

# Preparing social protection systems for shock response

A case study of UNICEF's experiences in Tajikistan

# 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 Tajikistan. A second case study focuses on experiences in Armenia.

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## Acronyms

<b>ASIP</b>	Agency on Social Insurance and Pensions
<b>CO</b>	Country Office
<b>CoES</b>	Committee on Emergency Situations
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>CWG</b>	Cash Working Group
<b>DRM</b>	Disaster Risk Management
<b>ECAR</b>	Europe and Central Asia Region
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>MEB</b>	Minimum Expenditure Basket
<b>MIS</b>	Management Information System
<b>MoHSPP</b>	Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population
<b>PCA</b>	Programme Cooperation Agreement
<b>RCST</b>	Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan
<b>SASP</b>	State Agency on Social Protection of the Population
<b>SOP</b>	Standard Operating Procedure
<b>SRSP</b>	Shock Responsive Social Protection
<b>TESPP</b>	Tajikistan Emergency Social Protection Programme
<b>TJS</b>	Tajikistani Somoni
<b>TSA</b>	Targeted Social Assistance Programme
<b>TWG</b>	Technical Working Group
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>WFP</b>	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<sup>1</sup>.

In UNICEF, shock responsive social protection 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"*.<sup>2</sup> 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 expansion<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

## TAJIKISTAN CONTEXT AND THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

This case study documents the journey of UNICEF and the government of Tajikistan from the feasibility assessment of 2017, to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Tajikistan is situated in a seismically high-risk zone and is highly prone to both geophysical and meteorological natural disasters. The country regularly experiences natural hazards such as avalanches, earthquakes, floods and mud or landslides. According to the Committee on Emergency Situations (CoES), on average 150 natural disasters occurred between 1997 and 2016. Furthermore, Tajikistan is the most climate-vulnerable country in the region and the frequency and intensity of natural disasters is increasing. While most disasters have a local, limited impact, the cumulative effect on livelihoods and the economy is considerable. Earthquake damage alone results in an annual average loss of about 4.68 percent of Tajikistan's GDP while the estimated economic damage from flood and mudslides over the period between 2010-2016 was some

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.

US\$125 million. Their recurrent impact at household level contributes to stubbornly high poverty rates (31 percent in 2017). It is estimated that children make up 50-60 percent of those affected by disasters annually. The economic impact of these disasters on poor and vulnerable households compromises children's rights to survival and development.

In recent years, the government of Tajikistan, with support from development partners, has made good progress in establishing the foundations of a coherent social protection system, including development of the legal, policy and institutional framework. Social protection is the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population (MoHSPP), under which the State Agency on Social Protection of the Population (SASP) manages social assistance. The flagship social assistance programme is the Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) programme, a cash transfer for poor households which started in 2011 with support from the World Bank. This covered 15 percent of households in 40 out of 68 districts in 2019. In 2020, the Government issued a decree to expand TSA coverage to the remaining 28 districts. The Agency on Social Insurance and Pensions (ASIP) is responsible for managing two small scale cash-based social pensions for older persons and people living with disabilities, as well as a

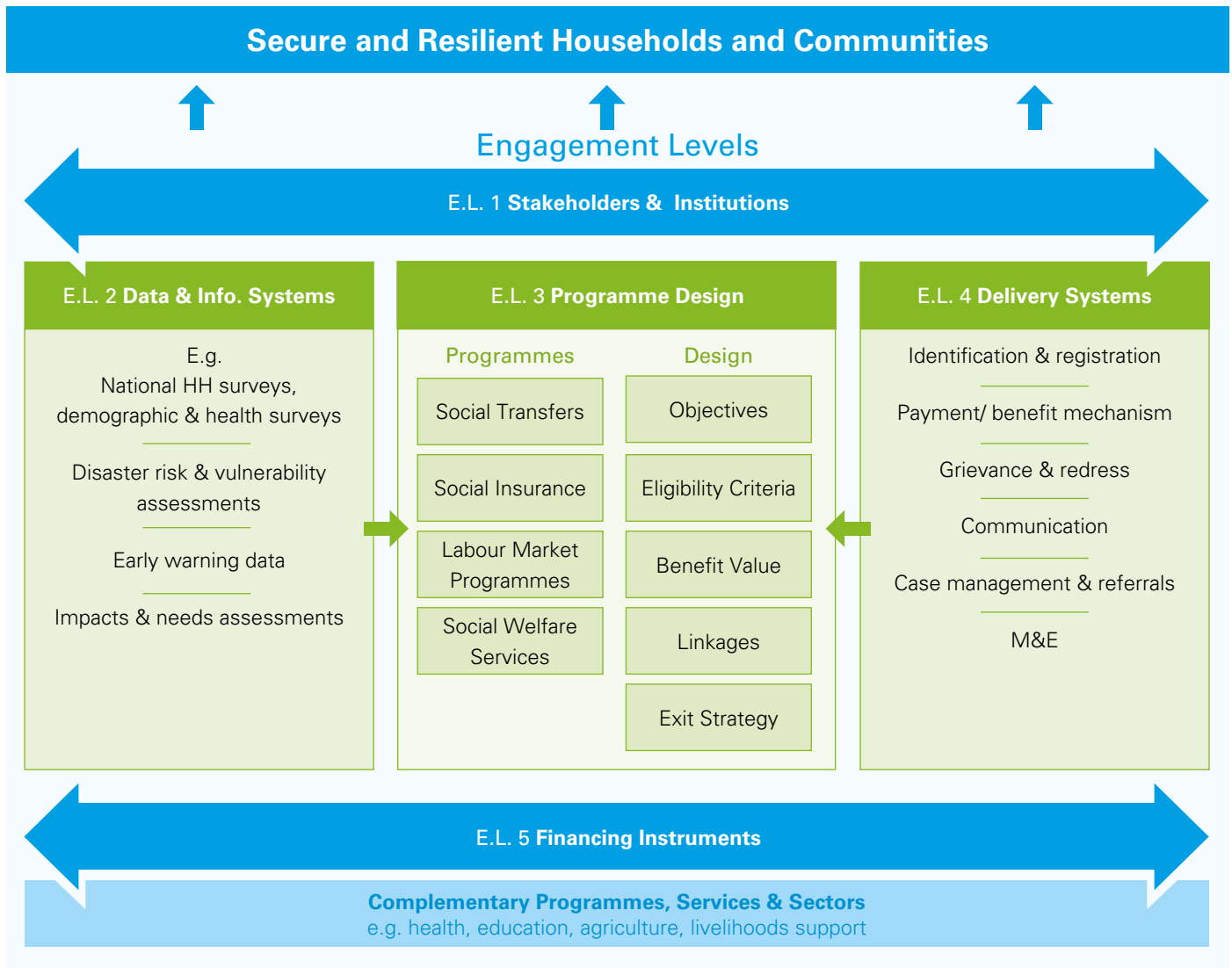
contributory pension scheme that was introduced in 2017. Any emergency assistance provided to households affected by shocks is the responsibility of the Committee of Emergency Situations and Civil Defence under the Government of Tajikistan (CoES), with support from the Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan (RCST) and where needed, the international community. This assistance remains ad hoc and as of 2019 was still predominantly given 'in kind'.

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 the impacts of natural disasters and to enhance the role of social protection within the disaster response mechanism in the country. In 2017 UNICEF's Tajikistan 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 disaster risk management (DRM) system, to inform the feasibility of and entry points for SRSP in Tajikistan. This was part of a broader regional initiative to identify opportunities and strengthen preparedness for emergency response through national systems.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Feasibility assessments were conducted in five countries in the region: Armenia, Tajikistan, Serbia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

FIGURE 1: Building blocks of a social protection system<sup>6</sup>



# The SRSP feasibility assessment in Tajikistan

The assessment examined the state of play, capacities, strengths and weaknesses of the social protection and DRM systems, to identify 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 and MoHSP 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.

<sup>6</sup> EUD (2019) Social Protection Across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus

## KEY FINDINGS

The assessment concluded that the TSA programme, and its underlying operational systems and processes, offered the greatest opportunity for responding to the needs of populations affected by disasters. It provides two entry points: i) a ready channel through which to reach existing TSA beneficiaries, and top up their regular quarterly benefits, to cover additional emergency needs; and ii) established delivery systems, data management systems, and institutions, which could be leveraged to implement temporary cash assistance for other non-TSA households. A factor constraining this potential is that the social protection and DRM governance and coordination frameworks, and the social protection

programmes and systems, have not been designed with shock response in mind. Another is the still-emerging nature of the social protection system, which currently has low coverage of poor and vulnerable households in normal times as well as capacity gaps and bottlenecks in TSA operations. 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. In addition, it highlighted that continuing efforts to strengthen and increase coverage of regular social protection, and making these processes, institutions and systems disaster sensitive and disaster resilient for continuity of social protection during and following shocks, were also essential to move forward with effective SRSP.

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

Entry points	Enabling factors	Constraining factors
Temporary 'top up' cash grants to TSA beneficiaries in areas affected by disaster ('vertical expansion')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TSA is a relatively well established programme with existing, fairly robust systems and processes.</li> <li>Government social protection authorities are open to exploring the idea of shock response through TSA and are pushing for a clear policy direction on 'social protection in emergencies'.</li> <li>Overlap between TSA beneficiaries and those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters.</li> <li>Some support within the CoES for use of cash in emergencies.</li> <li>Leverages the payments system of TSA, which has few bottlenecks.</li> <li>The simplest option for SRSP, creating the least additional work for those involved in TSA implementation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government lacks experience or expertise in humanitarian cash programming.</li> <li>No prior experience or standard operating procedures (SOPs) for use of the TSA for SRSP.</li> <li>Possible resistance to the concept of SRSP/use of TSA within the CoES since social protection is not currently considered part of national systems for disaster response and those responsible for leading emergency response may be reluctant to relinquish role/budget.</li> <li>Would require additional financing since TSA budget very limited.</li> <li>Requires strong communication to avoid confusion and social tensions.</li> <li>Would still need another mechanism through which to reach those households affected but who are not TSA beneficiaries.</li> </ul>
Making use of the underlying systems and processes of the TSA programme, to implement a separate emergency response	<p><b>Same enablers as outlined above, plus:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allows an emergency programme to make use of systems that already exist, but without any interference with the design features of the regular TSA programme.</li> <li>Can incorporate targeting criteria that are specifically emergency focused.</li> <li>May generate greater buy in from CoES since the intervention could be clearly defined as an emergency programme and maintain a role for these actors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Would require developing some new SOPs and systems.</li> <li>If using human resources of the TSA, need to ensure capacities sufficient so as not to overburden staff or impact negatively on long-term social protection provision.</li> <li>For greatest benefit it requires further investments in systems – including the coordination centres and data management systems.</li> </ul>

The analysis recommended that any efforts to move forward with one or both approaches should initially prioritise particular locations that are vulnerable to one or more natural disasters.

Finally, while a response through social protection was considered feasible and appropriate, the analysis also highlighted the importance of this complementing, rather than substituting, the wider response activities of the CoES and humanitarian partners.

## The journey since then

This section documents the activities of the government, UNICEF and other partners since then to move forward with SRSP preparedness in Tajikistan and how this has influenced the COVID-19 response. A timeline summarising the journey so far is shown in Figure 3.

### INTERNAL MOBILISATION

To act on the recommendations from the feasibility assessment, UNICEF's social protection and emergency focal points had to secure approval within UNICEF for this new strategic direction. The need for cash assistance in

emergencies, and the rationale for using the social protection system to provide this, were discussed with country senior management and section leads, along with the proposed actions. The team shared evidence from humanitarian cash programmes globally. Senior management had bought into the assessment process from the beginning and were convinced that this was an important workstream for UNICEF. As humanitarian cash assistance/SRSP had not been included as a planned programmatic intervention when the country programme strategy was prepared, the team then had to seek financial resources for some of the proposed activities. This took several months due to budgetary constraints and required the CO to find and secure new funds.



## DISSEMINATION, AWARENESS RAISING AND ENGAGEMENT

UNICEF had to seek the buy in and engagement from decision makers within central government and implicated development partners. While there was a good level of interest, there was a limited understanding in and outside government of both the use of cash assistance in emergencies, or SRSP, which contributed to certain concerns/hesitation and had to be carefully managed by UNICEF. For example, there were some concerns about the use of cash in emergencies, and also the risk that piloting this under the auspices of government social protection could create unrealistic expectations for future assistance in a context where funds are constrained. UNICEF's strategy was therefore one of continuous awareness raising and dialogue. Over a period of several months, UNICEF presented findings from the study and initiated dialogue and consultation on the options proposed and how to move forward. UNICEF used its presence on several existing

platforms and forums including the donor coordination group on SP, the UN country team, the DRR coordination platform REACT, as well as bilateral relationships with social protection and DRM departments, to do this. In 2018 UNICEF and WFP established the technical working group on humanitarian cash transfers as a platform specifically focused on improving knowledge and harmonising practice in emergency cash assistance. In 2018 UNICEF also convened a trip to Nepal for senior representatives of the president's office, social protection and emergency ministries, as well as the RCST, to learn first-hand about SRSP in the 2015 earthquake response. Again in 2018, the team invested in training on humanitarian cash transfers and SRSP for cross-government stakeholders. The result was the endorsement of the suggested actions outlined in UNICEF's feasibility assessment by these senior officials, giving the green light for designing and testing a cash response linked with the social protection system. In 2019, UNICEF sent government delegates to a UNICEF regional training in Almaty on the same.

FIGURE 3: Developing SRSP in Tajikistan – key milestones 2017-2020

<b>2017</b>	<b>December</b>	SRSP feasibility assessment completed
<b>2018</b>	<b>January</b>	Introduction of findings and recommendation to government Secure buy in from UNICEF senior management
	<b>February-June</b>	External dissemination and awareness raising through various platforms
	<b>June</b>	Learning trip to Nepal for government social protection and DRM actors
	<b>October</b>	Establish the technical working group on humanitarian cash transfers Recruit consultant to design TESPP
	<b>December</b>	Training for government actors and RCST on humanitarian cash and SRSP
<b>2019</b>	<b>February</b>	Consultant embarks on design of the TESPP
	<b>June</b>	Attendance of government actors in a UNICEF-hosted regional training on SRSP
	<b>September</b>	TESPP design agreed and letter of agreement between the 5 partners drafted
	<b>October</b>	LOA signed
<b>2020</b>	<b>March</b>	Planning for pilot TSA COVID-19 hits
	<b>May</b>	World Bank agree funding for cash response to COVID-19 linked with TSA
	<b>June</b>	Government signs decree for cash based social protection responses to COVID-19
	<b>December</b>	UNICEF launches an appeal for COVID-19 response, linked with the TSA



## DESIGNING THE TESPP: EMERGENCY CASH ASSISTANCE LINKED WITH THE NATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

In late 2018 UNICEF recruited an international consultant to lead a multi-stakeholder consultation process and propose a programme model for testing. The 'Tajikistan Emergency Social Protection Programme' (TESPP) was oriented to the emergency context of flooding and conceived specific linkages with the government's TSA programme, providing an intervention bridging emergency and social protection programming. Since both TSA beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries are affected by these disasters, the design agreed was a hybrid approach, leveraging the beneficiary lists and payment channels of the TSA programme to reach affected TSA beneficiaries, and the underlying institutions and systems of the TSA programme to provide temporary emergency cash assistance to affected non-beneficiary households. The TESPP design leverages some of the institutions, administrative processes and systems of the social protection system, as well as of the national institutions and processes for emergency response. As such, implementation of the pilot envisaged roles and responsibilities for five key partners – MoHSPP; CoES; Amonat Bank; RCST; and UNICEF.

The design process ran for 9 months in 2019. The parameters of the agreed pilot programme are outlined in Box 1. The scale of the agreed pilot study was small - some 250 households - driven partly by available funding as well as the recognised need to start small, test and learn. Operational procedures to be followed by each actor in the implementation phase were defined. The outputs of this process included: i) a Letter of Agreement signed by the 5 main partners; ii) a Programme Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between RCST and UNICEF, outlining the activities that RCST would have a role in, expected outputs and the budget allocation from UNICEF; iii) a financial agreement between UNICEF, SASP and Amonat Bank; iv) SOPs for implementation; and v) training of all actors to be involved in TESPP implementation.

### TESPP DESIGN FEATURES

- **Targeting design:** Given the link to the TSA, the TESPP design targeted 33 of the 40 TSA districts that had better physical access, to ensure the quality of the learning experience and reduce challenges during early implementation. With the resources available the pilot was expected to be implemented in between 1-3 districts depending on the scale of the shock. The TESPP planned a two-pronged approach to targeting households in the affected districts. The first category of TESPP beneficiaries was households in the affected districts that were already enrolled in the TSA programme. The second category of TESPP beneficiaries was those non-TSA households that

### BOX 1: TAJIKISTAN EMERGENCY SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMME

**Programme objective:** to pilot and test a mechanism for efficient and effective delivery of cash assistance to households affected by disasters.

**Modality:** unrestricted, unconditional cash transfer (UCT).

**Target locations:** one or more of 33 districts, which currently host the TSA programme and that are affected by flooding.

**Target beneficiaries:** pilot would target up to 250 vulnerable households in flood affected areas.

**Links to the national social protection system:** a separate emergency programme that makes use of the underlying MIS, payment delivery system and beneficiary list of the TSA programme.

**Targeting design:** i) households in affected districts that are enrolled in the TSA programme; and ii) non-TSA households in affected districts that are identified as vulnerable according to a post-disaster vulnerability assessment (including damage to property, injury/loss of life; and demographic vulnerability characteristics).

**Value and duration of assistance:** a one-off emergency payment, the value of which varies according to household size (0 - 2 children: TJS 400; 3 - 4 children: TJS 500; 5 or more children: TJS 600)

**Delivery mechanism:** cash payment through Amonat bank (same delivery process as is used on the regular TSA).

**Implementing partners and their roles:** MoHSPP (identifying TSA beneficiaries in affected areas and sharing details with Amonat bank and RCST); CoES (leading and circulating findings of the post-disaster situation assessment; co-selection on non-TSA households with RCST); RCST (support to the CoES on the post disaster situation assessment; coordination with SASP to confirm the list of TSA beneficiaries; leading the assessment of non-TSA households; post distribution monitoring; ensuring access of vulnerable households to complaints and feedback mechanisms); UNICEF (technical assistance to design and implementation; financing the pilot); Amonat Bank (cash delivery and reconciliation reporting).

vulnerability assessments confirmed had been affected. The proposed criteria for the second category included loss of life/injury; loss of livelihoods; and level of damage to housing. Depending on the level of need, the plan was to further prioritise based on demographic vulnerability criteria.<sup>7</sup>

- **Setting the transfer value:** The regular TSA provides a total monthly payment of only TJS 39 (US\$ 3.50 by recent 2020 exchange rate), which is recognised to be too small to meet the expected objectives of the programme even in normal times, let alone additional needs due to the emergency. To define a transfer value to test on the TESPP pilot, UNICEF and government counterparts considered findings of work undertaken by WFP Tajikistan on the food minimum expenditure basket (MEB)<sup>8</sup>, as well as the minimum liveable wage (defined in Tajikistan as TJS 400/person/month). The value also took into account Government concerns about affordability of SRSP since an aim of the pilot was to build government support to invest. Since another aim is learning and proof of concept, it was decided to set the base value of the pilot emergency cash transfer at TJS 400 per household, in line with the minimum cost of diet and minimum living wage, and with additional top-ups per child (see box 1). The utilisation of the transfer by beneficiaries and its adequacy to meet emergency needs would then be monitored during the pilot to inform future transfer values.

## TESPP IMPLEMENTATION

### *Triggering the TESPP response*

Under the national procedures for emergency response, upon declaration of an emergency in particular districts the CoES with support from the RCST completes the 24-hour Urgent Report, to estimate the magnitude of the disaster in terms of territories and likely population affected. The MoHSPP would then activate the pilot TESPP, if this report highlights that 100-250 households are affected.

### *Registration*

In the localities where the TESPP is activated, a two-pronged process of registration would take place:

- Identification of those households in the affected locations that are already TSA beneficiaries: based on the data from

the abovementioned situation assessment, the RCST would inform SASP about the specific geographic areas where TESPP is to be activated. SASP would then compile the list of TSA beneficiary households whose place of residence is within the affected areas and submit this to RCST and Amonat Bank.

- Identification of other households in need of assistance: the TESPP pilot design proposed to leverage the existing national processes for emergency response. The RCST, in coordination with COES, the District Disaster Commission, the Jamoats, and the Heads of Mahalas, visit affected areas to apply the Affected Household Assessment Questionnaire. Under the TESPP the CoES and RCST would then use this assessment data to define the list of TESPP beneficiary households, according to: i) households that lost one or more of its members; ii) households that count injured members; iii) households that lost partially or totally their house; iv) households that lost their livelihoods (crops, arable land, livestock, or small businesses and shops); and iv) presence of vulnerable groups.

### *Enrolment and payment*

The TESPP pilot aimed to follow as much as possible the existing TSA business procedures. For both sets of beneficiaries, the State Savings Bank (Amonat Bank), which provides payment services on the TSA programme, would disburse TESPP payments. For TSA beneficiaries this process is straightforward – no further enrolment activity is required and the emergency payment process for this group can be activated immediately. Any non-TSA households identified as TESPP beneficiaries by the CoES and RCST must first be included in the TESPP beneficiary register. The MIS of the TSA programme has space to enable this broader functionality, since the World Bank which supported its design had ambition to support future development of a functional ‘single register’ and reduce the fragmentation between initiatives. The MoHSPP was able to create a new folder in this beneficiary management system, to create a register of all new households receiving the emergency assistance. SASPP and Amonat bank would then follow the standard TSA procedures to open accounts for these households. As on the regular TSA, for those households without a bank account, it is envisaged that the payment process on the TESPP would be over-the-counter payments.

<sup>7</sup> Such as the presence of female headed households, presence of disabled members, and household size.

<sup>8</sup> According to WFP’s cost of diet analysis, the minimum diet meeting only energy needs cost TJS 343/household/month in 2017 and a nutritious diet cost TJS 1047/HH/month.



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## INFLUENCING THE RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The pilot roll out of the TESPP was planned for the flood season in spring 2020. Of course, this unfortunately coincided with the occurrence of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that the pilot as planned could not be implemented – with all efforts turning to addressing impacts of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the effect of COVID-19 has been that senior officials came to understand the importance of social protection - in the form of cash transfers - in meeting the needs of households during shocks, and experiences from the TESPP design process have influenced the national COVID-19 response efforts in several important ways.

As in other countries, beyond the immediate health impacts the pandemic presents a socioeconomic crisis in Tajikistan, with restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 affecting economic activity and triggering a global economic recession, tremendously shrinking the volume of production, export and trade. Tajikistan experienced only a partial lockdown lasting 1-2 months, and after a sharp decline in April and May, labour markets were recovering between June and December 2020. However, severe vulnerabilities remained, including continued work disruptions/permanent job losses for some as well as much-reduced remittances for poor families reliant on migrant labour. The World Bank reported elevated food insecurity 10 percentage points above 2019 levels.

In May 2020 the MoHSPP published the government's social protection response plan to COVID-19. The priority intervention outlined is for emergency cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households – including top-up payments to social protection beneficiaries and support to additional households not covered by existing programmes. This recommended to use the TSA system for cash transfers, as had been planned on the TESPP, and the government signed a decree for a one-time cash payment.

The World Bank also launched its own plan for a COVID-19 response, targeting families with children below the age of three years. UNICEF was able to successfully present the model to the World Bank and suggest using the model for the new programme implementation. The Bank has taken the decision to also use the TSA programme's beneficiary lists and payment delivery processes and institutions to provide emergency cash top-ups to TSA beneficiaries with children under three. They are also aiming to develop a separate register of households affected by COVID-19, within the TSA MIS, as the start of a fledgling 'single register'.

UNICEF arranged a presentation of the TSA programme and systems at the technical working group. This enabled international humanitarian partners to understand the role of social protection in the COVID-19 response. While WFP elected to continue with its established parallel processes for cash delivery rather than move to TSA's processes, this knowledge helped to influence WFP's targeting strategy for its appeal, which proposed to focused on those 28 districts not covered by TSA, for a more cohesive response.

# Lessons learned

Several lessons can be learned from UNICEF's experiences preparing national social protection systems for shock response in Tajikistan.

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

UNICEF's experiences in Tajikistan, as elsewhere, are reinforcing the importance of preparedness planning for SRSP. Investing in the feasibility assessment and capacity building ex-ante has enabled stakeholders to understand the enablers and entry points as well as possible barriers and risks to address, across the various components of the social protection and DRM systems – including the high level policy environment and institutional framework, programme design, administrative processes, operational systems and coordination mechanisms. The options analysis helped to crystallise specific objectives of and directions for SRSP, as well as setting out the actions needed to achieve these. The assessment also helped build understanding of UNICEF's own capacity, or "readiness" to engage in the space. Social protection was not considered in isolation but always with reference to the existing national DRM system, its strengths and limitations. This generated confidence that the SRSP options proposed were not only feasible but were also appropriate to the context – i.e. they were adding value, filling gaps in and complementing the existing DRM system. It also helped to identify where coordination between these sectors would need to be improved.

*Moving from idea to implementation takes time:* Globally, UNICEF is learning that building a shock responsive social protection system takes time, and experiences in Tajikistan are no different. The inclusive process of engagement with key national counterparts, throughout the assessment process, helped generate ownership and meant that the findings were more readily accepted by the government, opening space for action planning. However, this assessment was just the first in a series of actions that are needed to prepare national stakeholders, systems and institutions for implementing an emergency response linked to the social protection system. Significant time had to be devoted to generating awareness, understanding, buy in and acceptance across government departments, and to building relationships of trust. UNICEF has had to repeatedly reinforce this conceptual understanding due to the high rates of staff turnover in government departments. This has been highlighted most critically in the COVID-19 response, where WFP could see the potential value of designing a response linking with the national TSA institutions and operational systems, but where the time that would be required to begin engagement on and set up these ways of working was not conducive to delivering a timely and effective response.

*Importance of evidence:* Prior to 2020 there was only limited experience of emergency cash assistance in Tajikistan, either within government or international partners. UNICEF found that sharing global evidence on the efficacy and effectiveness of humanitarian cash transfers was important in the early stages of the discussions, to assuage fears and concerns. Similarly, the field exchange visit to Nepal helped to make the concept of SRSP more tangible, and for government to appreciate, practically speaking, what it could look like and how it could be done. Globally, however, a robust evidence base on the added value of SRSP as a way of delivering cash assistance in emergencies is still being built. This was why UNICEF and its partners put store in piloting the TESPP, in order to generate evidence to inform future decisions on institutionalisation.

## *Preparing for SRSP requires a range of specific investments:*

Making progress on the SRSP action plan has required concerted investments in the form of staff time, technical expertise and financial resources. Awareness raising and convening activities in 2018-2019 took up a considerable portion of the social protection and DRR staff members' time, while technical experts had to be commissioned to lead both the assessment itself and the TESPP design activities. A budget totalling some US\$80,000 was needed to cover the feasibility assessment, training, study visit and design consultancy, while the cost of the small planned pilot TESPP was another US\$40,000. To date in Tajikistan, these investments have been made possible through the contribution of UNICEF and USAID – though UNICEF struggled to identify new donor funding streams for these preparedness investments. Going beyond a pilot to institutionalise such a mechanism, complete any related system strengthening investments that are needed, or mobilise financing for any shock response, will require further and more significant investments.

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

Experiences in Tajikistan reaffirm the emerging consensus from global experiences of SRSP and linking humanitarian assistance and social protection, that non-government partners can play diverse roles to support this process above and beyond direct financing of any shock response. This includes, for example, building national capacities through technical assistance and system strengthening, or by providing operational support to particular areas of the implementation cycle. It also includes sharing or harmonising certain design features, functions or systems across response programmes to enhance coverage, adequacy and comprehensiveness of the overall response, or filling gaps in national social protection responses by designing and implementing complementary and mutually reinforcing assistance. In Tajikistan, UNICEF has supported on the strategic direction, technical assistance to design, systems building, financing, convening and advocacy. Meanwhile the Red Crescent's on the ground presence means it is well suited to provide oversight and support to government on day to day implementation. Going forward the

World Bank will also be instrumental in both directly financing and providing technical assistance to strengthen systems of shock response through social protection.

**Stakeholder coordination is essential, challenging, and needs specific attention:** Designing and implementing SRSP requires coordination and cooperation of actors working in social protection and DRM spheres. Both sectors have specific mandates and functions as well as comparative advantages that together can improve overall outcomes – however bringing together sector siloes requires new ways of working and new coordination structures. In Tajikistan on the government side, the MoHSPP and CoES are both implicated in SRSP. UNICEF was well placed to support this on account of its existing collaborations with both these departments. Specific tools and mechanisms were established that aided this coordination including: i) establishing a technical working group (TWG) of the five TESPP partners which secured the participation of all organisations on technical aspects of TESPP design while avoiding bureaucracy inherent in central government processes; ii) the Letter of Agreement which provided senior endorsement of the responsibilities of each organisation in the TESPP and mobilised action within the government departments; and iii) the SOPs which gave clarity on the roles of each organisation and sequencing of actions. Further efforts will be needed if SRSP is to become institutionalised beyond any TESPP pilot – including bringing social protection into the protocols for managing disaster response. Meanwhile, any emergency response through social protection must also be coordinated with any wider responses led by international partner organisations. The establishment of the interagency taskforce on cash, bringing together UN agencies and other development partners that are engaged in humanitarian cash transfers, chaired by WFP, is helpful here. However, to be effective it will need more active engagement from

both government and non-government actors, in areas such as harmonising transfer values across programmes, or on targeting strategy, as a minimum.

**It is important to appreciate possible trade-offs and understand and address any constraints in national systems when designing responses through social protection systems:** While there are clear potential advantages to making use of national social protection systems, the approach also presents new challenges. In the case of Tajikistan, making use of existing data, systems and processes offers potential for a faster and more cost-efficient response. However, on the flip side there are gaps in coverage - operational systems can only be leveraged in those districts where the TSA is operational, while the social protection system does not currently target or provide support for the ‘missing middle’ – such as families in the informal sector and migrant workers – that will be affected by shocks. This was demonstrated in the context of the national COVID-19 response, where scaling up social protection to existing beneficiaries has been possible but where these badly affected sections of the population, and communities outside the TSA implementation zone, are not supported. In December 2020 UNICEF also launched a humanitarian appeal for US\$5 million with the aim of targeting 40,000 households excluded from the current social protection COVID-19 response. WFP’s cash for work intervention also aims to cover this group. Another issue to bear in mind is that a range of political pressures will influence the design decisions of national governments. In Tajikistan, this influenced, for example, decision making on the transfer value of the TESPP, in a context where the affordability of social protection is a politically sensitive topic. It is also something that may influence the vulnerability assessment processes informing shock response, in a context where there is a tendency for government to under report emergency needs.

## Next steps for SRSP in Tajikistan

UNICEF plans to build on the momentum created by the COVID-19 response experiences and will be seeking to further progress the institutionalisation of SRSP in Tajikistan in 2021. This will include:

- Joint monitoring of the cash transfer responses to COVID-19 with the MoHSPP and the World Bank.
- Documenting experiences of providing shock response through the TSA programme, jointly with the World Bank.
- Using this evidence to present the case for SRSP, and the TESPP, to government and development partners and agreeing on the next steps: to include moving forward with the pilot TESPP; a budget review of current state emergency funds; undertaking a cost-benefit analysis to demonstrate the benefit of using TESPP/TSA for emergency cash response; and advocacy for policy change.



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