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Social Protection in Contexts of Fragility and Forced Displacement: Introduction to a Special Issue

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ABSTRACT *Effective social protection is increasingly as essential to supporting affected populations in situations of protracted instability and displacement. Despite the growing use of social protection in these settings, there is comparatively little rigorous research on what works, for whom, and why. This special issue contributes by adding seven high-quality studies that raise substantially our understanding of the role of social protection in fragile contexts and in settings of forced displacement and migration. Together, these studies fill knowledge gaps, help support informed decision-making by policy-makers and practitioners, and demonstrate that impact evaluation and the analysis of social protection in challenging humanitarian settings are possible. The studies provide evidence that design choices in implementation, such as which population to target, choice of transfer modality or which messages are delivered with programmes, can make a substantial difference in the realisation of positive benefits among vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the findings of the studies underline the relevance of tailoring programme components to populations, which may benefit more or less from traditional programme implementation models.*

Humanitarian challenges of protracted fragility and conflict-related crises and the more recent unprecedented migration and refugee movements around the globe underscore the need to break down the barriers between humanitarian and development work. Ongoing and new crises left an estimated 206.4 million people in 81 countries in need of international humanitarian assistance in 2018 (Development Initiatives, 2019). Over 65 million individuals were estimated to have been forcibly displaced worldwide in 2015 as a result of prosecution, conflict, generalised violence, or other human rights violations (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016). In fragile contexts and protracted crises, such as in Afghanistan and Somalia, responsive long-term systems are needed to reach affected vulnerable populations consistently. Acute and extended crises, such as in Syria, have contributed to migration flows, which also highlight the need for long-term solutions in countries of destination.

Social protection is increasingly considered as a policy response in contexts of fragility and displacement. In nonfragile contexts, extensive evidence demonstrates that social protection helps reduce poverty and inequality, enhances livelihoods, and has long-term positive impacts on human capital development (Bastagli et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2016; Handa et al., 2018; Hidrobo, Hoddinott, Kumar, & Olivier, 2018; United Nations Children's Fund, Eastern and Southern Africa Regional

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Office [UNICEF ESARO], 2015; World Bank, 2016a). As part of the commitments under Sustainable Development Goal 1, the global community has pledged to expand the coverage of social protection measures for all and to achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable by 2030. This expansion must include the scale-up of social protection in contexts of fragility and forced displacement to ensure no one is left behind. Concomitantly, development actors recognised the importance of social protection as a human right and, at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, committed, through the Grand Bargain, to ‘increase social protection programmes and strengthen national and local systems and coping mechanisms in order to build resilience in fragile contexts’ (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2016, p. 14).

While establishing effective social protection in situations of protracted instability and displaced populations is more complex, it is also coming to be viewed as an essential mechanism in supporting distressed populations. However, despite the increasing use of social protection in these settings, there is little rigorous research on what works, for whom, and why. For example, Doocy and Tappis (2016) carry out a systematic review of cash-based approaches in humanitarian and emergency settings with the primary objective of synthesising evidence of impacts on outcomes among individuals and households and a secondary objective of identifying programme factors that hinder and facilitate programme implementation. In the case of the first objective, among over 4,000 studies identified in a first search, only five rigorously measured the impacts of cash-based schemes, while 10 measured efficiency, and 108 measured operational components. Of the five studies identified, the majority assessed outcomes in household food security, poverty, and other economic areas, leaving gaps in terms of outcomes in human capital, child protection, and other social or psychological areas of well-being. The conclusion that there are geographical and sectoral gaps is shared by a review completed by the World Bank for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in 2016 and focused on scaling up cash transfers in humanitarian settings (World Bank, 2016b). An increased investment is required to fill these evidence gaps. Failing to expand the evidence base risks maintaining a disconnect between evidence and programming, hindering the provision of effective support to populations in need.

Significant challenges arise in conducting research in fragile contexts and among mobile and marginalised groups, but a few examples exist of ways ethical and rigorous research can be performed, often based on creative research designs to overcome practical obstacles and on technology to facilitate data collection safely and ethically. Aker, Boumnijel, McClelland, and Tierney (2016) compare the effects of the manual versus mobile delivery of unconditional cash transfers in response to a drought in Niger. Hidrobo, Hoddinott, Peterman, Margolies, and Moreira (2014) compare the effects of three types of support on Colombian refugees in Ecuador: cash, food vouchers, and food transfers. Lehmann and Masterson (2014) examine the effects of a one-off cash payment to support Syrian refugees living at high altitudes in Lebanon to support them in the winter months.

This special issue contributes by adding seven high-quality studies that raise substantially our understanding of the role of social protection in fragile contexts and in settings of forced displacement and migration. Together, these studies fill knowledge gaps, help support informed decision-making by policy-makers and practitioners, and demonstrate that impact evaluation and the study of social protection in challenging humanitarian settings is possible.

The seven studies fall under three broad themes: (a) comparisons of effectiveness across various delivery modalities; (b) evaluations and the implications of targeting choices, including universal reforms; and (c) the impacts of programmes targeted on refugees and refugee host communities. The studies cover a wide range of country and geographical locations, from West Africa (two studies, on Mali and Niger) to the Middle East (Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen) and Latin America (Ecuador) and combine primary and secondary data. Five of the seven studies may be classified as impact evaluations, representing a doubling of the number of impact evaluations examined by Doocy and Tappis (2016) in their systematic review. To overcome practical and logistical hurdles inherent in implementing research in fragile settings, the studies rely on a variety of quasi-experimental or micro-simulation methods, including matching, geographical regression discontinuity, and instrumental variable approaches. Only one study relies on a pure experimental method. The studies answer

questions not only about the effectiveness of interventions in diverse settings, but also address issues in programme design, policy, implementation, and evaluation.

The first set of studies asks what type of benefit or transfer is most effective at meeting programme objectives and at what associated cost: a long-standing debate in development and humanitarian settings (Gentilini, 2016). Aurino, Tranchant, Diallo, and Gelli (2019) compare the effects on education outcomes of emergency school feeding and of general food distribution among children in northern Mali during a period of political and economic turmoil and violent conflict. They find that, while school feeding led to increases in school enrolment and educational attainment, general food distribution led to declines in school attendance over a five-year period, primarily among boys. These differences are potentially accounted for by adjustments in child labour. School feeding is de facto conditional on school attendance and hence less compatible with child engagement in work. General food distribution, in contrast, resulted in greater labour supply among boys, particularly in high-intensity conflict areas.

Schwab (2019) compares the effects of cash transfers and the effects of food distribution among households in rural Yemen over the lean season during a period of tension that led to the current civil war. He explains that, in theory, the effects of cash transfers and of food distribution may differ because cash helps alleviate liquidity constraints that may drive down household investments, while food aid helps bulwark households against food price shocks, especially during crises. Schwab's findings indicate potential for both liquidity and price risk mechanisms, with both aid modalities producing modest impacts. However, cash transfer recipients invest relatively more in livestock (an activity with higher liquidity requirements), while food recipients increased production of higher-return crops.

Brück, Díaz Botía, Ferguson, Ouédraogo, and Ziegelhöfer (2019) study the differential effects of two types of food aid on child nutrition in Niger, a low-income country frequently experiencing violent conflict. Their findings suggest that food aid alone has no impact on child nutrition; however, food aid, paired with asset-based programming, produces positive impacts, suggesting that economically supportive, nutrition-focused programmes generate positive synergies or spillovers.

These three studies are significant because they appear to be the first studies on fragile settings to explore these specific combinations of outcome groups and programme modalities, such as cash transfers versus food aid or such as general food distribution versus school feeding. The findings of the studies highlight the importance of the consideration of the broad range of effects of social protection programmes within humanitarian responses and planning. Programme impacts on various outcome areas, such as education, nutrition, and productive investment, may differ depending on the design of a social protection response. The studies in this special issue may form the starting point for weighing more systematically the optimal composition of integrated social protection initiatives in confronting humanitarian emergencies.

The second set of studies addresses the implications of programme targeting choices, including the implications of universal programme delivery, a topic of substantial debate because of the often stringent associated budget constraints (Verme & Gigliarano, 2019). In rural Niger, Schnitzer (2019) is the first to explore and compare the performance of common humanitarian targeting methods, such as proxy-means tests, household economy analysis, and geographical and combined methods. Her results indicate that the targeting performance of the various methods differs between households that may be described as persistently poor and households that are transiently food insecure, that is, exposed to shocks that affect food security. The findings suggest that combinations of methodologies can be adopted based on programme-specific objectives.

Krishnan, Olivieri, and Ramadan (2019) examine Iraq's public distribution system and quantify the welfare impact of urban reform on the only universal non-contributory social transfer system in the world. Their results suggest that, since household ration consumption is inelastic, any one-shot reform will have meaningful adverse welfare impacts. Thus, any reform must include a functional compensation mechanism, particularly to maintain welfare levels of poor households. The trade-off associated with various targeting methodologies in diverse settings is an increasingly important theme

as conflicts and displacement occur among large populations at greater frequency. Krishnan et al. (2019) and Schnitzer (2019) add to the debate on targeting by explicitly considering changes in household welfare and recognising that poverty is dynamic, which has implications for reform and optimisation as programmes and policies mature (in the case of Iraq, through three decades of conflict and insecurity).

The third set of studies examines impacts of programmes targeted at refugees and host communities. De Hoop, Morey, and Seidenfeld (2019) analyse the short-term impact of the No Lost Generation cash transfer programme, which supports the school participation of displaced Syrian children in Lebanon. The study finds that the effects of the programme on school enrolment may have been limited because of supply-side capacity constraints (The Lebanese public school system incorporated vast numbers of Syrian children in a short time, and, as a result, many schools reached full capacity). However, the study documents substantial impacts on school attendance among children who enrolled in school and were benefiting from the cash transfer programme. The findings underline the potential of cash-based programmes to make a difference in the school participation and well-being of displaced children and the need to coordinate demand-side and supply-side interventions in settings of massive displacement.

Valli, Peterman, and Hidrobo (2019) explore the impact of transfers of cash, food, and food vouchers on social cohesion among Colombian refugees and poor Ecuadorians in urban areas of northern Ecuador. Their findings indicate that transfers contributed to the integration of Colombians in hosting communities through increases in personal agency, positive attitudes accepting diversity, confidence in institutions, and social participation. However, the transfers had no impact among the Ecuadorian population. The authors hypothesise that programme messaging around inclusiveness, interaction across nationalities during nutrition and health training sessions, and resource sharing may have contributed to the observed rise in social cohesion. The study is the first experimental analysis examining social cohesion in a refugee-hosting setting and contributes to the growing interest among policy-makers in understanding the mechanisms behind social cohesion outcomes.

Taken together, the studies in this special issue add to the evidence demonstrating that rigorous impact evaluation can be conducted in fragile and humanitarian settings. Although such research may pose major methodological, practical, and ethical challenges, there are large gains to be realised through greater investment in research (Puri, Aladysheva, Iversen, Ghorpade, & Brück, 2017). High-quality studies and evaluations are not the new norm in contexts of humanitarian crises, fragile settings, and forcibly displaced populations. However, if done well, they can be important tools for gathering sound evidence based on policy-making in social protection. Furthermore, these analyses provide evidence that implementation design choices, such as which population to target, what type of modality to transfer, or which messages are delivered with programmes, can make a substantial difference in the realisation of positive benefits among vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the findings of the studies in this special issue underline the relevance of tailoring programme components to populations, which may benefit more or less from traditional programme implementation models.

There remain substantial evidence gaps and outstanding questions of interest to international stakeholders (see Puri et al., 2017; Woodward, Griekspoor, Doocy, Spiegel, & Savage, 2018). For example, under what conditions and for which populations is a cash transfer strictly preferred over a transfer in kind? Which designs of shock-responsive social protection systems allow more flexible responses to (rapid onset) emergencies? Can humanitarian responses led by the international community be the starting point for building longer-term national social protection systems? Are conditionalities justified in fragile settings, and what role can light-touch messaging or nonpunitive measures play to raise the effectiveness of unconditional cash transfers in reaching desired outcomes? Answering these questions will require a significant commitment in investment and time by the research community and international actors. This special issue represents a step forward in

understanding how best to deliver essential social protection to poor and vulnerable populations with the ultimate goal of improving the future health and welfare of these people and saving lives.

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