WINDS OF CHANGE

Lessons and recommendations on the use of Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) for the Caribbean Atlantic Hurricane Season

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Acknowledgements

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The document is intended to be updated regularly and practitioners are invited to share your documents on the CaLP library and reflections on CaLP discussion groups.

Introduction

This briefing note has been commissioned by the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) Network in order to compile evidence on good practice and lessons learned to generate recommendations for humanitarian practitioners and other actors to take into consideration when designing cash and voucher assistance (CVA) in the Caribbean region. This briefing note is based on findings from 12 key informant (KI) interviews and a desk review of approximately 35 documents including evaluations, appeals, guidance and grey literature. The key lessons are structured by the CaLP’s Programme Quality Toolbox categories with a focus on Caribbean specific considerations. The document is intended to be updated regularly and stakeholders are invited to share documents on the CaLP library and reflections on CaLP discussion groups.

There is no shortage of CVA standards and guidance available on quality programming, coordination, preparedness, data sharing and protection, communications with affected populations and COVID-19. Overall lessons on CVA are applicable in the Caribbean and therefore are not included below (e.g., standards on CVA design such as transfer values, targeting, eligibility; setting clear roles and responsibilities for effective coordination; post distribution monitoring guidelines); the lessons below are focused on the aspects of the Caribbean context that are different from global lessons and best practice.

Top three CVA recommendations for the COVID-19 response

01 Enlist digital delivery mechanisms: Lessons learned from previous experiences reinforce this recommendation. In the COVID-19 context, digital CVA can limit contact and mitigate the spread of disease. See CaLP guidance on COVID-19 and CVA considerations on emerging good practice on this topic.

02 Consider Anticipatory Action: Forecast-based financing, forecast-based action, early warning early action and other anticipatory action approaches are gaining increasing traction with humanitarian actors as mechanisms for providing critical support to vulnerable communities before disasters occur. Anticipatory action requires pre-determined 1) forecasts, triggers and decision-making protocols, 2) timed and planned early actions, 3) financing mechanisms and 4) delivery channels. Anticipatory action is very relevant for the region where seasonal events are cyclical and to an extent, predictable.

03 The Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB): The MEB should be updated to take COVID-19 related aspects into consideration across sectors and thematic areas.
Overall Lessons

The Caribbean region is diverse

Although not CVA specific, a key lesson highlighted is the differences in history, economies, politics, and languages between the sub-regions of the Caribbean and among the different islands. What has worked in one context may not work in another for a myriad of reasons (e.g. government receptiveness and knowledge of use of CVA in humanitarian situations varies). Several key informants emphasized the point – which was notably absent from the desk review - that working in the Caribbean is surprisingly complicated because of cultural norms and a lack of understanding of the socio-economic environmental, geographical and political elements of each island. Humanitarian actors new to the region often make the false assumption that the Caribbean is straightforward due to its relative economic and political stability compared to other humanitarian contexts.

Due to the very limited presence of international humanitarian actors in the Caribbean, it is recommended that actors have a strong understanding of the context based on discussions with local actors to underpin their added value, particularly in the delivery of CVA, as this offers a potential for collaboration and to ‘piggy back’ off other regional and national preparedness initiatives. It was stated that not all humanitarian actors need to be at a heightened

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1 For actors working in Haiti it is recommended to read the 2018 report, “Moving Forward with Cash in Haiti: A Review of Cash-Based Interventions During Hurricane Matthew Response in Haiti” as it outlines the major considerations for the context to take into account for CVA.
2 CDEMA, January 2018, “Rapid Review of the Regional Response in the Hurricanes Irma and Maria Events,” where reference to “cash-based assistance” was made throughout the report, highlighting the need to review CVA across the affected states. In addition, the action in the report call for stakeholders to: “Re-examine cash, voucher and livelihood revitalization initiatives for sustainability, impact on cultures and economies.” This briefing note is based on a review of the available evidence in order to offer lessons learned, highlight good practice and offer recommendations to feed into preparedness plans for those implementing CVA in the Caribbean.

3 Eastern Caribbean States versus, the Overseas Territories of the UK, France and Netherlands, versus Haiti, versus Dominican Republic versus Cuba. This mapping from OCHA can be helpful to see the variety of countries: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ocha-caribbeanoverview-20190703.pdf
The Caribbean is well-suited for CVA due to strong finance services and markets, but the cultural nuances of using cash must be understood well.

Go local

A clear theme across the data has been on the importance and value of localisation in a region such as the Caribbean. There are strong existing capacities in most governments, along with close knit communities, strong civil society actors and private sector entities amongst the first responders. Capacity building efforts, particularly CVA trainings, have been mixed. While cited as useful, there is also high turnover of staff both in government and local organisations, and therefore limited institutionalisation of CVA knowledge. Recommendations include a call for more regional exchanges at all levels for those working in CVA and explicit investments in knowledge transfer as part of job descriptions of humanitarian experts deployed in a response.

Buy-in and awareness-raising as preparedness ‘software’

A key lesson from recent years has emerged on the importance of buy-in of national partners at all levels, from government officials to Red Cross National Society governance boards and local implementers, such as Rotary, Lions Club, Adventist Relief Agency (ADRA) or local church groups. Over the last decade, the Red Cross has run pilots with national societies in the region which have set the stage for acceptance and buy-in from their management ahead of larger disasters (e.g. Dominica and The Bahamas). There are South-South learning events and regional conferences at intra-government level where sharing and learning takes place which was also listed as good practice.

As one informant noted, there is much conversation in the Caribbean on CVA, the Caribbean has a good enabling environment for CVA; and therefore CVA should be the default response. While significant progress has been made, there is still caution and reticence on CVA, in particular from some disaster risk (DRM) agencies which need to be addressed. It is recommended that the good practice of conversations and the ‘software’ of preparedness continues to be supported.

Agree on common approaches and standards

Donors and other actors would like to see common approaches to CVA before outlining the necessary coordination mechanisms, given the relatively small populations and close knit nature of communities in many of the Caribbean states. The literature review indicates a lack of coordination and strategy among all actors (government, donors, international actors, private sector, civil society) in many cases, which has been exacerbated by competition and/or a lack of understanding of the different capacities and value added of the various stakeholders. It is recommended that actors working in CVA have harmonised approaches to transfer values, assessments and monitoring for CVA and a common understanding of the range of actors and their roles within a specific response. The Joint Emergency Cash Transfer in Dominica (see Box 4), led by the Government of Dominica, WFP and UNICEF, and the Joint Cash Platform in the British Virgin Islands, led by the Government of the British Virgin Islands, Red Cross, Caritas, in the 2017 hurricane season are both cited as good practice.

Box 1: Good practice Localisation

In the last two years, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has scaled down its physical operations in the region and has since focused on working together with local organisations on partner-led responses. By focusing on reinforcing local partner readiness, which includes CVA, CRS can extend its response capacity through localised collaboration throughout the region, while maximising operational cost efficiency.

Box 2: Good practice Coordination

The Cash Working Group (CWG) in Haiti is seen as good practice as joint needs and market assessments, the creation and sharing of guidelines and harmonisation led to a more coherent response. The Haiti CWG has a wide representation of actors and the ability to influence, advocate, set standards and collaborate around added value of members. It is co-led by Mercy Corps and WFP and had dedicated funding for coordination staff, learning and the development of guidelines.
Winds of change

The Caribbean is primarily a region with strong governments which lead the response

Share space and resources

A clear finding from the review is the added value of different actors sitting together in a response. In the responses in Dominica, the British Virgin Islands and The Bahamas, government provided or facilitated access to a space for partners in-country with internet and office amenities. As many actors lack an existing national presence (a key constraint in rapid scale-up of assistance), this provision was appreciated by international partners and also enabled quick decision making and relationship building because of the close working environment, as was noted in the evaluation of the Dominica JECT.

For the British Virgin Islands JCP, resources such as staff, office space, vehicles were also shared. Social workers from the Department of Social Services, a project manager from CRS and various Red Cross staff worked as one team with equal ownership on decision making and implementation. The Collaborative Cash Delivery Network has approaches and tools under development that may be relevant for the response in the Caribbean context, which is characterised by real-time collaboration with an area-based approach. It is recommended that national DRM agencies and other operational agencies are supported to plan for the provision of joint working spaces and sharing of resources.

Learn to work in government-led responses

The Caribbean is primarily a region with strong governments which lead the response. International humanitarian actors are often coming in due to the lack of presence (and at times from outside the region) and are not used to engaging with governments to such an extent. It is recommended that international aid actors deploy staff who have the ability, knowledge and experience of working with high-capacity governments, including the ‘soft’ skills of relationship-building and networking. This is a lesson echoed across the key informants and a key lesson from the British Virgin Islands evaluation.7

Box 3: Good practice

Supporting government-led response

In Dominica, WFP and UNICEF collaborated to support the Government to implement the Joint Emergency Cash Transfer (JECT) programme, which temporarily expanded the existing Public Assistance Programme from about 6,600 people to approximately 25,000 and increasing the transfer value. In addition to government-funded benefits for existing recipients, an emergency grant was funded by WFP, with a top-up for households with children funded by UNICEF. In addition to piggy-backing off the Government’s existing social protection programme, the intervention strengthened capacity and systems through the development of an operations manual and standard operational procedures, as well as coping for an information management system.

Go digital

With the widespread use of mobile phones and the enabling infrastructure in the Caribbean, key informants and existing literature point to the efficiencies of using digital platforms throughout the project cycle and particularly for rapid analysis and sharing in assessment, registration and post-distribution monitoring. Digital tools are still not harnessed to the extent possible but the shift is being made by all actors, from government to local partners. Recommendations include the use of pre-made forms (KOBO/ODK) for assessments and registration (e.g. five simple questions to determine the eligibility for a rapid, low-value transfer12), process and output monitoring forms that are easily downloadable to adapt, and accountability and feedback mechanisms. It is recommended that processes are digitised to the extent possible and forms developed as part of preparedness planning.

Particular attention should be paid to responsible data management throughout the project cycle to ensure no new risks are introduced either to the recipients or to the organisations providing assistance. Key recommendations include minimising the collection of personally identifiable and sensitive information, standardising data sharing agreements, identifying data governance protocols with implementing partners in the preparedness phase, and working closely with ICT and IT practitioners to ensure digital tools meet data protection standards.13

Use secondary data for initial assessments and analysis

A lack of primary data early in the response was listed as a key challenge. While this is a global challenge, the Caribbean is notable in that unlike other regions, secondary data in the form of country poverty assessments, census information, consumer price indices, regular market monitoring from government sources, exists and is relatively accessible. The Red Cross has found creative ways of using data from Zika-related health programmes in country, in order to start the process of analysing vulnerabilities. The use of secondary information was highlighted by both key informants and the desk review as a good way to quickly determine a Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB), key livelihood needs, minimum wage and map financial service providers (FSPs). Global good practice, cautions on assessment ‘fatigue’ and on small islands, this is doubly true, as highlighted in Dominica.14 As time and programming progresses, the information can be refined for recovery programming. It is recommended that any assessment should include official government sources and primary data collection should focus on gaps, or if required, serve to validate existing information.
Comprehensive market assessments are not needed in most cases

Humanitarian actors implementing CVA are trained to tick off the market assessment box, however, across key informant there was a strong feeling that a comprehensive, in-depth market assessment by humanitarian actors was not required to implement CVA in most Caribbean states. This decision is subject to the scale of the impact. Markets are essential lifelines on small islands and generally reestablish fairly quickly, as it is a government priority due to the high dependency on exports.

As noted above on assessments, it is recommended that actors working in CVA communicate regularly with government entities responsible for markets (usually ministries of trade or finance), to ensure markets can support an immediate CVA response. It is also recommended that actors assess the scale of the disaster and either implement a ‘light touch’ market assessment to ensure limited inflation and continued availability of goods. If a disaster has a high impact with low recovery capacity, then a more comprehensive market assessment should be carried out.

Selecting a delivery mechanism depends on agency capacity and resources, objectives of the programme and coverage

There are a range of options to transfer resources, with some agencies opting for pre-existing arrangements, others assessing and then choosing providers on a case-by-case basis, and other times working through government delivery mechanisms to ensure limited inflation and continued availability of goods. If a disaster has a high impact with low recovery capacity, then a more comprehensive market assessment should be carried out.

Mobile money considerations

The best cash delivery option should always be a context-specific decision, based on an assessment of strengths, weaknesses and costs of feasible options. The decision to opt for mobile money – or any technology-based solution – should only be made if it fits the needs of the user, the humanitarian actor and the mobile network operator better than other available delivery mechanisms and should not be utilised by humanitarian actors to transfer risks. Opting for mobile money will not always be the most appropriate solution, especially in many of the Caribbean islands, where there is relatively high bank penetration and/or recipient populations have other preferred means of managing their finances.

15 Example of IFRC and quick deployment and disbursement of funds via debit cards in Antigua and the Bahamas
16 See GSMA’s Mobile Money Metrics, which includes the Deployment Tracker, a database of key information on global mobile money services
17 See Oxford Policy Management’s global evidence series on shock-responsive social protection
18 See Oxford Policy Management’s global evidence series on shock-responsive social protection

Photo: @IFRC
Who targets whom?

Targeting is a significant global challenge and specific dynamics in the Caribbean are worth noting. On one hand, there is a push to use existing government lists for social assistance, in line with Grand Bargain commitments on CVA, localisation and strengthening the ‘nexus.’ On the other hand, there is widespread recognition that: 1) the lists can be incomplete and/or need to be cleaned (e.g. Dominica 2017), 2) without data sharing protocols in place, this can take time to access (e.g. The Bahamas 2019) and 3) in many cases it leaves out migrant, refugee and undocumented populations - a growing issue, particularly with the Venezuela crisis. Many key informants recommended that the role of international NGOs and civil society actors is to ensure that assistance reaches those not recognised by government as they tend to be the most vulnerable. There is also an issue of trust between marginalised populations and the government, which international actors can help bridge by using their position to influence and advocate for inclusion.

There is also the question of how vulnerability is understood in the Caribbean. In a primarily middle and high income region, the concept of vulnerability and who requires assistance may differ between the government definition and that of international aid agencies. For example, humanitarian assistance has not traditionally covered those at the cusp of poverty lines, whereas in many places in the Caribbean, this group is considered important to support in the immediate aftermath to avoid them falling into poverty. It is recommended that different perspectives of vulnerability are taken into consideration. Depending on the objectives of the programme (system strengthening, capacity building, meeting basic needs, etc.), actors, including donors and governments, should coordinate amongst themselves on how coverage can be reached, who is best placed to assist whom, and with which funding streams.

Box 5: Good practice Flexible targeting22

A reflection from Dominica by UNDP in a Cash for Work (CFW) activity is that vulnerability criteria can be flexible at the start and adapt through the project cycle. The CFW activity was based on a Government safety net programme that provided modest incomes to vulnerable individuals for clean-up activities, which was reoriented to clear debris after the hurricane, with at least 50% of employees required to be women. When the project started, UNDP found that those working were predominantly male unemployed construction workers, resort staff and other men who had suddenly lost their jobs due to the hurricane. These workers gradually left during the six-month implementation period as better paid employment opportunities opened up and by the end of the project, beneficiaries were almost all women or vulnerable individuals, as originally planned. Income was a priority need during the emergency phase both to procure essential items to support families and help markets restart, as confirmed by WFP’s vulnerability assessments. UNDP’s project contributed to this during the initial response phase.

Establish clear two-way communication channels with affected populations that are country specific and take into account language and access

Establishing effective two-way communications with affected communities is a global lesson and the Caribbean-specific elements include taking into account migrant populations and their language and outreach needs. A range of digital platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, SMS, solar-powered radios when power and phone lines may be down) are all needed to support robust face-to-face and community interactions. Word of mouth is just as powerful a medium of communication across the Caribbean and both digital and analogue need to work hand-in-hand in order to effectively communicate with populations. In light of the COVID-19 restrictions, a reliance on digital platforms will be necessary. Depending on the context, posting lists with names or widely advertising who from the communities are on a verification panel is not appropriate.23 In the current environment of government social protection expansions in response to COVID-19, it is doubly important that the government is involved in the communications around CVA in order to ensure the assistance is well understood and does not interfere, cause confusion with or undermine social protection programming.
05. Monitoring and Evaluation

Prioritise evidence building

There is limited evidence for CVA in the Caribbean compared to other regions. This gap has restricted the ability of evidence-based decision making on the allocation of limited resources, as well as informed advocacy to support buy-in at the national level. For example, it is not appropriate to take evidence from Haiti and present it to The Bahamas as good practice as the contexts are vastly different. There is an urgent need and recommendation that response actors and donors allocate sufficient funds to document the use of CVA and produce and share evidence of CVA responses in the region.

One key informant noted that outcome monitoring through post-distribution monitoring systems and periodic evaluations or reviews is needed to ensure that the intervention remains effective to meet the diverse and evolving needs of affected populations. In addition, the monitoring analysis can be used for advocacy purposes and to gain buy-in from stakeholders.

06. Conclusions

Given the enabling infrastructure, markets, local capacities and interest of key stakeholders, the Caribbean region offers a number of opportunities to scale up CVA. The region also offers the opportunity for humanitarian actors to rise to the challenge and meet commitments to strengthen accountability to affected populations, support to local and national responders and improve collaboration among humanitarian and development actors. CVA is a critical tool which should not be treated as a stand-alone element, but as part of preparedness and contingency planning, and as a strategy to strengthen resilience through the development of shock-responsive social protection systems. Humanitarian actors need to collaborate, in support of national and regional actors, to leverage and maximise limited resources.