



Building on social protection systems for effective disaster response: the Lesotho experience

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How can social protection systems be used in disasters, as a complement to, or substitute for, humanitarian assistance? Oxford Policy Management led a three-year research project investigating this question, looking at the role of social protection in both mitigating the impact of large-scale shocks and supporting households after a crisis hits. We identify factors that can help and hinder effective disaster response, and consider how social protection actors can best work together with others working in humanitarian assistance and disaster risk management (DRM). Six country case studies form the core of the research. Here we present findings from one case study, Lesotho. This draws on fieldwork in October 2016, which looked at the extent to which social protection interventions and systems formed part of the response by the government and its partners to the El-Niño-induced drought and food insecurity of 2015-16. We also consider the potential for using these programmes and systems to address future shocks.

How are vulnerable and crisis-affected households supported in Lesotho?

Lesotho has a strong political commitment to providing social protection for poor and vulnerable households and individuals. It spends a high percentage of its budget on social assistance (4.5% of GDP) – nearly triple the average for sub-Saharan Africa. It offers a range of programmes including cash and in-kind transfers, free school meals, public works and subsidies. Some of the government's largest nationally funded programmes include:

- the Child Grant Programme (CGP), a cash transfer that reached 27,000 households as of 2016 (about 7% of households) but was only present in half of all subdistricts (Box 1).
- the Old Age Pension (OAP), a programme fully instigated and owned by the government. It reaches all people over 70 who do not receive a civil service pension (80,000 individuals). The transfer amount is higher than the CGP and likely to reach more households.
- the National School Feeding Programme, which is some 50 years old and has much greater coverage (390,000 primary school children).

A National Social Protection Strategy has been adopted with the aim of bringing coherence to the sector. The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), created in 2012, leads on social protection policy and also runs the CGP. Some of the other programmes are run elsewhere: the OAP is managed by the Ministry of Finance, and the National School Feeding Programme by the Ministry of Education and Training. An important feature of social protection in Lesotho is that most of the programmes are funded by the government itself, with development partner support confined to provision of technical assistance to improve the overall system.

Box 1: The Child Grant Programme (CGP)

The CGP provides quarterly cash payments to poor households with children. The programme has developed a database, the National Information System for Social Assistance (NISSA), that includes data on CGP and non-CGP households and was envisaged for use by other programmes as needed. Households are identified as eligible if identified by the community as being poor and based on application of a formula to the NISSA data that aims to assess households' level of economic wellbeing.

33 of Lesotho's 64 subdistricts, known as community councils, were registered on NISSA under its original method ('old NISSA'). At the time of the crisis in 2016 a revised NISSA registration procedure ('new NISSA') had been rolled out in a further three community councils; the remaining 28 community councils were not reached. The programme issues payments physically through a cash-in-transit firm, although new payment systems were being trialled in six community councils.

DRM activities, including responses to emergencies, are led by the Disaster Management Authority (DMA) and have been enshrined in law for 20 years. The DMA has a disaster risk reduction policy and a multi-hazard contingency plan, and runs the annual Lesotho Vulnerability Assessment Committee (LVAC) assessment to determine food security status. It faces substantial challenges in coordinating DRM nationwide owing both to technical and financial resource constraints and to the ambiguous division of roles, responsibilities and reporting lines between national and district levels. District Disaster Management Teams (and equivalents at village level) provide the local structures that support coordination of the response to a disaster that are led by other line ministries within the Government or externally through UN agencies.

The many UN agencies, donors and NGOs in Lesotho have a presence that is often long-standing, though perhaps smaller than elsewhere. Some agencies provide support from a regional office.

The El Niño crisis and the response

Climate shocks – particularly drought, but also floods – are common in Lesotho and are expected to become more frequent. It had been foreseen for some time that the strongest El Niño event experienced in 35 years would lead to drought and a significant increase in food insecurity. The government declared a state of drought emergency on 22 December 2015. By May 2016 477,000 of the country's population of about 2.1 million were classified as being in 'survival deficit', lacking the ability to meet basic food and non-food needs.

The shock is set against a backdrop whereby, even though Lesotho is now a lower middle-income country that has experienced economic growth for the last two decades, 57% of the population is thought to be below the poverty line (2010/11). Many households still rely on agriculture for their livelihoods (and on remittances, though this is declining). Movements in and out of poverty are relatively limited.

Implementing agencies attempted to use social protection programmes or delivery systems to respond to El Niño in four ways:

1. Provision of cash top-ups to existing beneficiaries of CGP ('vertical expansion' of the CGP).
2. Additional support to CGP beneficiaries through other programmes (i.e. 'piggybacking' on the beneficiary list).
FAO distributed seeds; Catholic Relief Services provided seeds and vouchers.
3. Exploring the use of the NISSA database to identify households for assistance (i.e. 'piggybacking' on the wider list of households. WFP explored this but did not use it).
4. Government introduction of a food subsidy.

Other government-funded social protection programmes besides the CGP and NISSA – the OAP, National School Feeding Programme, public works programme and Public Assistance – were not considered in response to El Niño during 2016, even though they routinely distribute transfers to large numbers of the population. Alongside this support UN agencies and NGOs also provided emergency cash and in-kind support and the Government pledged support was largely ear-marked for water and sanitation and focused on supply side initiatives.

Considering how responsive these were to the El Niño shock, we find:

- There is cautious agreement that, on balance, it was better to make use of the **CGP** than not to use it, and might be in future provided it is part of a broader package. Warmth towards its use was greater among agencies that were involved in its implementation. There are many caveats around its limited geographical reach, the fact that it only covers households with children and the fact that its recipients are households who were deemed the most poor some years ago.
- The **food subsidy** is reported to have been partially effective in stabilising prices and enabling some households to obtain part of their food requirements more easily. It reduced the cost of food assistance for NGOs and the school feeding programme. However, it was not designed to benefit the worst off households so may not have reduced the cost of items more commonly purchased by the poorest. Demand for the subsidised products increased more than expected which posed problems for the government budget.
- The implementation of the **school feeding programme** (not adjusted in the drought) was somewhat affected by the shock because of the rising cost of food which affected its viability for many of the service providers, though not everywhere.

Lessons from the use of social protection in the response to El Niño

The use of the CGP as a vehicle for supporting the response to the El Niño drought provides an opportunity to reflect on some benefits and challenges of using the social protection system to support and complement DRM initiatives in Lesotho, both in preparation for and after a large-scale shock. We can also look at how its use was affected by the broader regulatory environment and by capacity issues across social protection, DRM and humanitarian response. We discuss here these institutional, organisational and operational factors. The implications from the CGP's experience are summarised in Table 1 at the end of this section.¹

Institutional issues: policy context, regulatory environment and coordination

Although elements of the DRM and social protection sectors are long established they operate largely independently of one another. Despite its long-standing legal foundation, the DMA does not have the strength in practice to deliver the leadership in a crisis that it would wish to have. Moreover there is ambiguity in roles, responsibilities and reporting lines subnationally. The DMA sits on the District Disaster Management Teams but does not run them: they are chaired by the district administrator who reports to the Ministry of Local Government and Chieftainship Affairs and is not answerable to the DMA nationally. The Local Government Act has no provisions for DRM.

In contrast to the response to the previous food security crisis, the response to El Niño had stronger government ownership. However, the limited convening power of the DMA, together with its resource constraints, meant that its efforts were not very effective. Instead the Humanitarian Country Team provided an important coordination platform.

As for social protection activities, while now being brought together under a single strategy, these remain firmly embedded in the separate ministries that run them and are not always perceived as 'social protection'. This helps to explain why there was no consideration of adjusting the OAP or school feeding programme (e.g. through top-ups) – interventions not run by the MoSD – as a social protection response during the El Niño crisis. Meanwhile, development partners tend to have long-standing relationships with particular ministries or programmes; these influence the channels through which they deliver humanitarian response.

Moreover while political commitment for regular social protection is high in Lesotho, political commitment for social protection as a response to covariate shocks is moderate. Ministries and international agencies each have a strong attachment to 'their own' programmes; they pay little attention to, and have limited influence over, those implemented by others. The decision as to which social protection intervention or delivery system to use in the El Niño response was therefore ad-hoc and not considered in advance, especially since forums for wider dialogue in social protection are largely absent so there was no natural space to consider all the options.

Organisational issues: capacity, resources and financing

Administrative constraints, especially in staff capacity, are considerable in both the social protection and DRM sectors. For example, several core CGP and NISSA staff members are funded by international donors, as is the data collection for an expanded NISSA which has been outsourced to the private sector. These resources were further stretched during the response to El Niño. The government's reform programmes are working to address existing constraints through integration and consolidation of core social protection programmes, so it is possible that, by the time of a future shock on this scale, the resourcing challenges encountered during the El Niño response will have changed. Nonetheless the extent to which an up-to-date NISSA and/or the CGP can play a central role in future disaster response is contingent on its capacity at the time.

Financing for emergencies is an issue, regardless of whether channelled through the social protection sector or not. The sources of funding for the response to El Niño were identified only after the drought disaster had already been declared. The social protection sector, which already commands high levels of government expenditure for its routine programmes, has little sway in obtaining additional government resources during a crisis, owing in part to a lack of planning and anticipation of needs, but also limited interest by the government in considering social protection as a response instrument for disasters.

¹ Note that the fact that we focus on the CGP does not imply that it should necessarily be the primary vehicle to support shock-response in Lesotho. Equally, any observations of challenges in its use are not intended to suggest that it is less effective than other programmes. It is simply that other programmes have not been assessed from a similar perspective or been under the same level of scrutiny as CGP has, so no comparisons can be made.

The DMA faces tight financial constraints. Its regular budget covers only its own operations: it is intended to be used for its coordination of DRM activities by others, but not to fund the actual response to disasters. A Disaster Management Fund has been created but does not contain sufficient funds to handle crises. As a result it did not function when the drought was declared (the absence of funds had been noticed during the previous crisis, in 2012, but had not been resolved). The lack of clarity about the availability and location of funds led to the government's delayed response to the crisis. The government pledged M155 million (\$10 million) in its response but this was not immediately available and most of the cash and in-kind emergency support to households was supplied by the international partners during the first six months of 2016.

While the economy is deemed to have performed reasonably well for several years, the economic outlook is weakening and the need for curtailing government expenditure intensifying. Within this context, the prospect of government-financed response to emergencies remains uncertain. Nevertheless, there are ways in which Lesotho can improve the fitness of its financing architecture for emergency response by improving its anticipation and analysis of funding requirements (and sources for addressing emergencies), including regular review and update of mitigation and preparedness plans; better articulating the processes for resourcing and accessing the Disaster Management Fund, linked to the broader public financial management processes; and finally continued efforts to improve cost-efficiency of responses at design and implementation stages.

Operational issues: targeting, data management and payment systems

A central objective of emergency response is to make sure that the people most in need – however defined – receive the right type and amount of assistance. We reviewed whether the NISSA database and the CGP top-up offered advantages relative to the emergency system in this regard. While there is cautious agreement that, on balance, it was better to make use of the CGP than not, some aspects of its operational features need to be considered if used in future – as, indeed, would be the case for any social protection programme.

First, the NISSA has a limited role in identifying how many people are in need of assistance since it is not crisis-specific. This is the prerogative of LVAC assessments commonly used across southern Africa. Where NISSA may have some role to play is in the matter of which precise households should receive assistance. The traditional approach has been for DMA to carry a targeting exercise, combined with similar independent exercises by its partners. However, in the response to El Niño the DMA exercise was very slow (unfinished as of October 2016) to the frustration of NGOs who tried to rely on it. So does the NISSA offer an appropriate alternative?

For it to be a credible means of identifying households to receive assistance it needs to be comprehensive, relevant, accurate and accessible:

- **Comprehensiveness:** In respect of its geographical completeness, it was present in only about half of all subdistricts as of 2016, some of which were selected randomly. As for the *number of households* covered, the 'old NISSA' model conducted a census-style survey; in practice about 70% of households in participating community councils are thought to be on it. Most of the data were collected around 2010 and many households have moved or changed since then, which compounds the shortfall in coverage. By design, the 'new NISSA' registers even fewer, at around 50% of households. It is not designed to capture households that become vulnerable or poor as a result of a shock, especially as data collection may be carried out years before the shock itself. The CGP list is a subset of 23% of the households on the NISSA list.
- **Relevance:** Regarding the type of information collected, the NISSA is closely related to the DMA's targeting questionnaire for assessing humanitarian need and so contains many relevant variables though, naturally, not all. It necessarily cannot contain information on current dietary diversity at the time of a shock, omitting a facet of targeting for emergency response to food insecurity that is otherwise captured by the DMA.
- **Accuracy:** This relates to the degree to which the NISSA reflects the well-being of households when the data are required. Naturally, over time a static database becomes a less accurate reflection of the current picture. If several years have passed since data collection, agencies may become increasingly hesitant to use the NISSA on account of the risk of high errors of inclusion and exclusion, beyond any inaccuracies in the original data collection.
- **Accessibility:** Access to the NISSA in Lesotho is confined to a few staff in the MoSD in the capital, Maseru. This is problematic because the District Disaster Management Teams, who lead on emergency response, cannot easily see or access it from the district. For other stakeholders to access the beneficiary database they make a request to the MoSD that the Ministry deals with on an ad-hoc basis with no formal protocol for granting permission.

Certainly, the CGP beneficiary list has provided a means for reaching many households affected by the El Niño crisis. Nonetheless, this has come at a cost of many households initially being left out in community councils where only CGP beneficiaries were supported: in part because of funding shortages, too. The gaps in NISSA coverage, relevance and data currency justify the use of complementary methods for identifying households for assistance. As would be the case with the use of any static social protection database for emergency response, additional targeting at the time of the crisis will always be needed.

Other elements of CGP operations also need to be reviewed to better fit a crisis context, notably its payments modality. The existing payments to CGP beneficiaries are made every three months, largely disbursed manually in cash through a security firm. Because of this CGP beneficiaries only received their first top up in June 2016 (six months after the declaration of the emergency), when their routine quarterly payments were due. In future either the programme would need to explore possibilities of extraordinary payment schedules or explore possibilities through use of mobile technology that are currently being piloted in a number of community councils.

Table 1: Factors enabling and constraining the effective use of the CGP as a response to the El Niño crisis

Institutional issues		
Policy context and regulatory environment	✓	Social protection sector is well established in Lesotho (including the CGP, which was launched in 2007). CGP perceives itself as being squarely within the sector, unlike other interventions such as the OAP and National School Feeding Programme which are not viewed as social protection interventions by their custodians.
	✓	National Social Protection Strategy recognises that social protection interventions may have a role to play in response to large-scale crises such as droughts.
	✗	Political appetite by government for use of social protection programmes in response to covariate shocks is moderate.
Coordination	✓	DMA is designated as the agency for coordination of disaster response, and had stronger ownership of the response than the previous food security crisis where the UN agencies took on a greater role.
	✗	However, the DMA's convening power is limited by a lack of resources, which resulted in a less coherent response to El Niño than many would have wished. DMA meetings tended to be used for information sharing more than for steering a coordinated response.
	✗	Forums for wider dialogue on social protection issues at national level were largely absent during the El Niño crisis, limiting the opportunity for a coordinated response from the sector.
	✓	At district level, where disaster response is managed, District Disaster Management Teams exist, bringing together government and non-government actors from multiple sectors.
	✗	District Disaster Management Teams do not report directly to DMA nationally, which weakens coordination between national and subnational level.
	✓	International community established coordination structures through the Humanitarian Country Team to manage the El Niño response.
Organisational issues		
Financing	✗	There is limited contingency planning and costing and no corresponding contingency financing mechanisms established, so there were no protocols agreed in advance about how to pass emergency funds through the CGP in the event of a shock.
	✓	The DMA's Disaster Management Fund had no funds at the time of El Niño and nor was there any protocol or mechanism for how it could be used in the event that funds were available. The use of the CGP therefore offered a partial solution as it offered a means of channelling funds to many thousands of households.
	✗	The CGP had to find and agree funding for top-ups with several agencies in the midst of the crisis: the duration of the support could not be guaranteed.
Capacity and resources	✓	Piggybacking on CGP payment schedule and top-ups places little additional strain on the regular operations of the CGP.
	✗	DMA has very limited staffing capacity and does not have resources to deliver emergency response. This makes it vital for implementing partners to take on the delivery of assistance.
	✗	CGP still relies on significant support to manage its own routine operations, particularly in relation to NISSA. It does not have 'surge capacity'.

Table 1: Factors enabling and constraining the effective use of the CGP as a response to the El Niño crisis (continued)

Operational issues	
Data management and targeting	✓ CGP beneficiary list provided an immediate mechanism for reaching a part of the population.
	✗ NISSA database captures information on half the population of any given area only. NISSA data used at the time of response was 6 years old. About half of the subdistricts in the country were not included on the database.
	✗ CGP is targeted only at households with poor children. Even assuming they were all affected by the El Niño crisis, they still only correspond to one quarter of the total population in need of support.
	✗ NISSA database is managed centrally. No direct access to the database at the district level, where responses are normally coordinated.
Payments/delivery	✗ CGP payments are made manually every three months. In the absence of staff and mechanisms to make an interim payment, households had to wait for their next quarterly payment to receive the top-up. This was slower than some emergency responses.
	✗ Payments made under CGP and other programmes are insufficient to help households build resilience to shocks, and were lower than the emergency assistance provided to other households.
	✓ Alternative electronic payment modalities are being piloted by CGP, providing potential opportunity for shock responsiveness in future.

Source: OPM. **Notes:** (1) ✓ = aspects that could be conducive to shock-responsive social protection. ✗ = aspects that may pose a risk, but could be mitigated. (2) This table summarises the findings from our light-touch case study which focused particularly on the use of the CGP as a response to a crisis. A fuller analysis of the merits and drawbacks of using social protection for crisis response in Lesotho would need to explore other options including the school meals programme, OAP and public works interventions.

Lessons learned in Lesotho: how can social protection best complement and enhance disaster response?

Given this practical experience from the response to the El Niño-induced drought, what are the broad lessons for Lesotho that may potentially apply to countries with similar contexts?

Continued support to routine social protection

The social protection system is in the midst of reform and strengthening. The CGP is being expanded to reach all subdistricts in the country and its underlying system for identification of potential recipients, the NISSA, has gone through redesign and is being applied to new cohorts of households. Further deliberations are also being made on how the NISSA can form the basis for supporting eligible households across multiple programmes operated within MoSD and elsewhere in the government. New payment modalities are being piloted and tested under the CGP. There are also plans to review and improve the operations of the OAP. Within this context, support to improving the regular functioning of the core social protection programmes and delivery systems, including the CGP and OAP, is likely to make a considerable difference to their efficiency and effectiveness in the event they are used in a crisis.

Taking a more holistic view of social protection

The CGP was used in the El Niño response because of its reach and familiarity to international partners supporting its development. In the absence of strong coordination structures within the sector in 2016, ministries and institutions were understandably strongly attached to ‘their own’ programmes. Under these circumstances the merits and demerits of using different social protection instruments were not considered as a whole, thus limiting the potential role of social protection as an effective response mechanism. Newly established interagency coordination mechanisms are expected to improve collaboration within the sector.

Role of social protection as complement to broader emergency response

The use of the CGP for the El Niño response was a reasonable way of reaching a proportion of the people affected, though at most it was only able to reach one quarter of those in need. This demonstrates one of the ways in which social protection programmes can be used and highlights the need to view other potential roles that social protection may play as a complement to a wider humanitarian response. Even in geographical areas where social protection programmes are in place, they are unlikely to correspond to all of those affected by crises. Therefore, where recipients of existing programmes are supported, close coordination is necessary to ensure that all those in need of assistance are reached and that no-one is left behind. Moreover particular attention must be paid to the level of support provided through the different channels to ensure it is equitable and meets the needs of those affected.

Support to the emergency response mechanism and coordination structures

Much support is needed to enhance the capacity of the DMA for disaster preparedness and response. One priority is identifying how to effectively resource the Disaster Management Fund, which was unable to deliver support in the El Niño crisis. Another is to articulate how the social protection sector can feed into the DMA's structures and processes for coordinating emergency response: consideration of 'shock-responsive' social protection should take place within the framework of current procedures for mitigating, and responding to, disasters so as not to risk setting up a parallel system. Interaction between actors responsible for DRM and social protection will be made easier as the DRM sector is strengthened and as the social protection sector itself becomes more cohesive.

Place great focus on planning and preparedness

A shortcoming of the response to El Niño in Lesotho was limited planning and preparedness. There is a strong need for strengthening the process for anticipating financing requirements on a routine basis through better preparedness and contingency planning activities supported by timely data and/or an improved early warning system. Moreover, preparatory work should begin now on how the social protection sector might make a useful contribution in response to future shocks. This should take into account not only what was done in the 2016 response, but also what was not done. Consideration of non-contributory social assistance should be integrated into contingency plans, including an indication of how expanded programmes would be resourced. The role of social protection across the entire continuum of DRM from preparedness to response and recovery should be considered.

Determine the role and relevance of NISSA to shocks

A core question related to social protection systems is whether its core features can lend themselves better to an emergency response? While the NISSA is undergoing reform, its custodians need to reach a decision on four major aspects determining its relevance in a shock: comprehensiveness (how to reach non-beneficiary households), accuracy (how households can report changes to their material circumstances that affect their categorisation on the database), accessibility (how to ensure that District Disaster Management Teams can easily use the data), and the protocols by which the system might be used in an emergency.

About the project

The Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems study is a research programme (2015 to 2018) led by Oxford Policy Management (OPM), in consortium with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) and INASP. Its aim is to strengthen the evidence base as to when and how existing government social protection systems can better respond to shocks in low-income countries and fragile and conflict-affected states, thus minimising negative shock impacts and reducing the need for separate humanitarian responses. The research is funded by UK Aid as part of the UK Department for International Development's (DFID's) Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence Programme (HIEP).

Further information

This policy brief builds on work by Andrew Kardan, Clare O'Brien and Malefetsane Masasa. The research draws on data gathered through a combination of literature review, document review and consultations with key informants and stakeholders at national and sub-national levels. Our method builds on insights offered by the literature and summarised in our overarching conceptual framework for Shock-Responsive Social Protection. These are all accessible on our project webpage, where the full Lesotho case study can also be found. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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