Kyrgyzstan
Supporting National Social Protection Systems to Respond in Times of Crisis
Introduction

Social protection systems are increasingly being used to provide emergency assistance during times of crisis. These systems allow for more effective, efficient and sustainable solutions in delivering aid than creating parallel responses. This report documents an intervention by the State Agency for Social Welfare1 of the Kyrgyz Republic, supported by UNICEF, to design and implement a horizontal expansion of the national social protection system to provide cash assistance to vulnerable households affected by inter-ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. The case study documents UNICEF’s experiences, the processes followed and the lessons learned.

Overview & background

Following the ousting of former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010, riots escalated into mass violent clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern Osh and Jalalabad provinces. At least 490 people lost their lives in the violence and more than 4,600 were injured in the largest emergency the country had faced since independence. About 400,000 people were directly affected by the violence, with 75,000 refugees fleeing to Uzbekistan and a further 300,000 persons internally displaced. The Interim Government had limited experience of and capacity to deal with major emergencies, and also faced a governance crisis, as the violence led to a breakdown in trust between the ethnic communities and lowered confidence in the law enforcement authorities, particularly among ethnic Uzbeks. The Interim Government appealed for international assistance to deal with the humanitarian consequences of the violence. Although most of the refugees and internally displaced people returned to their homes within a month, they required extended emergency assistance, given large-scale destruction of housing, sustaining of injuries, and loss of livelihoods. Vulnerable families with children (an estimated 2,300 people) were particularly in need of support.

By 2010, the national social protection system was already relatively well developed. Social assistance programmes included subsidies inherited from Soviet times and two targeted cash-based social transfer programmes, both introduced in 1998. The Unified Monthly Benefit (UMB) is means-tested, targeting low-income families with children aged 1.5 to 16 years (or 21 years if still studying). It also includes a fixed birth grant and allowance for children under 1.5 years. The Monthly Social Benefit (MSB) is categorically targeted to disadvantaged groups, including children and adults with disabilities, orphaned children, families with many dependents and older persons not qualifying for state pensions. Families meeting the criteria can receive both benefits, which are paid at household level: transfer values vary depending on family size and demographic composition. Together the programmes accounted for 0.5 per cent of GDP in 2009. Both were centrally managed by the State Agency for Social Welfare (SASW) and had fairly good coverage, reaching 346,833 child beneficiaries (around 14 per cent of the country’s children and 18 per cent of all families with children) and 63,818 persons (over 6.5 per cent of the population) respectively in April 2010. The registration processes for both programmes – and especially the UMB – were rigid, bureaucratic and cumbersome. Families had to apply in the social welfare offices at district level, often over 100km from their residence. Both programmes required applicants to provide multiple documents, which could take time to collect and were not all easily accessible (some required in-person application, again at district level). For example, the UMB required copies of parents’ national ID, children’s birth certificates, and proof of income from workplaces or local authorities. The MSB required caregivers’ national ID, children’s birth certificates, parents’ death certificates, certificates for children at school, and certificates from the health authorities confirming disability. The UMB had the additional requirement of a household visit by a social welfare officer to further verify income. UNICEF had been working with SASW since 2008, supporting independent analysis of the social protection system, reforms to MSB targeting (to stop linking the categorical benefit to family income) and other efforts to reduce exclusion error. It was also involved in technical discussions and policy dialogue in 2009 on how to respond to the impacts of the global financial crisis through the social protection system.

1 Now the Ministry of Labour and Social Development
Early on in the recovery phase, it became apparent to UNICEF that humanitarian assistance was limited to sector-specific, in kind, commodity distributions according to agency mandates. There was no analysis of the needs and vulnerabilities of low-income families and no plan to provide any income support to households despite the fact that markets and services were not disrupted. In this context, UNICEF and SASW designed and implemented a horizontal expansion of the national social protection system to provide cash assistance to vulnerable households affected by the inter-ethnic conflict.

Intervention

Throughout the project, UNICEF worked in partnership with the Interim Government – both SASW and other departments – to extend the two social transfer programmes to new, disaster-affected households. The eligibility criteria remained the same, but an extraordinary enrolment campaign was conducted and other actions were taken to reduce barriers to enrolment for new households. Social protection was also expanded to provide support for children whose parents or caregivers had gone missing in the conflict. Children with missing parents/breadwinners and without supporting documents were covered with a monthly stipend of KGS 1,000. During that time children were assisted to restore or establish documentation in order to become eligible for the UMB or MSB. These children could receive support until they turned eighteen.
Prior to the crisis, the SASW had never engaged in emergency response and it had not initially been clear about its role. After physical access was restored to the affected areas, UNICEF and SASW conducted a joint rapid assessment, which confirmed that socially vulnerable groups (low-income families with many children, children with disabilities, single senior citizens and families who had lost their breadwinners) and especially children were among the most affected, that households had lost their means to earn incomes, and that this line of activity was directly relevant to its mandate.

The feasibility of using the social protection system to respond to the needs of those affected by the crisis needed to be assessed. UNICEF’s prior engagement with SASW meant that it was already familiar with the objectives, design and operational processes of social transfer programmes in their usual development context. This sped up the assessment process and facilitated political buy in from the start. UNICEF knew the programmes’ eligibility criteria, and believed that those identified in needs assessment as most vulnerable met the criteria. It also knew that the application processes for these programmes – especially the UMB – were not conducive to supporting a rapid response. It thus resolved that an extraordinary enrolment campaign targeting the communities most affected by the conflict would guarantee minimum incomes for households impoverished by the conflict while lives and livelihoods recovered.

After the assessment, UNICEF held discussions with SASW to ascertain the political will for responding to the needs of conflict-affected families by expanding the social transfer programmes; if it was possible to relax certain administrative processes to facilitate rapid identification and enrolment; the capacities of the administrative staff and the support they would need to rapidly scale up the programme; where registration and payments usually took place and whether these points were accessible to the affected population; and any risks or concerns the SASW had regarding expanding this programme and if they could be mitigated. A cross-governmental taskforce was established, chaired by the Vice Prime Minister for Social Affairs and including SASW, the State Registration Service, the Ministries of Finance, Education and Health, and UNICEF. The taskforce developed a plan to ensure that those affected by the conflict could access the state services they needed. Within about two weeks, a Temporary Regulation was drafted and approved by the President to accelerate enrolment to the social assistance programmes. This relaxed the proof of eligibility requirements for a six-month period – the peak of the humanitarian response – in the affected areas, and was also applied to applications that were already in the pipeline but not yet approved. Ad hoc local social commissions were established to rapidly assess applications without household visits, and decisions could be made without documented proof of eligibility being provided.
As soon as the regulation was endorsed, leaflets were distributed in three languages in the affected territories to inform the population about the initiative, its purpose and how to apply. UNICEF recruited additional social workers and trained them on the new Regulation, introducing points of contact for social welfare at village level in the affected areas through mobile groups. This effectively took registration to community level, increasing accessibility for the poorest. UNICEF funded these mobile groups until the end of 2011. The mobile groups and the multi-disciplinary taskforce assisted families to speedily restore their documents. The mobile social workers assisted applicants who had lost their documents to complete the required forms, and these were then fast tracked through the taskforce.

At that time no digital management information system (MIS) existed. UNICEF set up an information support centre in Osh City Social Welfare Department, and social protection specialists were deployed there. The centre developed a specific MIS to support the project. This created an integrated single database of affected families.

SASW officers did not practice case management before the crisis. During the crisis, UNICEF provided training and coaching for social protection managers and social workers on additional outreach measures to ensure family welfare. New documentation—a family care and support plan—was introduced to monitor needs, referrals to services and progress. UNICEF covered the costs of monitoring visits by social workers until the end of 2011. The Government subsequently adopted the same monitoring approach.

During the crisis, like previously, social transfer payments were delivered to families every month as cash payments through local post offices, as post office branches proved accessible in all villages despite the conflict. Cash delivery was smooth, as the post offices were used to making these payments. It took about one month from the rapid assessment in July until the first payments were provided at the end of August.

The costs of these transfers were funded through the national budget line for social assistance. The numbers were manageable and so did not require additional measures from the Ministry of Finance. In addition, these newly enrolled cases fitted the normal eligibility criteria for social transfer programmes and so were eligible for continued, regular support (i.e. not just during the crisis period), meaning needs were met through the existing national budget rather than with ‘emergency funds’. UNICEF provided technical assistance, mediated negotiations to facilitate vital regulatory changes, financed and supported increased operational capacity for the programmes during the extraordinary enrolment campaign, and monitored the programme.

Progress and results

The Temporary Regulation ensured speedier enrolment of eligible cases to social transfer programmes while it was in force. During the six-month ‘grace period’ applicants could be enrolled and begin receiving their transfers without providing all the necessary documents. Given the displacement, it was also possible to enrol eligible households outside their places of residence, so that they could receive support in their temporary location. A total of 254 new conflict-affected households (including 764 children) were enrolled on the UMB, while 645 children were enrolled in the SMB.

Taking registration to people not only speeded up enrolment of those made vulnerable and impoverished by the crisis, but also identified persons who had previously been eligible but had not known about the programmes or had been unable to apply. In both programmes enrolments increased substantially while the eligibility requirements were relaxed (UMB increasing by over 18,500 children and MSB by 3,346 cases). The households enrolled in the programmes (those already in the pipeline, and new cases arising from the emergency) became part of the regular beneficiary caseload on submission of their restored documents. They continued receiving assistance after the emergency response and recovery ended.

LONGER-TERM EFFECTS

UNICEF’s experiences provide tangible evidence that supporting emergency response through national social protection systems can have longer-term impacts for the underlying social protection system in the country:

• UNICEF’s partnership with SASW during the emergency was a useful entry point to negotiate reforms to the value of the UMB benefit, leading to provision in 2011 of a Guaranteed Minimum Income of appropriate size and linked to national poverty indicators.

• The status of social protection within government increased, as senior officials came to
understand the importance of social protection for meeting household needs. This led to the reinstatement of social protection at ministerial level, with the creation of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MoLSP) in 2011. Under this new Ministry, social protection was managed through the newly created Department for State Benefits. Until that point no single ministry had owned child protection, and distinct functions were spread across the portfolios of different departments. After the MoLSP was established, child protection was formally integrated as a component of social protection services.

- Social protection professionals received ‘hands-on’ experience of implementing such a programme. Thirty of the social workers trained by UNICEF were subsequently mainstreamed into the Department, and funded by the state budget. Others were employed by NGOs supporting social welfare service provision. The Department also continued following the case management procedures introduced during the crisis after UNICEF’s exit.

LESSONS LEARNED

Several lessons can be learned from UNICEF’s experience of linking to national systems to provide assistance to conflict-affected families in Kyrgyzstan. These include enabling factors that supported effective implementation, along with challenges faced.

UNICEF’s early engagement with SASW generated the understanding and political will to support the response. Thanks to participating in the rapid assessment, the SASW saw the impact of the crisis on families and children, and better understood its mandated role. UNICEF’s previous working relationship with SASW also helped, as trust and understanding had already been established.

Early establishment of the interagency taskforce with senior leadership was crucial. The group worked quickly and productively to elaborate actions, required procedures and provisional normative acts, and endorsed the Regulation on behalf of the Government, and facilitated its sign off by the President. Besides the legal necessity, the Regulation had a catalytic effect by ensuring efficient collaboration among the concerned governmental entities, and between central and local authorities.

Speedy design and approval of the Temporary Regulation was critical for enabling the social transfer programmes to be used for the crisis response. The Interim Government lacked certain statutory powers, meaning the President had to approve decisions directly, rather than their approval in cabinet committees. These interim measures made the approval process faster than could be expected in normal times.

Conflict-Sensitive Design and Implementation

The ethnic nature of the conflict required a conflict-sensitive response. The inter-ethnic dimension was sensitive and SASW was unsure how to respond. The Government was not a party to the conflict but there were political sensitivities, as it had to be seen to be impartial. The conflict most heavily affected Uzbek communities, while most officials were Kyrgyz. The staff were somewhat reluctant to respond, partly on grounds of personal safety, and partly because they were also part of the community and not immune to the long-running tensions between the two ethnic groups.

- UNICEF’s engagement and the idea of providing support through the social protection system helped to mobilize stakeholders in government, at national and sub-national levels, behind the concept of ‘support for children’. This gave the national Government a clear and neutral role, as the programmes were open to both ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz citizens and assisted all children and vulnerable groups affected by the emergency. This also helped with communicating the initiative to frontline staff and the affected communities, as everyone could find common ground around assisting children. This demonstrates how an appropriately designed cash intervention can promote humanitarian principles in a conflict context. While the payments were insufficient to cover all humanitarian needs, Uzbek communities perceived them as a sign that the Government supported reconciliation and solidarity.

- To ensure that the initiative was inclusive of both communities, UNICEF recruited both Uzbek and Kyrgyz social workers for the programme. The social commissions’ membership reflected the communities’ ethno-demographic composition and included respected elders from both ethnic groups. These informal, traditional and trusted channels were a first entry point into some communities. This approach to community mediation avoided any inflammation of tensions and helped with peacebuilding and reunification of communities.
Institutionalizing shock-responsive social protection requires coordination and support across government. The 2010 initiative – and the required regulations, procedures and activities – was developed ex-post. To leverage similar approaches effectively in future disasters requires the mechanism to be agreed and institutionalized into the social protection system ex-ante. UNICEF and the Department of Social Benefits under the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (the successor to the SASW) have both advocated for this, but to date approval has not been granted. Between 2012 and 2014 a new social protection strategy was elaborated, which included an action point to establish an emergency unit or structure within the MoLSP and to formalize standby arrangements for similar deployments. However, this was never implemented. The high changeover of ministers and deputy ministers in the MoLSP and other departments has not helped. UNICEF could play an important role in bridging this gap between the social protection and emergency sectors by facilitating dialogue and joint planning between the relevant ministries, for more effective and efficient emergency cash interventions in the future.