



Supporting social protection: five considerations for a principled humanitarian approach

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As humanitarian organizations broaden their mindset from saving lives in emergencies to making a more sustainable impact, they increasingly consider supporting existing social protection systems in order to increase the long-term impact of their assistance. Doing so could help them complement the activities of development organizations, strengthen local capacities and durably reduce chronic needs arising from armed conflict. But this may come with additional pressure on principled humanitarian action.

In this post, ICRC policy adviser and operational researcher Colin Walch reflects on some of the challenges and opportunities that supporting social protection creates for principled humanitarian organizations. While linking social protection and humanitarian aid requires reconciling differences in terms of principles and approaches, a more systematic engagement with existing social protection systems would strengthen sustainable humanitarian impact.

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Under what conditions can principled humanitarian organization support existing social protection systems? Predictable cash transfer is a form of social protection (SP) that aid the poor and protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks. These cash transfers *protect against hunger*, prevent asset depletion and enhance people's ability to cope with the shocks from armed conflict and disasters. Social protection mechanisms, mostly provided by the state and often financed by development or cooperation agencies, are found to reduce *poverty and vulnerability more sustainably* than ad hoc humanitarian aid.

Predictable cash transfers are well received by communities because they allow people to meet their *immediate, self-identified needs and accumulate the savings* and assets to plan ahead. Finally, social protection helps to *build the social contract between the state and its citizens*, paving the way for sustaining or building peace. *Major donors* are therefore touting social protection as a clear opportunity to *link humanitarian, development and peace efforts* in crisis.

However, there is a tension between supporting social protection for sustainable impact and the risks it represents for principled humanitarians. Supporting existing SP systems may complicate impartial and independent needs assessment and it may be perceived as taking the side of a party in conflict. It may also indirectly legitimize the state, affecting the perceived neutrality and access of the humanitarian organization. By engaging in SP systems, a humanitarian organization may be asked to *share data on recipients with one of the actual parties to a conflict*. Finally, the basic building blocks of social protection may barely exist, so there is very little to support or build on.

While these are valid concerns, they should not automatically reject any type of engagement with SP systems. Indeed, not all armed conflicts are similar, and some contexts might be more conducive to engage with SP systems. This post proposes five related considerations for evaluating whether the ICRC and other principled humanitarian organizations might be able to support existing SP systems without compromising humanitarian principles.

Perceived neutrality and access

As put forward in a *previous post* on this blog, “[b]y being perceived as neutral and unbiased towards adversaries, the ICRC aims to gain their trust and acceptance so that they allow the organization to operate effectively and safely in the territory they control.” Neutrality is therefore a means to secure safe access. It is feared that supporting state-led SP systems could be perceived as aiding one side in a conflict, which may be used as a reason to block humanitarian access to areas held by the opposing party. However, supporting states in their humanitarian efforts does not automatically lead to accusations of taking sides, potentially leading to a loss of access. Humanitarian organizations can in fact feasibly work with states and their SP systems on a “principled” basis. In Colombia for example, the ICRC has been *supporting a state-led SP mechanism* for the protection of families of missing persons in conflict without this affecting its perceived neutrality and dialogue with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the country. Médecins Sans Frontières has recently highlighted how *their work clearly supports health ministries and how they intend to deepen such support* to state health systems.

While it is often assumed that supporting state-led social protection will be negatively perceived by NSAGs operating in the area, this may not always be the case. In fact, some NSAGs have asked for more public services, and the humanitarian organization’s facilitation might not, therefore, be an issue. In Afghanistan, for instance, the Taliban (before they took power) *asked the government and international organizations to improve health care in remote regions of Afghanistan*.

Quality of dialogue

The quality of the dialogue with the warring parties and communities is crucial to assessing how support to existing social protection systems would be perceived. Transparent and sustained dialogue provides insight into how support might affect their perception of the humanitarian organization’s neutrality and provides the basis for in-depth discussions around targeting of vulnerable households and post-distribution monitoring. Dialogue with both sides could help to highlight the principles of humanity and impartiality in providing such support.

Supporting social protection does not imply that humanitarian organizations support the political agendas of the state or of the armed group, and it is important to emphasize this point in the dialogue with the NSAGs and the community. During dialogue with NSAGs, it is crucial to emphasize that the ICRC supports only state social protection programs that address people’s humanitarian needs.

Impartiality

Before deciding to support an existing SP program, it is important to assess whether the SP system is driven solely by needs, irrespective of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. The social protection program should be non-discriminatory, and the assistance should be based only on the severity and urgency of needs. However, social protection benefits can be allocated according to political elites’ interests and influence, marginalizing some communities and making access to benefits contingent on the political behavior of potential recipients.

Where public-sector corruption is an important concern, measures should be taken to protect humanitarian funds from diversion; it should not, however, be the sole argument justifying building a parallel (and unsustainable) structure. There are *ways to reduce these risks* before supporting social protection, and development banks have long engaged with countries with high levels of corruption and have developed *several tools to reduce it*. If there is good dialogue with the authorities in charge of the social protection, the humanitarian organization may be able to openly discuss and address issues of inclusion or marginalization within its programs.

Sustainability

While the objective of supporting social protection is to have a more sustained humanitarian impact, not all SP systems are sufficiently resilient to achieve this. They might be underfinanced, weakened by political instability, or fully dependent on donor countries for financial and technical sustainability. Before supporting a social protection program, it is therefore essential to assess whether it is sufficiently sustainable without the humanitarian organization’s support.

Humanitarian organizations can nevertheless design a humanitarian cash response with a view to influencing the state to adopt some features of the program for its future social protection. It might adopt the program and its target population or parts of the *program design*. While a functioning SP system might not yet exist, humanitarian organizations can advise and support the government in designing SP programs that address the needs of conflict victims, making it more inclusive and sustainable.

Added value

Finally, an important question to ask before supporting a social security network is whether the humanitarian organization has the necessary expertise and an added value compared to other humanitarian and development organizations. Within the Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the ICRC is potentially a new player in social protection compared to National Societies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have been supporting SP systems long before the ICRC, particularly in response to natural hazards, health emergencies and, more recently, refugee crises. Similarly, the IFRC has *written a guidance* to assist National Societies in strengthening the linkages with existing social protection systems in their countries. Outside of the Movement, the World Bank, UNICEF, the International Labour Organization and the World Food Programme implement and finance the majority of social protection programs today and lead research on this topic.

In the case of the ICRC, its added value lies in its mandate in conflict zones, where development actors cannot reach. The ICRC can advocate for the inclusion of conflict-affected communities in social protection and facilitate their access to these systems (through transportation, for example), particularly when communities are too hard to reach or excluded by the state. In its role as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC can facilitate access to potential national or local SP mechanisms, in a similar way it did for *COVID-19 vaccinations in remote and conflict-affected zones*.

Next steps: opportunities and obstacles

These five considerations help to guide humanitarian organizations to engage with SP mechanisms in a way that would not affect their principles. There are different types of engagement and support to existing SP systems and the level of engagement depends on the contexts. When directly supporting existing SP mechanisms may be too risky in light of humanitarian principles, (risking losing access in other parts of the country for example), there are still ways to engage with SP systems. This can include orienting or facilitating access of the affected populations to existing SP programs. Hence, humanitarian organizations should not be asking whether to engage with social protection, but rather how and to what extent.

A systematic mapping of the existing SP mechanism would help to highlight opportunities and entry-points for engagement, avoid undermining existing initiatives, and may represent exit strategies once the acute phase of the crisis has passed. It emphasizes and brings a more sophisticated level of programmatic sensitivity to conflict dynamics and local capacities for longer term development. External support to social protection is particularly important to ensure that the system keeps functioning during armed conflict and avoids a total collapse. In Ukraine, *community groups, local churches and youth groups* as well as the *Ukraine SP systems* were first to respond to the humanitarian needs, while international humanitarian organizations came later.

Social protection represents a natural avenue to collaborate with development actors, which would ensure that the impact of humanitarian work is sustainable. Collaboration around social protection may help the affected population rebuild their lives with agency, and make sure that vulnerable people are not ignored or excluded. *A nexus that works builds* on each actor's strength, expertise, knowledge and principles.

A major obstacle to supporting social security networks has been humanitarian organizations' limited ability to plan and fund over the long term. The standard one-year programmatic humanitarian cycles are not sufficient to properly align and support social protection. While donors expect to see humanitarian cash programs align with local and national SP systems, their actual financing practices for humanitarian agencies remain short-term. More long-term and predictable humanitarian financing is essential to make humanitarian activities more sustainable and improve the convergence and support to existing social protection systems.

See also:

- Cristina Quijano Carrasco, "*Humanitarian engagement in social protection: implications for principled humanitarian action*", February 11, 2021
- Jill Capotosto, "*The mosaic effect: the revelation risks of combining humanitarian and social protection data*", February 09, 2021
- Jérémie Labbé, "*The International Committee of the Red Cross and the localization of aid: Striving toward meaningful complementarity*", January 19, 2018

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