

Common Principles for Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection

SPIAC-B Working Group on Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection

The Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) Working Group on Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection aims to strengthen links between humanitarian assistance (HA) and social protection (SP), with cash transfers as the main entry point¹. Our membership brings together individuals from humanitarian and social protection actors including donors, the United Nations, development agencies, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, and not-for-profit organizations (NGOs and INGOs).

The Working Group, in line with its remit as a technical community of practice, proposes nine Common Principles to inform actions for more

effective progress in linking HA-SP to provide better services to affected people. These principles will be accompanied by practitioner-focused documents to propose their operationalisation and will be updated, when necessary, given the evolving nature of policy and practice.

These principles were developed by following a consultative process involving all members of the working group as well as other humanitarian, and social protection actors. A majority of the working group members validated these principles. Humanitarian Development Peace (HDP) Nexus recommendations frame this document.

The document consists of two parts:

- A.** An introduction describing why humanitarian and development actors need common principles, and how we will use them.
- B.** The nine Common Principles

The Working Group plans to add a forthcoming annex that provides further guidance on the operationalisation of the principles.

¹ Please see links to further information online on the [SPIAC-B Subgroup on linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection](#).

Why do we need Common Principles?

The frequency, intensity, complexity, and duration of crises is increasing, putting at risk progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More people live in contexts of protracted, crises, driven by conflict, climate vulnerability and socio-economic fragility. These needs will increase due to the climate crisis and disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable people such as women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities across the globe. Supporting crisis-affected people requires new ways of working together by international and national actors, and stronger coherence between Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) interventions. Long-term reliance on humanitarian assistance in protracted crises highlights the pressing need for greater responsibility sharing, including development financing to sustain basic services in crises. The [DAC Recommendation on the HDP Nexus](#) put forth eleven key principles to strengthen the coherence of humanitarian, development and peace actors in fragile and conflict settings. It calls for “prevention always, development wherever possible, humanitarian action where necessary. This approach should also be supported by the right kind of financing, drawing from diverse funding sources to ensure that the right resources are in the right place at the right time.” Commitments towards strengthening the HDP Nexus are also set out in the Grand Bargain, Agenda 2030, the Sustaining Peace resolutions, and Agenda for Humanity.

Social protection systems play a central role in addressing poverty and vulnerability, enhancing resilience, and responding effectively to shocks.

Strengthening social protection to enhance resilience for vulnerable groups is a key target of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and [Universal Social Protection 2030 \(USP2030\)](#). Meanwhile numerous commitments have been made to

link humanitarian assistance with social protection systems, recognising the potential of such connections to enhance effectiveness of aid.² Experience from COVID-19 and other recent shocks affirmed the important role of comprehensive, government-led social protection in effectively supporting needs of populations affected by shocks.

Linking humanitarian assistance and social protection provides a clear entry point for development and humanitarian actors, and government and non-governmental actors, to work together towards shared outcomes (see also Figure 1). It can generate efficiencies and advantages for people that humanitarian and development assistance aim to serve, thus improving on siloed humanitarian and development assistance. However, when practiced, linkages can offer improvement over parallel systems. Examples of advantages gained through linking can include greater timeliness, predictability, cost effectiveness, accountability, inclusivity, or sustainability, as well as effective risk management. When practiced, linkages should work towards meeting affected peoples’ needs (defined by dimensions of coverage, comprehensiveness, and adequacy).

Yet, humanitarian space and the role of principled assistance must be protected when linking with social protection in complex crisis settings characterized by risks of or ongoing protection violations. Connecting humanitarian assistance and social protection is not possible or necessarily desirable in all contexts.

The value of linking humanitarian assistance and social protection is clear. However, experience illustrates the constraints of putting linkages into practice. Linking requires that stakeholders from diverse and often siloed institutions work together

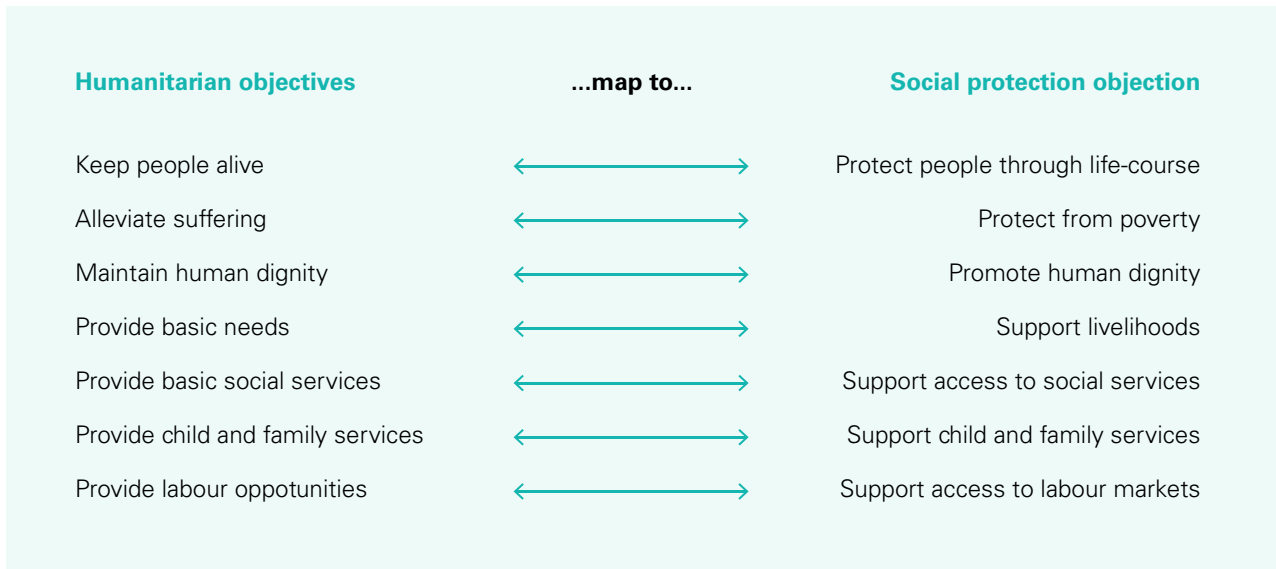
2 Including the Grand Bargain commitments 2016; the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants 2016; SPIAC-B’s call to action on linking humanitarian action and social protection (HA-SP); the Joint Donor Statement from the humanitarian Donor Cash Forum and calls for action published in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

before, during and after crises. At the same time, working together requires these stakeholders to understand and respect each other’s mandates and guiding principles, and build on one another’s comparative advantages. Key barriers include fragmentation and lack of coordination between development and humanitarian actors and between governmental SP and DRM actors and partners. Weak social protection systems remain common in many crisis settings. Siloed financing structures and funding constraints to programming across the nexus persist. Expertise to cut across sector and institutional siloes remains scarce. Additional challenges include con-

straints to data and information sharing, and institutional barriers, lack of political willingness/organisational self-interest, and gaps engaging local actors.

These Common Principles seek alignment with other relevant international commitments and global guidance.³ They provide a common framing to inform and define future global practices and mechanisms for linking humanitarian assistance and social protection to make progress towards our collective goal of better assistance for vulnerable populations.

Figure 1. Convergence of humanitarian and social protection objectives



Source: taken from [EU SPaN Guidance package, Reference document n°26, p.12](#)

3 These include amongst others the IASC Humanitarian Principles; the SPHERE standards; USP 2030; the Paris Declaration of Aid Effectiveness; the CAG Caucus Outcome document; as well as principles set out in TRANSFORM; SPACE policy guidance on coordination of HA-SP; [EU Social Protection Across the Nexus Toolkit \(SPAN\)](#); ECHO’s policy on humanitarian cash; and ECHO’s 2023 Guidance on Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings, and the OECD-DAC Recommendations on the HDP Nexus.

How will these Common Principles be used?

- We commit to using these principles to **guide our work as a Working Group** – including in our advocacy and our engagement with the Cash Advisory Group (CAG), Cash Working Groups, the SPIAC B and its working groups, social protection coordination groups, and other external stakeholders.⁴
- We commit to using these Principles to **guide discussion, address questions, and inform future ways of working within our respective organisations** – particularly at country level where they can contribute to enhancing coordination among HA-SP-peace actors.
- We recognise that political stability, the nature of shocks, and maturity of social protection systems varies between countries. There is no single universal objective for or approach to linking humanitarian assistance and social protection. The ways and extent to which stakeholders collaborate necessarily depends on context: linking where possible but recognising the distinctive contributions of humanitarian assistance and social protection to ensure timely response may mean that efforts may not take place to link humanitarian assistance with social protection or contribute to system building in all contexts. This document highlights principles which can be considered universal, as well as those which apply to specific crisis contexts.
- This statement of principles is deemed a living document that will be reviewed periodically as more evidence and effective practices emerge.

Common Principles

We call for all humanitarian and development actors to share the responsibility, to work with other actors, and to commit to the following ways of working:

IN ALL CRISIS SETTINGS

- 1. Systematically assess entry points for linking HA-SP when designing and implementing emergency response plans:** Where there is a need for international humanitarian assistance, we call for humanitarian response plans, with support from development partners groups, to systematically assess the maturity and relevance of the pre-existing social protection system and use this information when planning responses. In any context, where feasible, we call for contribution towards strengthening of existing social protection systems through humanitarian and development assistance. We encourage prac-

tioners to analyse their approaches and avoid undermining existing social protection efforts through parallel structures. We call for such assessments to be conducted in a coordinated way across agencies and the humanitarian coordination architecture, and the development-peace structures, to avoid overwhelming governments with multiple requests.

- 2. Ensure the meaningful and safe inclusion of vulnerable populations:** We call on development and humanitarian actors to work together to protect vulnerable groups whose inclusion in

⁴ Noting that there is a [new cash coordination model under Cash Advisory Group \(CAG\)](#).

social protection systems may put them at risk, or whose vulnerabilities may result in their exclusion from these systems. Meaningful and safe inclusion would require that needs and vulnerability assessments be disaggregated by gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion, or other contextually specific marginalized groups. Assessments of social protection systems (Principle 1) must apply a gender, age, and diversity lens. Where exclusion is driven by conflict dynamics, these risks need to be jointly identified and addressed. We encourage practitioners to contribute to strengthening of complaints and feedback mechanisms to improve the inclusivity of social protection systems to excluded vulnerable populations.

3. **Ensure engagement with local actors when linking HA-SP, taking into consideration the space in the country for civil society engagement:** We call on development and humanitarian partners, to identify clear strategies for engaging local actors in HA-SP policy, design, or delivery. To accomplish this, it may be necessary to map and understand local actors such as civil society groups, change agents, informal and traditional coping mechanisms, or other local actors as relevant for the context, needs, and populations represented by local groups.
4. **Elaborate more flexible financing mechanisms to enable social protection approaches ‘across the nexus’:** We call for donors to do more to close gaps in humanitarian and development funding streams, including through creation of new pooled instruments. In countries facing recurrent and protracted crises, where appropriate, we call on donors to work in close coordination with IFIs and national governments to develop joint, multi-year (medium to long-term) financing strategies for addressing basic needs and early recovery with effective planning around layering and sequencing different funding streams. We call for support and advocacy to state actors to strengthen their social protection financing and

ensure it compliments and enables transition from humanitarian financing, as appropriate to the context. Such strategies should also include climate and shock responsive programming as well as anticipatory action to scaling up in response to predictable spikes in needs where feasible.

5. **Build coordination mechanisms that link HA-SP at country, regional and global levels:** We call for humanitarian and development actors, to establish, or strengthen when already existent, effective coordination mechanisms. These may include social protection coordination groups at the country level which engage in joined-up analysis, planning, targeting, delivery, and monitoring, as appropriate to the context and maintenance of humanitarian space. It is vital that such mechanisms have buy-in from and participation of national and sub-national as well as, where appropriate, civil society and peace actors for longer-term sustainability.
6. **Work towards joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure results and build the evidence base for what does and does not work:** We call on development and humanitarian actors to jointly define expected outcomes and indicators for efforts to link humanitarian assistance and social protection. Frameworks could include joint assessments underpinning, planning for linking HA-SP, and measurement approaches, a common monitoring and evaluation plan, and dedicated research agendas for learning and better programming.

IN MORE STABLE CONTEXTS WITH RECURRING (PREDICTABLE CLIMATE) SHOCKS

7. **Make coordinated and complementary contributions to social protection system strengthening, guided by jointly defined plans, while retaining humanitarian space:** Where social protection systems are more mature, we call on development and humanitarian partners to work together to strengthen nationally led shock

responsive systems, in line with respective mandates and comparative advantages. Where social protection systems are still emerging, we call for humanitarian and development actors to jointly support strategies to transition towards nationally led systems, without compromising traditional coping systems or humanitarian principles. Such efforts contribute to increasing the resilience of vulnerable populations to shocks while building national capacities to manage social protection needs in the medium term.

IN FRAGILE AND COMPLEX SETTINGS, INCLUDING CONFLICT

8. Seek entry points to preserve elements of social protection or build the foundations of safety nets in conflict settings, when appropriate, based on strong conflict sensitivity, do no harm, protection risk, and other risk analysis:

We call on humanitarian and development partners to engage with conflict, protection, peace and governance specialists, to understand the nature of the conflict and how it affects possible linkages between social protection and humanitarian assistance. Such information will enable risk-informed and evidence-based decisions on linking. Where appropriate, we call on humanitarian and development actors to sustain assistance, or at least not undermine respective outcomes, existing sector investments and inform foundations for future, longer term inclusive system building. In such settings, this principle recognizes the role of humanitarian assistance to provide essential support. Nonetheless, where possible, all stakeholders should seek linkages and opportunities for collaboration and complementarity with humanitarian, peace, governance, non-state actors, civil society, local change agents, or the private sector.

COUNTRIES HOSTING FORCIBLY DISPLACED POPULATIONS AND MIGRANTS

9. Expand access to social protection for forcibly displaced populations and migrants:

Forcibly displaced and migrants are generally likely to have less legal protection and to face more barriers to accessing social protection and economic opportunities than citizens. To meet their needs, we call on development and humanitarian actors to undertake joint analysis of the legal framework and political economy dynamics and use this information to identify realistic objectives, and plans for linking these populations with social protection. In line with humanitarian principles, linkages should only be considered when appropriate considering social cohesion, do no harm, and protection risks. We call on development and humanitarian actors to work together with governments to build or adapt the SP system to meet the specific needs and capacities of displaced people. This should recognise their contribution to the national economy through their human capital and participation in social insurance schemes. International actors should work in line with the commitments to responsibility sharing as underscored in the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, recognising that host countries may also require significant international support for to achieve these objectives. Engagement in joint advocacy with government, sub-regional entities, and donors will accordingly be key.