential research questions:

- **What does effective horizontal coordination for ASP look like and how can this be assessed?**
- **Is sufficient investment being made in developing and maintaining horizontal coordination systems for ASP?**
- **What are the political economy factors that enable or constrain effective coordination between social protection, disaster management, and humanitarian actors?**
- **What are the best practices in multi-sectoral coordination for integrated social protection in fragile and crisis contexts?**

Coordination with and within the humanitarian sector

Coordination with and within the humanitarian sector for effective ASP, particularly in shock contexts and protracted crises, pose additional challenges. Challenges include the exclusion of social protection in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, insufficient engagement with government actors, and internal coordination problems within both sectors. Promising approaches to enhance coordination involve adapting national disaster management mechanisms, joint response strategies, and donor incentivization. However, research gaps exist regarding the most effective coordination models, the role of donors in promoting coordination, and the political factors hindering structural changes in humanitarian coordination architecture to better align with national social protection systems.

Potential research questions:

- **What are the barriers to more effective coordination across the nexus at country and local levels and what incentives are effective in enhancing coordination?**
- **How can the humanitarian coordination system be reformed to promote better coordination between social protection and humanitarian actors?**

Vertical coordination

Vertical coordination in ASP involves distributing responsibilities across different administrative levels and ensuring effective decision-making processes, communications, and resource flow. Challenges include inconsistent decentralization structures, unclear roles and responsibilities, ineffective communication, and insufficient resource allocation. While there is some evidence on how different decentralization models impact ASP governance, research gaps exist in understanding the implications of different models of decentralisation on ASP programmes, especially during large-scale shocks. Effective vertical coordination necessitates clearly defined roles, streamlined coordination structures, robust institutional structures, and institutionalized guidelines for programme operations. However, there is a lack of detailed analysis and assessment of vertical coordination processes in ASP, indicating a need for further research that learns from process evaluations and the experiences of front-line staff, to understand what constitutes effective operational guidance.

Potential research questions:

- **What are the key considerations for social protection actors in different decentralisation contexts for ensuring effective governance and delivery of programmes in response to shocks?**
- **What can be learned from process evaluations and front-line staff to improve systems and processes of vertical coordination for ASP?**

Human resources

Human resource capacity is a significant challenge in delivering ASP, particularly during large-scale shocks, with evidence highlighting staffing shortages, heavy burdens on front-line workers, and reliance on often overburdened community volunteers. While there is recognition of the importance of assessing and enhancing capacity, gaps exist in understanding how to analyse and improve capacities effectively, especially in decentralized contexts and conflict-affected areas. New analytical tools offer some promise in assessing capacity needs with more granularity. The literature highlights surge capacity procedures and integrated training to enhance staff capacities, yet there is limited evidence on their institutionalization and effectiveness. Additionally, there is a need to explore partnerships with non-state actors for ASP delivery in contexts with weak state capacity, requiring further research and evidence.

Potential research questions:

- **What are the most effective approaches to establishing, enhancing and maintaining staff capacities for delivery of social protection in fragile and crisis contexts?**
- **How can development partners work more closely with non-state actors for the delivery of social protection in fragile and crisis contexts?**

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