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Last updated: 24/11/2021

European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

Social protection

Why is this important?

With more than 65 million people forcibly displaced, and 130 million relying on humanitarian aid, there is an urgent need for improved coherence between humanitarian and development actions, and closer cooperation to create long-term and sustainable responses which include livelihood opportunities for crisis-affected people.

Scaling up social protection systems has been identified as one of the core avenues to enhance the resilience of vulnerable populations.

Social protection may be broadly defined as a set of policies and actions that enhance the capacity of all people, but notably poor and vulnerable groups, to escape from poverty (or avoid falling into poverty), and better manage risks and shocks. In crisis or shock situations, social protection interventions are primarily a means to help meet immediate needs and reduce mortality and human suffering.

While building national social protection systems has traditionally fallen under the remit of development, the humanitarian community can play an important role in aligning with and complementing these efforts, where consistent with its principles. The increasing use of cash-based assistance in humanitarian responses fits well with the use of safety nets and a wider social protection approach, especially in urban settings.

There are three types of situations where linking social protection and humanitarian action can bridge the so-called "humanitarian-development divide":

- Extreme fragility and protracted crises: humanitarian actions can be used as a window of opportunity to trigger investment in the development of nascent safety nets. The longer-term aim in such a scenario is to progressively move chronic humanitarian caseloads into social protection systems.
- Managing disasters differently: as a component of government-driven frameworks for response to disasters and crises, social protection can contribute to capacity-building at individual, household, community and national levels - so that these actors can withstand the negative impact of shocks -, and reducing the need for separate humanitarian response.
- Forced displacement: social protection can become a cornerstone of any strategy to address - also often protracted - forced displacement, including that of IDPs and refugees.

How are we helping?

In recent years there have been many examples of complementarity between social protection interventions and the Commission's humanitarian response in countries like Ethiopia, with the creation of a scalable rural safety net for food-insecure people; or Türkiye with the Emergency Social Safety Net, a single-card assistance scheme designed empower up to 1.3 million refugees to cover their basic needs. In Lesotho and Malawi, the EU is working to strengthen the design of existing social protection systems to make them 'shock responsive', strengthening local capacity for an earlier response and reducing the need for external and humanitarian reaction. Social protection systems have also played an important role in the response to the 2016 El Niño crisis.

On 28 and 29 September 2017, the first International Conference on Social Protection took place in Brussels, organised by UNICEF and co-funded by the European Commission. The conference brought together practitioners from humanitarian and development institutions, including representatives from host governments, academia and civil society organisations. It examined ways in which social protection systems can contribute to effective crisis response in fragile and forced displacement contexts. To help operationalise the humanitarian-development continuum, it highlighted opportunities for humanitarian assistance either to build on existing social protection systems or to help create them