

**Humanitarian Cash Transfer:** the Brazil Country Office's  
experience in response to the COVID-19 crisis

UNICEF - CIEDS

## Technical Data Sheet

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### Local Coordination Team



## Context

A shock-responsive social protection system, in coordination with other sectors, plays a key role in helping children and their families to better prepare for and cope with emergency-derived stresses and shocks by increasing their capacity to access essential goods and services.

Although Brazil has a robust inter-federal social protection system and an efficiently targeted national cash transfer program benefiting mainly vulnerable families with children, the socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed gaps in the system's response to shocks.

The abrupt and relevant reduction in household income, the increase in food insecurity among the most vulnerable Brazilian families, and further on, the emergency<sup>1</sup> aid's progressive depletion until its termination were promptly reflected in the high demand for the services of the Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS), the entry point to basic social protection in the **Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS)**.

**SUAS >>** The Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) is the management model used in Brazil that organizes the operationalization of the National Policy of Social Assistance (PNAS) which is part of the Social Security System. SUAS was introduced by the Federal Constitution of 1988, with its guidelines based on decentralization, popular participation, State accountability, and household centrality.

► Its attributions are social protection, social assistance surveillance, defence of rights, preventing social risks incidence, regardless of one's previous tax contribution, in situations of social vulnerability resulting from poverty, deprivation, and weakening of affective bonds.

A clear example of the increased demand for social protection was the search for the Occasional Benefits ("Benefícios Eventuais" in Portuguese - BEs), mechanisms foreseen in the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS) that allow immediate responses to support vulnerable families in emergencies and are offered by the municipal entity.

### More about Occasional Benefits

► Occasional Benefits are provisions of the Social Assistance Policy, aimed at protecting individuals and families coping with social vulnerability of an occasional nature. They have temporary complexion, providing shelter and familiarity against lack of provisions and immediate necessities due to birth, death, situations of temporary vulnerability, and public calamities. They are under the responsibility of the municipal government, regulated by the Social Assistance Councils, through previously defined criteria and deadlines<sup>2</sup>.

According to a survey conducted by UNICEF and the National Collegiate of Municipal Social Assistance Managers (CONGEMAS) in 2020 with municipal social assistance managers<sup>3</sup>, Occasional Benefits were the services most demanded by the population at CRAS during the pandemic.

Although provided for in the LOAS and one of the main response mechanisms of SUAS in an emergency context, it is rare for the BEs to rely on recurrent funding or even technical assistance from the Federal Government or the states. Therefore, it is common for each municipality to fund and execute the BEs according to broad guidelines, which results in the application, in many cases, of particular criteria and delivery mechanisms. Thus, the most effective results are not always achieved, especially in emergency situations. A consequence is the creation of parallel programs to SUAS from scratch, which generally demands much more effort, and not always with the same results.

1 Benefit created by the federal government to guarantee a minimum income to Brazilians in a vulnerable situation, resulting from economic activities affected by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

2 As defined by Article 22 of Law No. 8.742, of December 7, 1993, Organic Law of Social Assistance - LOAS, as amended by Law No. 12.435, of July 6, 2011.

3 CONGEMAS; UNICEF. Guidelines and General Guidelines for the Preparation of CRAS Social Assistance Reference Centers in Contexts of Disasters and Emergencies. 2020.

But the challenges of the Brazilian social protection in response to shocks go beyond. It is common for municipalities and states to have little understanding of the role that Social Assistance can play in emergency contexts. There are also few actions dedicated to preparedness in such situations, which was as well the case in the COVID-19 emergency, limiting the possibility of consistent SUAS responses, despite the increased demand for social assistance services during the pandemic.

In response to the above context, UNICEF designed a strategy to support municipalities in improving shock responsiveness, a key feature for both the pandemic context and future emergencies. In this strategy, the emergency cash transfer played an essential part as it was followed by a series of technical support initiatives aiming to strengthen the municipalities' social protection systems, in partnership with the Integrated Center for Studies and Programs in Sustainable Development (CIEDS).

This document presents details of the Humanitarian Cash Transfer pilot, in 13 municipalities and its effects in contributing to more responsive municipal social protection systems to shocks.

## The humanitarian cash transfer pilot program

The challenging situation triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, with severe impacts on food security of vulnerable families in Brazil, guided the design of a pilot cash transfer program. Seeking sustainable results, UNICEF Brazil partnered with state and municipal social assistance secretariats.

Based on the existing provision of Occasional Benefits (BE) as a response to disasters in the SUAS, UNICEF Brazil sought to implement the humanitarian cash transfer pilot similarly to a BE. Therefore, it designed workflows and tools in collaboration with states and municipalities, additionally targeting the cash transfer to vulnerable families already monitored by the most relevant basic protection service in social assistance, the **PAIF**.

**PAIF >>** Programme for Integral Attention to the Family (PAIF) is offered by CRAS to families in situations of social vulnerability. Its central objective is to support families in accessing rights and preventing the breakdown of family ties, as well as violations and social risks within household relationships.

Throughout the implementation of HCT pilot, the UNICEF team and its partner CIEDS would take the opportunity to initiate an analysis of the occasional benefits situation at the cities participating in the pilot. Its purpose was to identify ways to strengthen the BEs as integrated responses to emergencies, paving the way for a more shock-responsive social protection system.

Following UNICEF Brazil's action plan in response to the pandemic, the pilot prioritized municipalities in the North and Northeast regions, as well as vulnerable urban territories that had the most unfavorable socioeconomic indicators and high mortality rates due to COVID-19.

## Main objectives



Alleviating food insecurity as a result of the pandemic COVID-19 pandemic in the selected vulnerable municipalities.



Fostering ways to implement direct transfers at the local level via CRAS.



Fostering preventive and responsive public policies to shocks, with a focus on the eventual benefit as the response mechanism.

## Advantages of cash transfer

Cash transfer in emergency context is a modality of direct transfer of monetary resources to the beneficiary in crisis scenarios, where access to income is threatened or compromised. Cash transfers have relevant advantages such as greater autonomy in the use of resources, supporting local economies, more agile and flexible responses and financial inclusion.



## KEY FIGURES



**4016**  
families



**13** municipalities



More than  
**16 thousand**  
people<sup>4</sup>



**3** states



**R\$ 803.200,00**  
in Humanitarian  
cash transfers



**23** Social Assistance  
Reference Center  
(CRAS)

<sup>4</sup> Estimate based on the average number of people per family in the pilot program's monitoring and evaluation questionnaire

## MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- Cash transfer of R\$ 200.00\*.
- Unconditional
- Mixed system: taking advantage of SUAS' capillarity and contracting a financial services provider
- Transfer mechanism: SODEXO card suitable for purchasing food and essential items in accredited establishments
- Target families in the PAIF, offered via the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), in June of 2021.

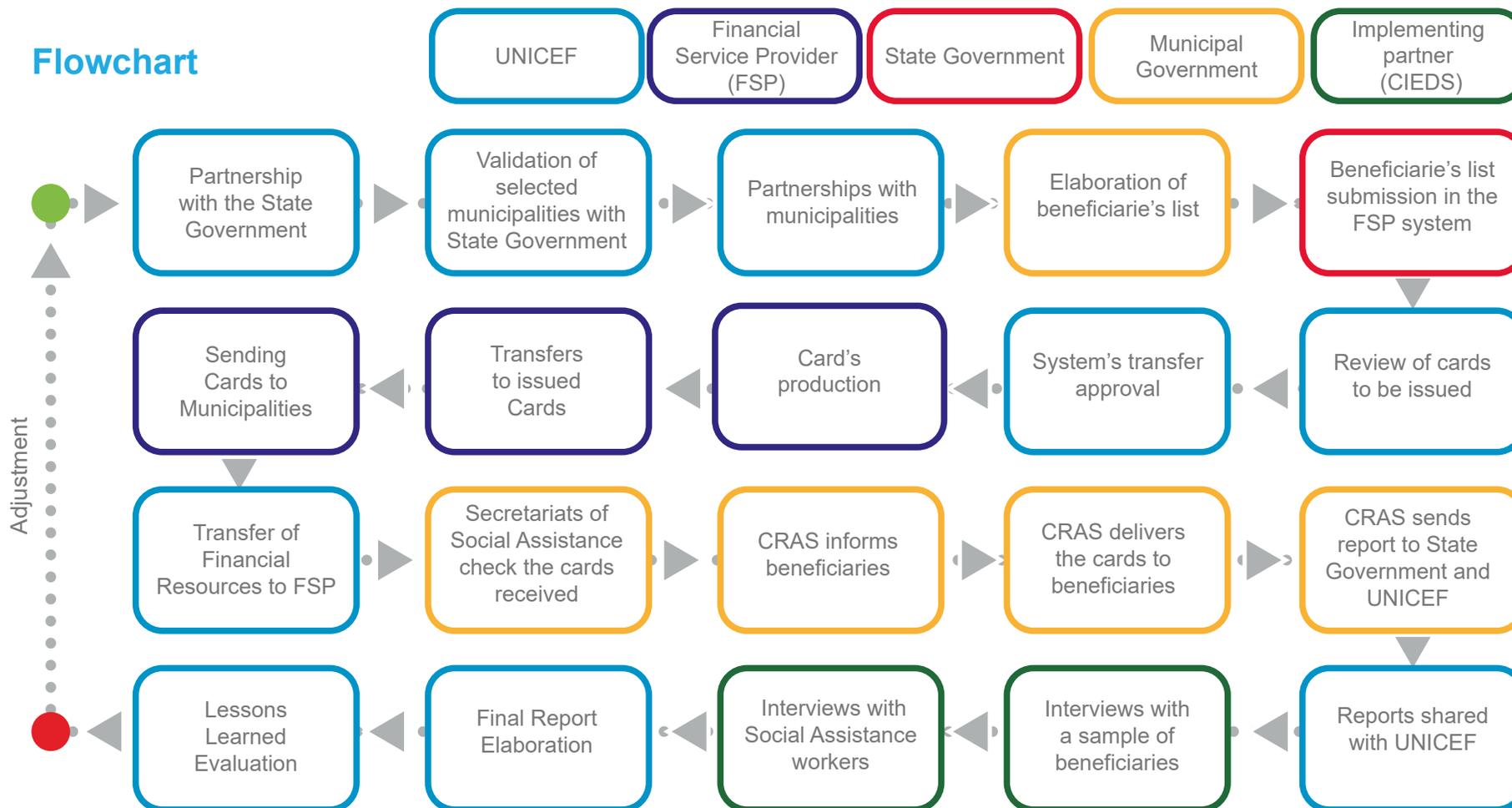


Model of the card distributed to the program's beneficiaries

## Behind the value offered

The value was meant for supplementing the basic needs of the most vulnerable families and was similar to other cash transfers practiced by civil society organizations around the country. It is worth noting that the definition of the value also considered a previous data collection of food basket's price that included food and essential items, with an average of R\$150.00, varying between R\$70.00 and R\$250.00 (fluctuation in value is location-dependent).

## How the actors were involved



## The strategic partnership with states and municipalities in detail

The social assistance **states' secretariats** of Pernambuco and Maranhão were responsible for:

- Selecting the six contemplated municipalities in each state;
- Articulating with the municipal social assistance secretariats;
- Supporting the design of workflows and operational tools;
- Reviewing beneficiary data and submitting requests on the financial service provider's information system (SODEXO);
- Overseeing the deliveries by CRAS.

In Rio de Janeiro, the **Municipal Secretariat of Social Assistance (SMAS)** assumed the same responsibilities with the two selected territories: Maré and Pavuna.

The **municipal** social assistance **secretariats** were responsible for:

- Articulating with CRAS of the municipality;
- Support in the design of workflows and operational tools;
- Review beneficiary data and send it to the state social assistance secretariat;
- Organize the deliveries by CRAS.

CRAS was responsible for:

- Preparing lists with each benefited family monitored by the PAIF in June 2021, with the data of their responsible contact and send them to the municipal secretariat of social assistance;
- Carrying out communication with the families monitored by the PAIF who are contemplated to receive the benefit;
- Supporting the design of workflows and operational tools;
- Heading out Cards and information about Card use and healthy eating tips.

### The importance of CRAS

The municipal Social Assistance Reference Centers (CRAS) were fundamental for implementing the program in the municipalities, due to their capillarity and territory presence. When the cards were handed out in CRAS, the responsible contact for each family indicated whether they would like to participate in a monitoring and evaluation survey of the pilot, which also sought to broaden their understanding of these families' realities.



Model of the pamphlet distributed to the program's beneficiaries.

## Results

As part of the pilot's monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, a set of actions was carried out and two different collection instruments were applied, as listed below:

- Lists of beneficiaries review;
- Review of issued and delivered cards in the municipalities;
- Request for signature upon Card receipt;
- Signatures' list checking and delivered Cards report;
- Undelivered Cards review;
- Undelivered Cards cancellation;
- Partnership with the state ombudsman in Pernambuco and Maranhão;
- Questionnaire with beneficiaries conducted by CIEDS;
- Interview with SUAS workers conducted by CIEDS (More details below).

### Questionnaire with beneficiaries

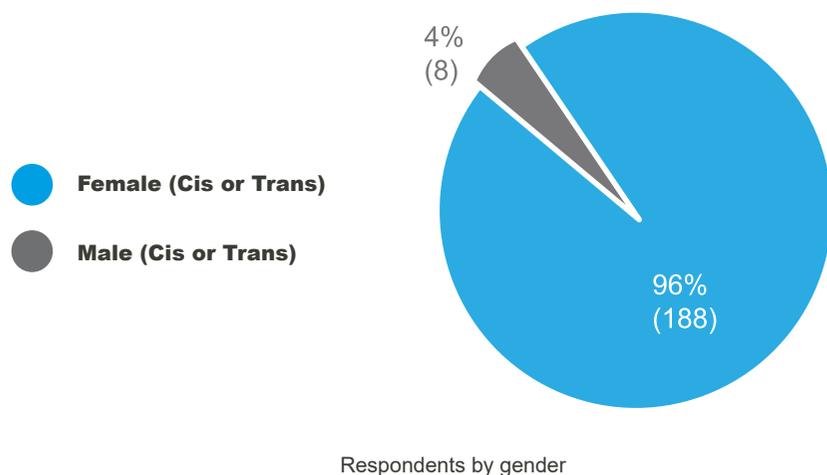
- Preferably face-to-face Proportionate stratified random sampling, 196 questionnaires applied

### Interview with SUAS workers

- The interviewees were appointed by the cities management team based on the criterion of having participated in the pilot 25 semi-structured interviews

## Beneficiary families

According to the survey, the Humanitarian Cash Transfer mostly reached women, who reside in an urban area\* and live in a house with, on average, four residents, two adults, and two children or teenagers. The predominance of women among the beneficiaries (96%) is aligned with the dynamics of other cash transfer programs, such as Auxílio Brasil (former Bolsa Família)<sup>5</sup>.



\*It should be noted that most of the beneficiaries lived in the territories of Maré and Pavuna, urban areas of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>5</sup> In December 2021 the Bolsa Família Program was replaced by the Auxilio Brasil program." <https://in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/lei-n-14.284-de-29-de-dezembro-de-2021-370918498> <https://www.in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/decreto-n-10.852-de-8-de-novembro-de-2021-357706502>



### *Kaline Pessoa/RJ*

*"I go right away to the supermarket to buy rice, beans, milk, and diapers", says the Paraíba-born Kaline Pessoa, upon receiving the Food Card in December 2021.*

*Kaline has lived for 20 years in Maré, a favela in Rio de Janeiro's northern zone. At 32, she's the mother of 3 children, which are supported by her alone.*

*"I work as a manicure, I do housekeeping, but in the pandemic I was unemployed. I received some food baskets and later I got the Bolsa Família. This aid now comes from heaven. It's going to help me a lot.*

*For 2022, Kaline hopes to get her baby a place at the daycare to resume looking for a job: "And then we'll be able to have health and prosperity."*

## Social and Food Security Situation

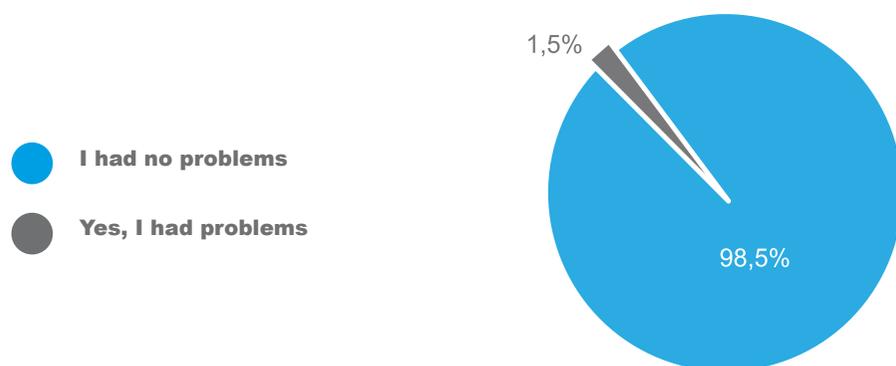
- ▶ Children or adolescents resided in **93%** of the reached households.
- ▶ **87%** of the respondents pointed out that they had run out of money to buy food in the last three months<sup>6</sup>.
- ▶ **73%** reported being a beneficiary of the (former bolsa familia) Auxílio Brasil.

The results suggest **the program design was able to reach people in situations of social vulnerability and food insecurity<sup>6</sup>, high incidence of children and adolescents.**

## Card utilization

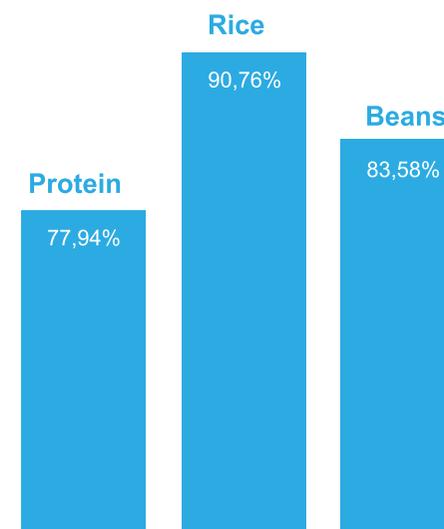
There were no major difficulties reported by the beneficiaries regarding the use of the card.

Did you have any problems using the Card?



Regarding the use of resources, the results suggest the objective of alleviating food insecurity situations was achieved. The **importance attributed to the Card by the surveyed beneficiaries was** evident, and they evaluated it very positively, with an overall average rating of **4.92**, on a scale of 1 to 5 as a result.

When asked which products were bought with the money received, a traditionally Brazilian combination was among the three items with the most individual responses: **rice, beans, and protein<sup>7</sup>**, as shown in the graph:



Followed by Milk (74.87%) Eggs (68.71%), Hygiene material (64.1%), and fruits (62.56 %). The results indicate that the value of the Card was used to buy foods that are in accordance with the healthy eating tips presented in the materials prepared by UNICEF.

<sup>6</sup> The interviews were conducted between the months of January and April 2022. Therefore, "last three months" referred to intervals between October/21 and February/22

<sup>7</sup> Food considered as proteins in the research: chicken, beef, goat, pork, ostrich, among others.

## Tamires Santiago/RJ

*Born in Maré, Tamires Santiago raises her four children in the community, in the northern part of Rio de Janeiro.*

*"2021 was a very difficult year. The children at home, no school... Work is over..."*

*Tamires worked as a kitchen helper, but the restaurant closed its doors. Unemployed and the sole provider of the family, Tamires tries to survive by selling candy. She received some support in the community, but sometimes it is difficult to feed the children.*

*"When I had nothing, this aid appeared. I will buy rice, beans, milk, and diapers."*



## Listening to CRAS professionals

### Who are they?

Among the professionals interviewed, there was a predominance of social workers.

- Most believe the information provided by UNICEF about the program design was easy to understand.

**“UNICEF coordination was fundamental, always accessible from the beginning to the end of the Card delivery process, always answering our doubts and guiding us in the best possible way.”**

*Professional from Governador Edison Lobão (MA)*

- All the people interviewed believe that the program has been successful in reaching households in food insecurity situation.

**“The improvement of families that are in social vulnerability. In these hard times, they had met the opportunity to buy groceries that met their immediate needs.”**

*Professional from Governador Edison Lobão (MA)*

- All the people interviewed pointed to the effectiveness of the Card as a means of cash transfer.

**“In a way (the cash transfer) positively affects the local economy, because like it or not, it's a working capital for our city and it immediately satisfied the basic needs of the beneficiaries who were contemplated, not to mention that it stimulated them to have a healthy diet.”**

*Professional from Sítio Novo (MA)*

**“Since the Card is for private and non-transferable use, I think it was well articulated for the beneficiaries' use”.**

*Professional from Calumbi (PE)*

## Challenges and strategies to address them

Locating beneficiaries contemplated with the Cards:

- 16% of the beneficiaries lived in rural areas, often
- difficult to access, including indigenous territories and quilombolas<sup>8</sup>.

## Outdated Registries

- Outdated registries as the main obstacle, since, due to the pandemic, many families had changed address or city.

**“Then, because of the pandemic, many of these families (...) had outdated registries, others had even migrated to other places, changed their addresses, so there was a bit of difficulty because of the pandemic”.**

*Professional from Porto Franco (MA)*

**“The major takeaway is the essential importance of having the social assistance record, which is a totally technical work tool in which we have all the family documents, stored, scheduled, (...) we have a backup of the family context.”.**

*Professional from Exu (PE)*

- In some small municipalities, the restriction of establishments that accepted the the card was a barrier, according to CRAS professionals interviewed.

<sup>8</sup> In Brazil, quilombolas are ethnic-racial groups, according to self-determined criteria, with their own historical trajectory, with specific territorial relations, with a presumed black ancestry related to the resistance to the historical oppression suffered

*Having updated registries is essential for the Secretariats of Assistance to make well-founded social-assistance diagnoses, mapping and identifying some of the main particularities and weaknesses of the territory. This action is fundamental to the development of public policies for risk mitigation and prevention, which will be the object of the System straightening initiatives.*

## Perceived Effects

Considering the challenges above-mentioned, the program has served as an incentive, positively influencing the actions of the municipalities to update social assistance records. Also, social assistance workers reported having joined efforts with the health secretariats and community leaders of their respective municipalities to locate and communicate with the beneficiaries, an important indicator of **intersectoral action**.

The **incentive to intersectoral action**, especially in public policies involving disasters and calamities, is a relevant element identified in the evaluation of the pilot, given the "usual" fragmentation of actions and attributions municipal public entities<sup>9</sup>.

The HCT experience revealed lasting effects, especially in strengthening the social assistance system and its relations with the population of the municipalities included in the pilot. Among the effects are:

- Increased closeness between the beneficiary population (and, potentially, between other people who learned about the program) and CRAS' services, especially PAIF. The Cards distribution motivated people's engagement and interest about other Social Assistance services.
- Strengthening intersectoral relations between municipal Social Assistance and Health Secretariats, primarily through the processes of active search for beneficiaries. Cases of outdated or insufficient records available to CRAS made it difficult to contact beneficiaries. Such cases were circumvented, solved among other strategies, through partnerships established between these two sectors, as demonstrated in the experiences of Imperatriz, São João do Paraíso, and especially in Rio de Janeiro.

**"It strengthened and also awakened the population's interest in getting to know the services that are offered at CRAS, and not only PAIF, but the other services provided here. And it was a pull factor for users to seek out CRAS."**

*Professional from Araripina (PE)*

**"As families went out their way with the certainty that they were going to have the money to purchase food and essential items and that they were going to be able to provide for their family for that certain week or certain month, with food on their table their needs were met, and it generated a positive impact on the families' food security."**

*Professional from Montes Altos (MA)*

**"In the municipality, we had more demand for service here at CRAS, because it was something that resonated very positively in the community."**

*Professional from Exu (PE)*

- Deepening relations between states and municipalities. As indicated in the official document of Guidelines for the Action of Social Assistance Policy in Contexts of Social Assistance Emergencies<sup>10</sup>, the states play a fundamental role in providing information, resources, and action structures to the municipalities in contexts of

9 DUTRA, Adriana. (2021). Gestão de Desastres e Serviço Social: O trabalho de assistentes sociais junto aos órgãos municipais de proteção e defesa civil. Curitiba: Appris Editora.

10 Ministry of Citizenship. Diretrizes para a Atuação da Política de Assistência Social em Contextos de Emergência Socioassistencial. 2021.

emergencies and calamities. Thus, with a greater exchange of information between the federative entities, institutional cooperation is facilitated.

**“The implementation of the program was positive because it brought the municipality and the state closer together. We were able to talk about these benefits in a positive way”**

*Professional from Cedro (PE)*

- Increased awareness of the need to update CRAS registries and records. As reported by the professionals, an eventual second delivery of Cards would be easier to implement due to the greater robustness of the records. The same would apply to the distribution of other benefits - indicating, therefore, a result of institutional strengthening and increased capacity for action in the municipalities.

**“The major takeaway is the essential importance of having the social assistance record, which is a totally technical work tool in which we have all the family documents, stored, scheduled, (...) we have a backup of the family context.”**

*Professional from Exu (PE)*

## Lessons Learned

The experience with the Card has brought important reflections and lessons learned:

- It has encouraged CRAS teams to keep their data updated;
- It has encouraged CRAS teams to strengthen the articulation process with other policies, such as health and education;
- It brought vulnerable families closer to the services offered by the CRAS.

The cash transfer mechanism was well received by both workers and beneficiaries, who claimed that the benefit was welcome at a time of extreme need, alleviating food insecurity and addressing other deprivations of rights that aggravate social vulnerabilities.

Thus, the perceived effects beckon positively for direct cash transfer as a modality of occasional benefit, as well as for the occasional benefit to be improved in municipalities.

## Next steps for the system's strengthening strategy in response to shocks

The pilot of the humanitarian cash transfer program also served to pave the way for the implementation of a complementary initiative: "Strengthening Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems" in collaboration with the municipalities. A tool to evaluate the shock responsiveness of the social assistance will be elaborated, which will serve as a guide for the expansion of this social assistance function in the municipalities. In addition, protocols to support the response in emergencies will be developed, which in the future may be implemented by other Brazilian municipalities.



SUPPORTS

