

Preparing social protection systems for shock response

A case study of UNICEF's experiences in Armenia

About this Document

This is one of two case studies documenting experiences and lessons learned from UNICEF's work preparing national social protection systems for shock response through cash transfers in the Europe and Central Asia Region (ECAR). This case study documents UNICEF's experiences in Armenia. A second case study focuses on experiences in Tajikistan.

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Acronyms

CO	Country Office
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CWG	Cash Working Group
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
ECAR	Europe and Central Asia Region
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MEB	Minimum Expenditure Basket
MES	Ministry of Emergency Situations
MIS	Management Information System
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
NK	Nagorno Karabakh
PCA	Programme Cooperation Agreement
RCA	Red Cross Armenia
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SRSP	Shock Responsive Social Protection
TOSS	Territorial Offices of Social Services
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VAS	Vulnerability Assessment System
WFP	World Food Programme

Introduction

SOCIAL PROTECTION IN EMERGENCIES

Social protection is a promising solution to bridge the humanitarian-development divide. Shocks and disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, driven by factors including environmental degradation and climate change, and humanitarian crises are becoming more protracted. New ways of working are required to efficiently and effectively prepare for, and respond to, shocks. Several factors support social protection's role in responding to emergencies. Social protection helps households to manage risk and can build the resilience of households that are vulnerable to disasters, preventing a fall into, or further into, poverty. There are also commonalities in the way that emergency assistance and social protection programmes are designed and implemented, with cash transfers an increasingly common feature of both national social protection systems and humanitarian responses of international actors. Thus, social protection, if designed to be 'shock responsive', can complement and support other elements of national disaster response systems. National governments and their partners are interested in exploring how to leverage social protection programmes or their underlying institutions and systems to meet needs of those affected by such shocks - as well as how humanitarian assistance provided through the international community can be linked with these national systems for a more rapid, cost effective, inclusive and harmonised response. The arrival of COVID-19 has seen this interest peak further, with 195 countries/territories having planned or introduced social protection measures in response to the pandemic as of June 2020. Social assistance accounts for 60 percent of these measures and over 50 percent are cash-based transfers.¹

In UNICEF, shock responsive social protection (SRSP) is defined as *"the ability of the social protection system to anticipate shocks to maintain its regular programme/s, to scale up and/or flex to accommodate new populations and needs as a result of the shocks, and to contribute to resilience building of individuals, households, communities and systems against future shocks"*.² Social protection can be adapted to better meet needs in emergencies, or scaled up to meet new needs, in various ways, including through design tweaks, vertical or

horizontal expansion³ of existing programmes, the introduction of new programmes, or the use of various elements of the social protection operational system by actors in or outside government for delivery of emergency assistance.

SRSP approaches are relevant to governments in the Europe and Central Asia region, where natural disasters, as well as displacements due to political conflicts, are commonplace, and where national social protection programmes are relatively well established, providing regular cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households in normal times. In the right context SRSP approaches offer potential to enhance resilience to disasters, improve response times, reduce costs of delivering emergency assistance, reduce duplications and gaps, and improve national capacities to manage disasters.⁴ At the same time, as with any programme approach, there will be challenges to address. There is a growing evidence base on the importance of preparedness investments for efficient and effective emergency response and emerging global experience in the last five years highlights that this is similarly important in SRSP. UNICEF is committed to improving emergency preparedness for disaster response and to supporting development of SRSP in countries vulnerable to shocks.

ARMENIA CONTEXT AND THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

Armenia is located in a high-risk zone for natural hazards. The World Bank classifies Armenia as among the world's 60 most hazard-prone countries. The country is susceptible to strong earthquakes, and is also vulnerable to weather-related shocks, which are growing in frequency and intensity on account of climate change. A third of the territory is vulnerable to floods and mudflows. Harsh winters including hail and frosts are another recurring shock bringing damage to livelihoods. This is a factor contributing to high poverty rates, with 26.4 percent of the population living under the poverty line in 2019. Larger households with children are among the worst affected – households with three or more children have poverty rates of 45.8 percent. Developing greater resilience to such hazards is a

1 Gentilini et al. (2020) *Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures "Living paper"* version 11 (June 12, 2020)

2 UNICEF Programme Guidance on strengthening Shock Responsive Social Protection Systems (2019) <https://www.unicef.org/documents/programme-guidance-strengthening-shock-responsive-social-protection-systems>

3 Vertical expansion - topping up benefits of existing programme beneficiaries. Horizontal expansion - temporary inclusion of new disaster-affected households into a social protection programme, by either extending geographical coverage, enrolling more eligible households in existing areas, or altering the enrolment criteria.

4 For example, as demonstrated in the evaluations of UNICEF's cash assistance in Nepal and WFP's emergency social safety net in Turkey, and in the review of UNICEF and WFP's programmes in the Philippines.

national priority, steered by the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction and the law on disaster management. In addition, Armenia remains heavily affected by the escalation of the conflict in and around Nagorno Karabakh. Escalation of tensions and active conflict in 2016 and again in 2020, resulting in a full-fledged war, has contributed to cross-border displacement of thousands of ethnic Armenians, many of whom are struggling to meet their basic needs.

The government of Armenia has a well-developed social protection system, comprising a range of cash-based social assistance programmes. Social assistance provision is the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), which oversees implementation of schemes through the Territorial Offices of Social Services (TOSS) and Social Security Service (SSS). The scheme with greatest coverage is the Family Living Standards Enhancement Benefit, which began in 1999 and comprises three components: i) the Family Benefit; ii) Social Benefit and iii) Quarterly Emergency Assistance, which together reached an estimated 13 percent of the population in 2019. The Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES) is responsible for coordination of disaster risk management (DRM) activities including emergency assistance, with support of the cross ministerial Emergency Commission, Red Cross Armenia (RCA) and where needed, the international community. Emergency assistance for disasters is still predominantly given 'in kind'.

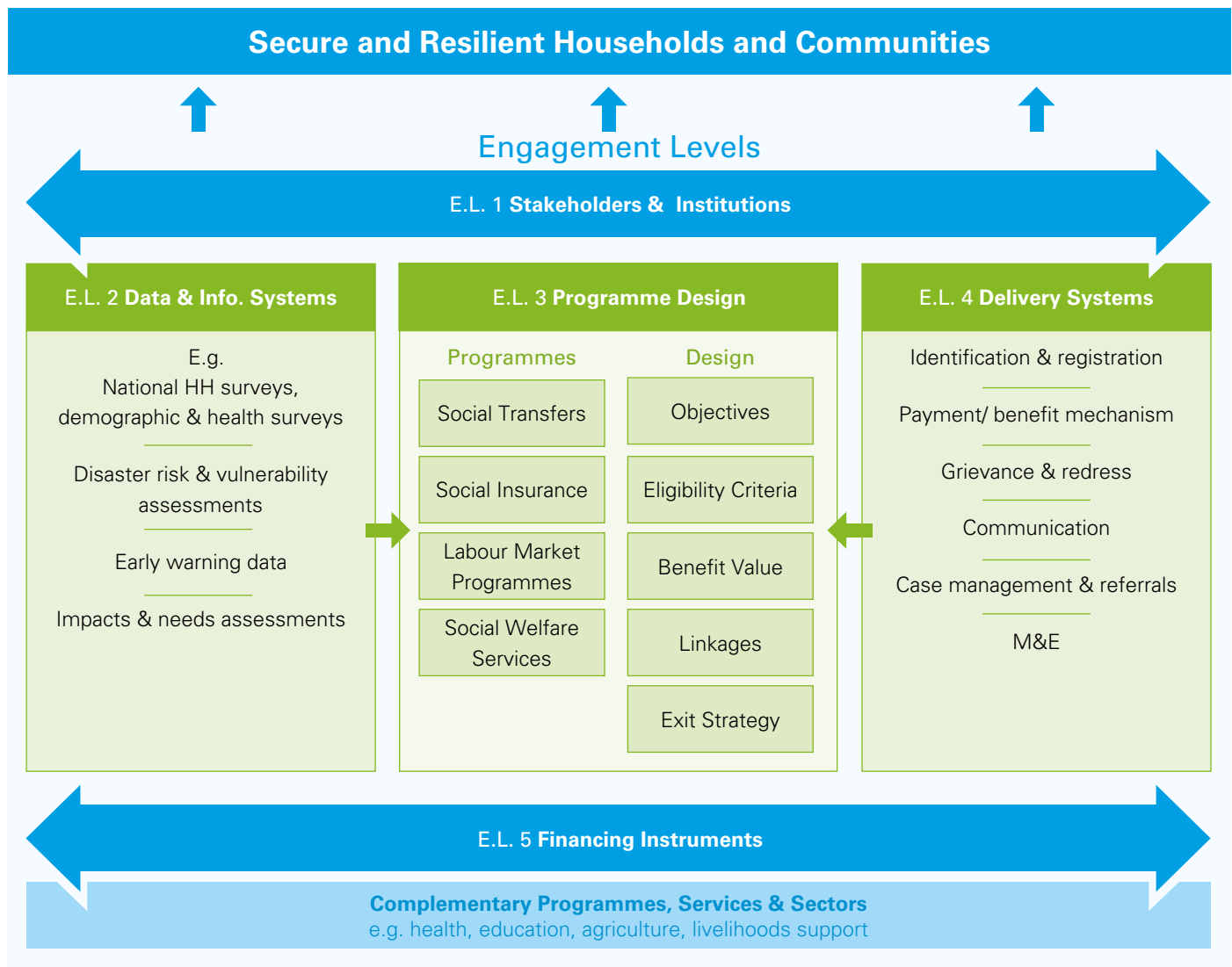
Cash assistance was, however, successfully implemented by various partners including RCA and agencies responding to displacement in the 2016 NK conflict. In 2015 in Armavir there was a small cash support provided by the government, through the social protection system, to households whose livelihoods were badly affected by severe hail.

In this context, UNICEF was interested in working with government to explore how the social protection system could be used, strengthened and adapted to better support needs of households that are vulnerable to shocks. In 2015 the CO had already commissioned two studies examining the social protection system from a DRR perspective, which highlighted the importance of social protection measures to strengthen household resilience to disasters, and were interested to explore the entry points for these and other shocks such as conflict. In 2017 UNICEF's Armenia country office led an assessment of the "readiness" of the country's social protection system for shock response. This examined the strengths and weaknesses across all building blocks (Figure 1) of the national social protection system, as well as current policy and practice in the DRM system, to inform the feasibility of and entry points for SRSP in the country. This was part of a broader regional initiative supported by the ECA regional office to identify opportunities and strengthen preparedness for emergency response through national systems.⁵



⁵ The UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia developed an assessment tool which was piloted in Tajikistan and Armenia. Feasibility assessments were conducted in an additional five countries in the region: Serbia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Georgia.

FIGURE 1: Building blocks of a social protection system⁶



The SRSP feasibility assessment in Armenia

The assessment examined the state of play, capacities, strengths and weaknesses of each of the components, or building blocks, of the social protection and DRM systems in the country, to reach conclusions on possible entry points and barriers to SRSP within the policy and regulatory environment, programmes, delivery systems, institutions and financing, and considerations for coordinating any SRSP mechanism with the DRM system. The assessment enabled the UN country team to arrive at a common understanding of the opportunities and constraints for continuing regular assistance and options and

next steps for scaling up to address wider needs through the social protection system at times of disaster.

KEY FINDINGS

The assessment concluded that the Family Benefit programme, and its underlying operational systems and processes, offered the greatest opportunity for responding to the needs of populations affected by disasters. The Family Benefit targets those families with children under 18 that are identified as being poor under the

⁶ EUD (2019) Social Protection Across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus

Vulnerability Assessment System (VAS). It provides two entry points for shock response: i) a ready channel through which to reach the programme's existing beneficiaries, considered some of the most vulnerable to the effects of shocks, with cash supplements to cover emergency needs; and ii) potential to reach additional emergency-affected households through the existing Quarterly Emergency Assistance cash component (beginning with those already identified through the VAS and potentially identifying others through specific ex-post registration). Constraining factors include the complexity of the targeting method employed under VAS, which is prone to inclusion and

exclusion errors; bottlenecks in administrative processes for registration and enrolment due to both this bureaucracy and low administrative capacity (registration remains paper-based and several of the verification checks with other civil registers must be carried out manually, while for those that are automated the data repositories are not integrated); and limited coordination between social protection and DRM sectors. The enabling and constraining factors identified are set out in Figure 2. The analysis generated a series of recommended actions for UNICEF and the government, to make progress in overcoming these constraints.

FIGURE 2: The Family Benefit as entry point for SRSP – enabling and constraining factors

Entry points	Enabling factors	Constraining factors
Temporary 'top up' cash grants to Family Benefit beneficiaries in areas affected by disaster ('vertical expansion')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Family Benefit is relatively well established with existing, robust systems and processes. The programme design already allows for transfer 'top ups', to account for higher vulnerability levels, and one component of the programme is already specifically designed to meet temporary emergency needs. MoLSA open to the idea of shock response through the Family Benefit and such temporary top-ups during shocks have been provided before through Government Decree. Tentative interest by MES. Clear overlap between Family Benefit beneficiaries and some of those vulnerable to impacts of disasters. Creates little additional work for those involved in programme implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government lacks experience or expertise in humanitarian cash programmes. No SOPs or regulations defined. Not clear whether the delivery systems would be resilient in the face of large-scale disaster disruption. Social protection is considered separate to emergency response and there is limited coordination between these different government departments. Those responsible for leading the management of emergency response may see this as an overstepping of mandate. Would require additional financing to the Family Benefit budget. Requires strong communication to communities, to avoid confusion and tensions. Would still need another programme option to reach those affected by shocks but who are not Family Benefit beneficiaries.
Temporary support to additional, disaster affected households outside the social protection system by making use of the underlying social protection institutions and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social protection systems and processes are relatively well established and robust. Reaching additional households not enrolled in the Family Benefit could be achieved through either i) setting a second, reduced vulnerability threshold in the VAS, to determine eligibility for temporary support during emergency times; or ii) a rapid registration process, to quickly assess additional vulnerable households not yet enrolled. This could be according to criteria that are relevant to an emergency, and involve relaxation of the usual verification requirements (home visit, documentation etc). 	<p>Same challenges as above, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Option i) would have greater benefit if there was higher coverage of the population by the VAS. Without a large pre-existing database of households to draw from, this would still need to rely on new applications. Option ii) would increase the workload of TOSS staff and additional capacity would have to be built. It may create difficulties if cases are identified that fit the eligibility criteria for the long-term Family Benefit programme but the national budget cannot support them longer term. Any temporary enrolment requires strong communication to avoid such confusion and social tensions.

Finally, while a cash response through social protection was considered feasible and appropriate, the analysis also highlighted the importance of UNICEF working with humanitarian partners (UN, Red Cross and NGO actors) to prepare for an internationally led cash response in the event of a large scale emergency requiring cluster activation.

EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS FROM THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Rather than provide an exhaustive analysis of every social protection scheme available in Armenia, the assessment process supported the country social protection and DRR team to identify the schemes likely to offer the greatest potential for SRSP, for more detailed programme analysis. The assessment approach enabled the country team to build a rapid

understanding of key entry points and barriers. It presented clear and tangible options for how SRSP could be achieved and allowed for comparison of the pros and cons of different options. For those offering good potential, it helped to guide analysis on some of the key next steps to address constraints and move forward with the options proposed. It also identified roles for actors working in DRM and how they could contribute.

The inclusive process sought engagement of key national counterparts, across both social protection and DRM sectors, from the outset. This raised awareness and understanding of SRSP and the importance of preparedness, opening space for further dialogue and action planning. UNICEF's partnerships and strong working relationships with both social protection and DRM actors, at national and sub-national levels, helped considerably to generate the cooperation needed from all stakeholders.

The journey since then

This section documents the activities of the government and UNICEF since then to move forward with SRSP in Armenia, and experiences from the COVID-19 and Nagorno Karabakh responses. Figure 3 provides a timeline of key milestones.

INTERNAL MOBILISATION

The feasibility assessment process was finalised in late 2017 and proposed a series of actions for UNICEF, the government and others in order to move forward with SRSP. Senior management in the country office agreed that this should be a priority area of engagement for going forward. UNICEF then updated its rolling workplan for 2018 and 2019-2020 with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to include a focus on SRSP and cash transfer planning. This provided the grounding for UNICEF to work on this area. The country office received financial resources from the UNICEF regional office for financing the needed activities.

DISSEMINATION, AWARENESS RAISING AND ENGAGEMENT

UNICEF had to seek the buy in and engagement from decision makers within central government as well as development partners, building understanding and appreciation of the importance of cash assistance as a tool for effective emergency

response, the role that social protection can play in meeting needs in an emergency, and the importance of preparedness. In 2018 UNICEF presented the assessment findings and recommendations through a series of bilateral meetings with government, and initiated dialogue on the options proposed and how to move forward. UNICEF then convened a joint trip to Nepal for senior government representatives in MoLSA, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and MES, as well as a delegation from Tajikistan, to learn about the government of Nepal's experience with SRSP in the 2015 earthquake response. In September 2018 UNICEF together with MoLSA, World Bank and Armenian Association of Social Workers organised a high level conference on the role of social protection in the sustainable development agenda where SRSP was prioritised on the agenda. At the conference UNICEF collaborated with the World Bank, presenting a unified approach from development partners on both the importance of SRSP for Armenia along with a call to action. This was followed up with a seminar to disseminate the key messages to emergency partners. At the end of the year the team invested in training on humanitarian cash transfers and SRSP for cross-government stakeholders. These activities were necessary to help build understanding in and buy in from across government. The outcome of the training was consensus across the government departments involved that SRSP was something to move ahead with, as well as on some of the actions needed to move forward.



FIGURE 3: Key milestones in SRSP in Armenia

2017	December	SRSP feasibility assessment completed
2018	January	Development of 2018 rolling work plan
	February-June	Discussion on findings of the assessment with government stakeholders
	August	Learning trip to Nepal for government social protection and sustainable development
	September	Convene high level conference on social protection and sustainable development
	December	Training for government actors and RCST on humanitarian cash and SRSP
2019	January-March	Development of 2019-2020 rolling work plan
	June-December	Advice to MoLSA on reform of the Family Benefit and the VAS
		Support in the reform of the social protection system of Yerevan municipality
	August	Setting up the Cash Coordination Working Group under the DMCT
2020	March	COVID-19 hits
	April-June	Government implements its emergency child grant and Family Benefit emergency top-up
	June	UNICEF and MoLSA design the emergency disability grant
		Complete de assessment of the social protection system with the World Bank
	June-December	Work on the rapid assessment and beneficiary registration IT system
	September-December	Emergency disability grant is implemented
	September	Armed conflict in and around Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone
	September-December	UNICEF leads advocacy to the government on the need for cash response
	November-December	Government roll out emergency cash assistance linked with social protection
	December	UNICEF and CWG members design SOPs on cash support

STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM FOR SHOCK RESPONSE

Based on the recommendations from the assessment report, in 2019, UNICEF embarked on a series of related workstreams with the collective objective of strengthening elements of the social protection system, including the policy and institutional framework, programme design and delivery systems, to prepare the system for future shock response.

Following the change of government in 2018, the incoming government was interested in developing a new labour and social protection sector development strategy. UNICEF worked with the World Bank to undertake a diagnostic of the social protection system, including potential for shock responsiveness.⁷ This further reinforced that the Family Benefit scheme was indeed the most feasible and appropriate entry point for SRSP, and the only programme which already contained some elements of emergency response. UNICEF provided technical assistance to ensure that the draft strategy captured both structural and temporal notions of poverty, links between social protection and risk and vulnerability across the lifecycle, and the use of social protection for shock response.

UNICEF in collaboration with the World Bank provided expert advice to the government on the suggested reform of the social protection vulnerability assessment system (VAS), to ensure that the targeting formula captures temporal poverty and vulnerability, for effective targeting of shock responses. Based on these discussions and considering MoLSA's reform in streamlining existing cash benefits, MoLSA also reached out to UNICEF to support them in redesigning the Quarterly Emergency Assistance component of the Family Benefit. This will be called the 'Economic Sustainability Benefit' and its targeting will be more explicitly connected to the changing economic situation of the household, including in the aftermath of shocks and stresses.

Besides the national social protection schemes, in Armenia the local communities also have a devolved responsibility for social protection. These local level social protection departments have mandatory functions in the implementation of the social protection programmes as prescribed by law on local self-government, as well as voluntary functions for developing and financing their own localised schemes. UNICEF therefore also worked with the municipal social protection department in Yerevan, where a third of the national population live, to revise their strategy and approach to social protection. The new strategy incorporated provisions of emergency assistance during disasters and emergency situations, including cash support, along with threshold amounts, to be financed from

the voluntary envelope in the municipal budget. UNICEF co-developed a regulation for its activation within the municipal governance framework.

STRENGTHENING COORDINATION OF EMERGENCY CASH ASSISTANCE

In 2019 UNICEF established the Cash Coordination Working Group (CWG) under the Disaster Management Country Team. The aim of the CWG is to coordinate humanitarian cash preparedness and response actions among all actors including national and international non-governmental organisations, government bodies and UN agencies and to ensure that assistance is provided in a harmonised way and uses resources in an efficient and impactful manner. The initial composition of the CWG included UN agencies, the UN resident coordinator's office and NGOs.

SRSP IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Armenia in March 2020. The country is one of the worst affected countries globally in terms of cases and deaths per million. The pandemic has contributed to increased poverty and socioeconomic vulnerability. UNDP's socioeconomic impact assessment highlights that the restrictions imposed resulted in business disruption, income loss and income insecurity for households as well as the deterioration of health and social well-being of people. Households that were already poor and with particular vulnerabilities, including female headed households, households headed by elderly members and those living with disabilities, and those with high dependency ratios, are among those worst affected. Others include those working in low productivity, labour intensive and informal sectors, particularly in urban areas, whose source of income has been lost.

The COVID-19 Socio-Economic Response and Recovery Plan (SERRP) developed by the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in consultation with government set out a range of health, and social economic response measures, within which social protection to protect these groups is a core pillar. UNICEF is leading the social protection pillar, in partnership with MoLSA. UNICEF highlighted to the government and MoLSA the wide-ranging responses to COVID-19 of other national governments, globally and in the region, that were based on SRSP, and advocated for exploration of this option in Armenia, based on the findings and recommendations

⁷ This used the ISPA Core Diagnostic Instrument (CODI). The report of this is forthcoming. UNICEF, World Bank (2020) Core Diagnostic of the Social Protection System in Armenia, June 2020.

of the feasibility study. The social protection pillar activities of the government and UNICEF have focused on provision of a series of cash assistance programmes linking with the national social protection system. These are set out here. They have complemented additional measures put in place by the government to support formal sector workers.

- **Emergency child grant:** For families not covered by the Family Benefit, where caregivers did not have formal employment or were earning less than 500,000 AMD/month (around US\$1,040), MoLSA provided a one-off emergency cash transfer of 26,500 AMD for each child under 18 years old. The amount was aligned with the existing child benefit package for children under two years old and the food poverty line.
- **Family Benefit emergency top-up:** Families already enrolled in the Family Benefit scheme received a top up to their regular monthly allowance, in recognition of the fact that these are some of the poorest and most vulnerable households. They received a one-off transfer of 50 percent of their regular benefit. 70 percent of this was given as a cash top-up and 30 percent was as an electricity subsidy.
- **Emergency disability grant:** The government financed the above schemes. UNICEF and MoLSA recognised that households with children with disabilities were among the most vulnerable and in need of further assistance, considering their diverse needs. MoLSA requested financial and technical support from UNICEF to provide a further top-up to those Family Benefit beneficiaries with a child with disability. UNICEF secured funding from the UN Multi-Partner

Trust Fund to provide a one-time cash transfer to these children. The value of this was also set to be in line with MoLSA's wider emergency child grant, the food poverty line and the long-term childcare benefit to the amount of 26,500 AMD per child.

All three interventions were implemented through institutions and delivery systems used on the Family Benefit scheme. For the disability grant, UNICEF channelled its funds through the government for this purpose, by opening a treasury account. Payments on the Family Benefit emergency top-up and emergency disability grant were managed by the Social Security Service under MoLSA and paid through HayPost, which provides a door-to-door service delivering the benefits for Family Benefit scheme beneficiaries. Both these top up grants were paid as part of the Family Benefit programme's usually monthly payment schedule. On the emergency child grant, beneficiaries had to first be identified and registered with the Social Security Service. This was managed through the social protection institutions and a bespoke registration process was developed for this purpose. Families lodged on-line applications and provided details of their child's proof of age through the Public Services Number⁸. They were then paid over-the-counter at banks. Figure 4 sets out the details of these interventions.

In addition, the Yerevan municipality social protection department initiated its own emergency response using municipal funds, which was implemented by April 2020. They gave out in kind emergency support to complement these national cash transfer programmes.



8 A unique identifier across the country that is given at birth.

FIGURE 4: Social protection responses to COVID-19

Emergency child grant	Family Benefit emergency top-up	Emergency disability grant
<p>Modality: Unrestricted, unconditional cash transfer.</p> <p>Target locations: Nationwide.</p> <p>Target beneficiaries: Vulnerable families with children under 18 that are not receiving the Family Benefit. Including parents that do not have a registered job and earning less than 500,000 AMD per month.</p> <p>Coverage: 194,887 children</p> <p>Links to the national social protection system: Builds on the institutions, systems and processes of the Social Security Service.</p> <p>Value and duration of assistance: A one-off emergency payment, set at 26,500 AMD/child.</p> <p>Delivery mechanism: Paid through banks of choice, as identified during the registration process</p> <p>Actors involved: MoLSA, Social Security Service.</p>	<p>Modality: Unconditional cash transfer, subsidy.</p> <p>Target locations: Nationwide.</p> <p>Target beneficiaries: Families enrolled in the Family Benefit scheme.</p> <p>Coverage: 85,000 families.</p> <p>Links to the national social protection system: Vertical expansion of the Family Benefit scheme, providing top-ups to the regular transfer.</p> <p>Value and duration of assistance: A one-off emergency payment, set at 50 percent of the value of the regular monthly Family Benefit. Provided as a cash grant to the beneficiary (70 percent) and an electricity subsidy (30 percent).</p> <p>Delivery mechanism: The cash grant provided as a cash in hand payment through HayPost, simultaneously with the regular Family Benefit. The electricity subsidy transferred directly to the Electricity company, through existing mechanism used by MoLSA for previous similar subsidies.</p> <p>Actors involved: MoLSA, HayPost, Electricity company.</p>	<p>Modality: Unrestricted, unconditional cash transfer.</p> <p>Target locations: Nationwide.</p> <p>Target beneficiaries: Families with children with disabilities enrolled in the Family Benefit scheme.</p> <p>Coverage: 2,932 children with disabilities in 2,757 households.</p> <p>Links to the national social protection system: Vertical expansion of the Family Benefit scheme, providing top-ups to the regular transfer.</p> <p>Value and duration of assistance: A one-off emergency payment, set at 26,500 AMD/child.</p> <p>Delivery mechanism: Cash in hand payment through HayPost (simultaneously with the regular Family Benefit).</p> <p>Actors involved: MoLSA, Social Security Service, Ministry of Finance, UNICEF, HayPost.</p>

Experiences from the social protection response to COVID-19: benefits and challenges

Working through the existing social protection system offered advantages of cost efficiency and timeliness compared to alternative channels as it reduced the need to set up and resource operational systems for cash transfer programme implementation from scratch. On both top-up programmes, beneficiaries were already identified and enrolled, and there was no additional workload for staff involved in payment delivery, with top-ups being included as part of the regular benefit payment. Even on the UNICEF-funded top-up, where time was needed to complete due diligence for the transfer of funds to government, establish and approve an MOU between the government and UNICEF and open the treasury account, it was still the quickest that UNICEF could have transferred assistance to households.

Of course, the Family Benefit scheme did not include all households that were impacted by the economic effects of COVID-19 and in need of support. For the emergency child grant vulnerable families with children had to first be identified and registered. MoLSA had to set up a system through the Social Security Service to manage these applications, and implementation of this registration process did face certain challenges:

- There was no existing registry of data that could easily be used as a starting point to identify households, since the VAS does not have good coverage of the population and e-governance initiatives for digitisation and integration of civil registration systems in Armenia are at an early stage. This meant households had to be first found and then registered and verified/ assessed.

- The existing Family Benefit registration process, involving a detailed application and home visit was not considered conducive to the needs of rapid response or appropriate for the context of COVID-19. In the interests of timely response, UNICEF recommended that the assessment should prioritise a small number of questions that were easily verifiable through linkages with other registries, such as population registry or state revenue committee level data.
- To reduce risk of transmission and in the interests of timeliness, MoLSA introduced this as an online registration process. While a sensible step in the context, this was designed and rolled out rapidly, ex-post and without sufficient sensitisation about the process or consideration of the challenges that people may face when they are not yet familiar with using online services. People struggled with the process, and many had lost or did not know their Personal Services Number. This had to be manually cross checked by social workers and ministry staff as these registries are not yet integrated. Based on this experience, UNICEF together with WFP and UNDP successfully advocated to MoLSA for the introduction of a new rapid response assessment and beneficiary registration system linked to an overall family social needs assessment, to overcome some of these difficulties. UNICEF is currently working on the system's development.

One challenge that UNICEF faced, in channelling support through the national system, was more limited access to recipient data, compared to if assistance was implemented through traditional humanitarian channels. UNICEF had originally intended to complement its cash top-ups for children with disabilities with some tailored sensitisation materials for caregivers on COVID-19, including self-care and wellbeing. However, their distribution relied on obtaining the names of the households who were receiving the benefit. The full list has not been shared due to MoLSA staff having too many competing priorities at this time and considering also the escalation of the NK conflict, which disrupted all ongoing activities. A related issue concerns adequate monitoring. UNICEF has negotiated with MoLSA for access to a random sample of beneficiary households to implement its own post distribution monitoring and verify receipt.

Of course, other families with children living with disabilities, that were excluded from the Family Benefit scheme, were also badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these households were already vulnerable before the crisis and were now impoverished. However, UNICEF's resources were only sufficient to support those already on the Family Benefit. This led to some frustrations among non-qualifying households, many of whom submitted complaints, both through MoLSA's feedback mechanism and directly to UNICEF. Many of these households would now qualify for the regular Family Benefit given their deteriorating economic status. Such cases have been referred to partner NGOs for support wherever possible,

and UNICEF is engaging with MoLSA to promote the scaling up of regular, long term social protection for families in 2021 as a core intervention for recovery.

There is no single 'right' approach to setting transfer values on an emergency cash assistance programme, and it is always something of a balancing act. On the one hand, ideally, transfer values should be adequate to meet the emergency needs of households. On the other, in the face of widespread need and limited budgets, there is also the desire to make resources stretch and cover more people. In the case of these social protection responses to COVID-19, transfer values were set by MoLSA. On two programmes the decision was taken to align with the existing transfer value used on the child benefit, while on the Family Benefit top-up, the decision was taken to provide 50 percent of the regular benefit value. The former decision was driven by a desire to harmonise with long-term social protection, in order to maximise reach and avoid risk of tensions. The latter decision was driven mainly by concerns about affordability. In both cases it was not influenced by calculation of actual needs and gaps. While on the one hand UNICEF has expressed some concern that these transfer values may not be wholly adequate to meet all needs, at the same time UNICEF fully appreciates the factors that MoLSA must take into account when making these decisions. Furthermore, these decisions were made quickly, which allowed for timely rollout of assistance. A more scientific calculation of transfer values according to needs and gap analysis may have arrived at a slightly different value but would also have been more complicated and time consuming, constraining a rapid (and effective) response.

Influencing wider cash-based response measures of the Government of Armenia and partners

The experiences of these social protection responses to COVID-19 through government systems have already influenced the design and implementation of wider emergency assistance by the government and humanitarian partners. This has been coordinated through the CWG which was activated during the COVID-19 response and the later NK response.

Firstly, the wider UN response to COVID-19 has been adapted. WFP has revised its school feeding programme into a cash based emergency response for those children that were enrolled in the Family Benefit scheme. These children were provided with a top-up cash grant to the equivalent value of 40 days' worth of food assistance (8,000 AMD/child). At the time of writing, UNFPA also has plans to provide cash grants for single elderly persons. Based on UNICEF's experience with the disability emergency grant, both these programmes are adopting the same mechanism for channelling and disbursing funds, through the treasury and then the social protection payment system.

Secondly, UNICEF, as lead of the CWG successfully influenced the government to approve and finance its first ever emergency cash assistance programme, for displaced households arriving in Armenian territory from Nagorno Karabakh due to the escalating conflict. Initially the government was reluctant to agree to a cash-based response from humanitarian partners. UNICEF and over 20 other partners in the CWG used evidence from the COVID-19 cash transfers and global evidence of emergency cash assistance to advocate about the relevance of cash support. In the negotiations that followed, partners acknowledged the government's concerns, on the need for harmonisation with social protection that is provided to citizens to avoid social tensions, but highlighted the importance of adequacy of assistance to meet the needs of new arrivals in a dignified manner. As a result, the government rolled out a one-time emergency cash assistance to the

displaced population, with the transfer value aligned with the minimum wage rather than social protection benefit size (68,000 AMD or US\$140) and with an additional 15,000 AMD top-up for those without accommodation, to compensate for utilities. Here again, the government will be working through the national social protection system to provide the payments (i.e. HayPost) and an online application system is being developed for registration.

The government has secured funding for this one-time support. However, the support of development partners will be needed, once further programmes are designed following a government needs assessment of affected families. As lead of the CWG, UNICEF is currently leading the development of SOPs for development partners and NGOs for the provision of their cash support through either the treasury, HayPost or banks.



Lessons learned

Several lessons can be learned from UNICEF's experiences in Armenia:

The value of preparing for shock response, ex-ante:

UNICEF's experiences in Armenia highlight the value of planning for and building the capabilities for SRSP ex-ante. The feasibility assessment meant that UNICEF and MoLSA were already aware of the possible entry points for how social protection could respond to needs caused by COVID-19. Meanwhile, where there had already been progress to set up guiding frameworks and processes, this was found to support a timely and effective response. Specifically, the frameworks developed for SRSP at the municipal level in Yerevan meant municipal emergency support programmes were being rolled out within a month, albeit only in the form of food and non-food items. Based on this positive experience the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure is now planning to roll out the regulation for social protection within voluntary authorities in other municipalities. At the same time, the COVID-19 response also highlighted examples of where there were delays to implementation because systems and processes were not already in place ahead of the pandemic. For example, signing off the paperwork for and setting up the account for UNICEF to channel its resources through the social protection system took around 1.5 months to arrange, while there were difficulties in rapidly designing and rolling out the new registration system for identification of households outside the social protection system.

Moving from idea to implementation takes time: Building a shock responsive social protection system is not a one-off activity; it is an incremental process. It requires the buy in and support from a range of different governmental institutions in order to move forward with the actions that are needed. In Armenia, a significant amount of time was needed to build understanding and buy in across government departments - of both the need for a cash response to shocks, and of the role of the social protection system. This was somewhat delayed by the 2018 change of government, after which the process of engagement and sensitisation had to begin again. In fact, one positive thing coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has provided the evidence of the relevance of and need for social protection, and shock responsive social protection, at times of crisis, which has built support. The changes to and strengthening of the policy and legal framework, programmes, delivery systems, data management systems and institutions, also require time to realise. UNICEF found that working through the established cycles for policy review and reform was more conducive to realising the changes needed than trying to push for immediate change in the middle of a policy or programme cycle.

Making progress in SRSP requires a range of specific investments:

Within UNICEF, supporting the government to make progress on SRSP has required concerted investments in the form of dedicated staff time, recruitment of technical expertise and financial resources. The awareness raising, convening and technical assistance activities to date have taken up a considerable portion of the social protection and DRR staff members' time (estimated as around 60 percent of their respective roles since 2018). Technical experts had to be commissioned to lead both the assessment itself and the subsequent training. An annual budget of approximately US\$25,000 was needed in 2018 and 2019, to cover the feasibility assessment, training and Nepal exchange visit. These were covered through financial support from UNICEF ECA regional office. The government also required support for resourcing of the actual social protection shock response.

Partners can contribute to SRSP preparedness in a variety of ways:

Experiences in Armenia highlight the diverse roles that UNICEF and other partners can play in supporting governments to develop effective SRSP systems. Prior to the pandemic, UNICEF's added value was in awareness raising, convening and advocacy, and technical assistance. During the COVID-19 response, above and beyond the funds provided, UNICEF also supported the government's social protection response through technical assistance to develop the tools and systems for rapid assessment (jointly with UNDP and WFP), and planning the complementary support measures for families of children living with disabilities. Now, in the Nagorno Karabakh response, UNICEF is playing a crucial role in influencing the design of the government's social protection response, is providing financial and technical support to the needs assessment, and will be supporting coordination of the government's social protection response with the planned responses of development partners within the CWG. A range of possible options for how partners will support are currently being discussed, ranging from channelling humanitarian funds through the government system to enable recurrent transfers, to direct implementation aligned with and filling gaps in the government's support.

It is important to appreciate possible trade-offs and understand the factors enabling or constraining effective programming when designing emergency responses through social protection systems:

While there are clear potential advantages to making use of national social protection systems for shock response, the approach also presents challenges. For example, in Armenia, making use of existing data, systems and processes offers potential for a faster and more cost-efficient response, especially for those families already benefiting from long term social protection. However, there are challenges to be aware of when it comes to reaching all households affected by a shock. Another issue to bear in mind is that political pressures can influence the design

decisions of national governments, which may mean those design decisions require some degree of compromise between what is best for meeting people's needs and what is politically feasible. In Armenia this has been noticeable, for example, in the discussions on setting emergency transfer values. Indeed, the Nagorno Karabakh experiences highlight that conflict and displacement settings require different considerations when designing and implementing SRSP. The government of Armenia was concerned that financial support provided to the displaced

should not be seen to exceed government social protection support, to avoid social tensions and also reduce the risk of creating pull factors for populations still living inside the conflict-affected region. They were also concerned about the need to assist Armenian host families as well as those displaced. Finally, these new arrivals are not included in or easily identified through national systems, requiring specific investments in identification and registration systems and processes.

Next steps for SRSP in Armenia

The experience of COVID-19 is galvanising support for SRSP. The labour and social protection sector strategy will be reviewed in 2021 and within this UNICEF expects that there will be scope now to discuss scalability for shock response and benefit sizes. Furthermore, the MES and others working on DRM are now fully informed on the role of social protection in emergencies which will help make progress on developing the institutional coordination framework. UNICEF plans to continue its support to institutionalising SRSP in Armenia, including through:

- Supporting the government on the review of targeting of the Family Benefit and Quarterly Emergency Assistance to ensure it is relevant and effective for shock response.
- Supporting future interoperability of social protection with wider data management systems, including development of rapid beneficiary registration and assessment tools.
- Continuing to support development of the legal and institutional framework for SRSP.
- Advocating for scaling up coverage of long term social protection programmes, particularly during shocks and disasters.





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