Introduction

Rwanda has made significant progress in growing its social protection (SP) system, reducing poverty and ensuring the social welfare of its citizens over the past two decades. The national social protection system has evolved into a comprehensive, preventative, life-cycle oriented social protection system (UN Joint Programme Document, 2020). Despite this remarkable progress, there are still many gaps and challenges that need to be addressed. These include: low coverage of social protection services in comparison to needs, institutional capacity gaps to effectively and efficiently deliver social protection services, and targeting inefficiencies amongst other issues. The Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey 5 (2016/17) survey shows that 38.2% of the population still lives in poverty, with 16% living in extreme poverty. Susceptibility to climate related shocks and significant dependence on natural resources are among the contributing factors to poverty in Rwanda. All these challenges call for the need to support the Government of Rwanda’s efforts to end poverty through integration of SP services and system strengthening.

About the UN Joint Programme in Rwanda

To support these efforts, in 2019, three United Nations (UN) agencies including the United Nations Children’s Fund, World Food Programme, and the Food and Agriculture Organisation developed a Joint Programme (UNJP) on “Accelerating Integrated Policy Interventions to Promote Social Protection in Rwanda.” This was done in partnership with the Government of Rwanda and under the stewardship of the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office in Rwanda. The UNJP was funded through the UN Sustainable Development Goals Fund (Joint SDG Fund) for the period 31 December 2019 to 30 June 2022 with a geographical scope at the national level and at the community level for direct service delivery in five targeted cells in five districts in Rwanda (Burera, Karongi, Kirehe, Nyamagabe, Rutsiro). The programme targeted the populations most vulnerable to economic and climatic shocks, primarily women-headed households, households with many children, and households with persons with disabilities.
The main objective of this UNJP was to support and accelerate the Government of Rwanda’s efforts for integrated Social Protection to end poverty in all its forms, leaving no one behind. The UNJP adopted a transformational intervention strategy which sought to provide innovative and integrated solutions for identified gaps at policy/strategic, system and community levels, accelerating results as envisaged in the national Social Protection Sector Strategic Plan (2018–2024) and the national Joint Multisectoral Action Plan to Eradicate Extreme Poverty amongst other key social protection priorities in Rwanda (see figure below).

**The Final Evaluation of the UNJP**

The final evaluation of the UNJP was undertaken to generate knowledge and high-quality lessons learned, including determining the overall functioning of the programme in catalysing strategic shifts in the social protection sector to foster a more shock-responsive and resilient policy framework, systems strengthening, and integrated service delivery to meet the needs of vulnerable households. It is also envisaged that the evaluation findings and recommendations will help the Social Protection Sector Working Group and the UN agencies to explore ways to further adapt and improve social protection programming and service delivery in Rwanda.

A theory-based evaluation approach was applied which involves using the Theory of Change and programme objectives as the point of reference to assess UNJP implementation. The six Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria including relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, outcomes (impact) and coherence were used as an evaluation framework. The evaluation applied a mixed methods approach including a document review, coupled with primary qualitative data collection at national and district level (focus group discussions and individual face-to-face or virtual interviews) and inclusion of secondary quantitative data collected for community level interventions. Diversification of sources and techniques was central to the data collection method and analysis.

**Key evaluation findings**

The UNJP response was comprehensive and relevant to national and community needs

The evaluation assessment of programme design and relevance found that the UNJP adopted an integrated multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral approach, with the intention to intervene at the three different levels and coordinate policies and programmes across the key sectors and line ministries. These include: the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC), Ministry of Emergency Management (MINEMA) and Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI). Strengthening the inter-institutional collaboration within government and facilitating collaboration between the social protection sector (led by MINALOC and LODA) and the disaster management sector (led by MINEMA) is one of the key achievements of the UNJP and a critical part of programme success. It enabled the key stakeholders
to work together in addressing SP challenges in a more comprehensive manner.

Additionally, the evaluation findings show that the model of simultaneously working upstream (national) and downstream (sector, cell, and village level) helped to create vertical linkages which allows partners to build strong evidence of effective innovative community interventions and use it to inform policy review.

The UNJP was also found to be well-aligned to both national SP policy priorities and community needs. Alignment was enhanced by extensive consultations with national level authorities (including MINALOC, MINEMA, MINAGRI), district authorities, community leaders and project beneficiaries in the selected districts.

The UNJP strengthened the policy framework for shock-responsive social protection and options for graduation

The UNJP has strengthened the policy framework for shock-responsive social protection in Rwanda. Key achievements include contribution to the revision of the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) Policy and the development of a comprehensive package of seven sector preparedness plans whose purpose is to integrate preparedness and response by considering various sectoral contributions, promoting better coordination of services to the most vulnerable households before, during and after shocks. Furthermore, the UNJP supported the Government of Rwanda’s emphasis on shock-responsive social protection by providing additional resources, technical know-how, and dedicated hands-on momentum on the issue. Examples of some of the support include: convening policy dialogues between ministries and other actors, actively supporting the Technical Working Group on shock-responsive SP, technical analysis and providing capacity building in shock-responsive SP amongst other contributing factors.

The evaluation findings also show that by piloting an integrated package of community level interventions, the UNJP implemented innovative solutions which can inform the design of the desired comprehensive graduation package that responds to the targets set in the Social Protection policy and Sector Strategic Plan (SSP). For example, the basket of interventions were included in the National Strategy for Sustainable Graduation M&E Plan (2022) which is pending Cabinet approval and will be considered in the Midterm Review of the Social Protection SSP which is currently underway.

Strengthening SP systems

Success was recorded in relation to strengthening social protection delivery systems. Firstly, the UNJP conducted a diagnostic assessment on the sensitivity of the SP sector to climate shocks and used the findings to inform capacity building activities and systems development works.

Evaluation data also shows that the integrated case management and referral (ICMR) mechanism is being implemented and is operational across the five districts. Furthermore, the ICMR business model
informed the design of the national implementation guidelines for the para-social workers mechanism with the Participating UN agencies also contributing to the dissemination of these guidelines at national and local government levels in 2021. The evaluation also found that a gap to successful ICMR implementation is the insufficient linking up of community workforces (Proximity Advisors) with disaster preparedness training and response efforts.

Figure 2: Examples of SP systems strengthening

The UNJP was successful in designing and testing a range of innovative SP interventions. The evaluation findings show that project beneficiaries in the five targeted districts participated in a combination of resilience-enhancing social protection interventions. Beneficiaries in all five districts also confirmed their participation in the different interventions. A frequently mentioned strength of the programme at community level was that the design provided for a comprehensive package of services (cash plus) combining asset transfers, capacity building, seed funding business projects and regular home visits to households with follow-ups by proximity advisors. Figure 4 shows the different interventions.

Figure 3: JP Resilience-enhancing SP interventions

Contribution to strengthening poor household’s resilience to climatic shocks

Interviews with project beneficiaries indicate that the UNJP has contributed to several individual and household level outcomes and these include; acquired knowledge and skills on small scale farming practices, improved savings culture, ability to pay for basic needs, improved living conditions, reduced family conflicts, and improvements in diet due to increased consumption of milk, vegetables, and eggs.

The evaluation identified the following community level outcomes: improved local development due to increased number of small businesses, a more diversified and strengthened local economy, reduced num-

Improving M&E systems
- Developing a M&E framework and tools for the household profiling data system (LODA)

Capacity strengthening
- 15 central government officers trained on shock-responsive SP
- 99 (35 women, 64 men) district officers, community leaders trained on seasonal livelihood programming and participatory planning approaches
- 143 district officials trained on DRRM and engaged in emergency simulation exercises
- Guidelines for the Consultative Committees for Development of the Cell developed and 123 (86 men & 37 women) trained on these guidelines

Integrated case management & referral
- World Relief tested the government-adopted case management and referral business model including different tools like classification of beneficiaries into pathways of support, identification of beneficiary issues, creation of referrals and monitoring and reporting

Figure 4: JP Resilience-enhancing SP interventions

Productive assets, inputs, infrastructure - terracing, boreholes, small livestock (goats, sheep, pigs, and poultry)
Growing community demonstration plots and homestead kitchen gardens - 3656 across 5 districts
Seed funding for business proposals - 108 (35% M; 65% F)
Village Savings Loan Associations (VSLAs) - 178 (34% M; 66%F)
Capacity building/skills training - est. kitchen gardens, terracing, water harvesting, income generating activities, setting up VSLAs
Income generating activities - selling surplus
Counselling services by Proximity Advisors including sharing information on SP entitlements through Interpersonal Communication (IPC) and Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC)
The UNJP was successful in designing and testing a range of innovative SP interventions. The evaluation findings show that project beneficiaries in the five targeted districts participated in a combination of resilience-enhancing social protection interventions. Beneficiaries in all five districts also confirmed their participation in the different interventions.

Integration of gender, equity and people with disability
The evaluation found that gender and equity were integrated to a large extent through targeting most vulnerable households and in particular women, including teenage mothers and women in households with more than three children, and persons with disabilities (PWD). Women empowerment activities, such as seed funding for female-run individual and group business/projects, were also implemented to better their lives. In as much as PWD were integrated, the evaluation established that more could have been done to ensure more intentional and effective inclusion and participation of PWD in the UNJP. Therefore, in future Joint Programmes, sufficient time should be invested into planning and conceptualising how gender and disability should be mainstreamed throughout all the programme activities.

Lessons learned on effective approaches in comprehensive social protection
- The programme was well aligned to the Government of Rwanda’s priority policy needs. By developing feasible solutions to these issues, the UNJP interventions gained traction and were quickly implemented; for example, training proximity advisors in interpersonal communication and SBCC.
- Building the capacity of local authorities and community structures is crucial for the success and sustainability of interventions, especially when they are expected to continue supervising and monitoring activities after programme implementation.
- Providing a comprehensive package of nutrition-sensitive, shock-responsive social protection that includes livelihood empowerment pathways, seed funding and VSLAs, combined with psycho-social support from Proximity Advisors, builds resilience for vulnerable and food-insecure people.
- The seed funding to support competitive innovative income generating business ideas and projects contributes to enhance beneficiaries’ graduation. The mechanism (grant approach with accompanying guidelines) has been appreciated by beneficiaries and local leaders and should be considered for integration into the national SP system as an approach to graduation of households from extreme poverty.

Efficiency
The evaluation found that the UNJP was well coordinated and highly cost-effective. A steering committee and technical committee were set up to coordinate the UN agencies, relevant ministries, and the implementing organisation. These structures played a key role in providing guidance and strategic direction for the UNJP. A limitation of the UNJP is that it did not provide for similar technical structures to be established at district level.

Sustainability beyond the UNJP
The evaluation concluded that services and innovative mechanisms implemented under the UNJP will likely be sustained beyond the stipulated programme period as sustainability mechanisms are in place to ensure community level interventions continue through strengthening existing community structures (e.g., para social workers) and committees such as the Consultative Committees for Development of the Cell. The UNJP also benefitted from strong community involvement and buy-in into the different activities in the five targeted communities. The evaluation shows that there is need for continued funding for similar social protection interventions beyond this seminal phase. The UNJP experience confirms that the UN can add great value to national SP system strengthening in Rwanda.

Conclusion
The evaluation found that despite the advent of COVID-19, the UNJP has mostly achieved its planned outputs and exceeded its planned targets. It has demonstrated the importance as well as showcased innovation in social protection. However, to ensure sustainability, replication, and scale-up of the different innovative interventions implemented under the UNJP, advocacy for further financing for a similar but longer and wider joint programme is needed.
**Key policy recommendations**

1. The evaluation found that the social protection interventions implemented in the five districts have resulted in positive outcomes and enhanced the resilience to respond to shocks. The following is therefore recommended:

   - To cost the interventions at community level, in particular the seed funding. This is **high priority recommendation** that should be implemented by MINALOC with the support of PUNOs in the next 6-12 months.

   - To scale up the interventions to other communities, cells, sectors and districts. This can be achieved through: continuous advocacy and policy dialogue for universal coverage by 2030 (next SDG reporting timeframe); identifying key moments in the development planning process to advise on target setting and resource mobilisation priorities; and revision of the NST-1 targets up to 2024. This is a **high priority recommendation** that should be led by MINALOC and LODA with support from development partners including UN agencies and implemented in the next 6 to 12 months.

2. The evaluation found a gap in linkages between the Proximity Advisor workforce and shock-responsive interventions. It is thus recommended to revise the para-social workers’ guidelines to include disaster preparedness and response efforts and link them to SP interventions/access to SP services. For those already trained, refresher training should include a module building on the guidelines developed by MINEMA. This is a **medium priority recommendation** that should be led by MINALOC and LODA with support from development partners including the UN agencies and implemented in the next 6 to 12 months.

3. The findings from this evaluation show that the ICMR model can be successfully implemented by well-trained Proximity Advisors who have the support of the sector and district officials and that it has had a positive impact on the lives of beneficiaries. The model should therefore continue to be scaled up across all districts and cells as a continuous process with regular refresher trainings. This is a **high priority recommendation** that should be led by MINALOC and LODA with support from the UN agencies and implemented in the next 6 to 12 months.

4. The findings from this evaluation demonstrate that awarding seed funding to well conceptualised business plans via an open, transparent and competitive bidding process, supported by Business Development Advisors’ (BDA) coaching, is a sustainable model for supporting the poorest households to access livelihood opportunities. This model should be further refined to include continuous support from BDAs to ensure businesses remain viable in the medium to long term (e.g., linking products to market, setting profitable prices etc.). It should then be considered in the ongoing midterm review of the 2018-2024 Social Protection Strategic Plan and Guidelines for provision of seed funding to VUP beneficiaries which were developed by the JP and informed the delivery of the UNJP model. This is a **high priority recommendation** that should be led by MINALOC and LODA with support from the UN agencies and implemented in the next 6 to 12 months. It can also be taken on board by future Joint Programmes and other programmes supporting social protection, social inclusion and livelihoods.

5. Developing a financing strategy and national resource mobilisation plan for social protection was a planned action within the JP that was not achieved. It would have enabled the JP to work with the government to unlock further financing to implement the SP policy and sector strategic plan, e.g., climate funds for shock-responsive SP and financing of categorical grants. It is recommended that UN agencies, MINEMA and MINALOC, together with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, develop a finance and resource mobilisation strategy for a comprehensive, shock-responsive social protection system in Rwanda. This is a **medium priority recommendation** that should be implemented within the next 12-18 months after the revised SP sector strategic plan is ready, the revised VUP programme document is approved, and once the NST-2 is already being prepared.
This evaluation brief is based on a more detailed evaluation report developed for the UNJP by Southern Hemisphere. The evaluation team included Cathy Chames, Nana Davies, Sylvestre Musengimana, Brilliant Bhebe, and Petronella Ncube.