

Policy Briefing

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Does cash-plus programming work in contexts of protracted crises?

Cash-plus programmes aim to strengthen food security and livelihoods by providing cash transfers alongside complementary support and services. In stable settings, these programmes can, to some extent, draw on established public services and administrative capacities. Yet, increasingly they are used in protracted crises – namely, situations characterised by conflict, violence, displacement and climate shocks – despite the challenges that such situations present. As implementation of these programmes in protracted crises expands, this Policy Briefing asks whether cash-plus programming is fit-for-purpose in such settings, and offers recommendations for enhancing its effectiveness.

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Key messages

- Few cash-plus programmes in protracted crises explicitly link their objectives, plus components, targeting criteria, and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) to the conditions that increase vulnerability in such settings.
- Programmes in crisis contexts and stable settings alike focus primarily on supporting individuals. Any adaptations are mostly minor changes to delivery processes to work in protracted crises.
- Programme design should be adapted to specific crisis contexts. Policymakers could try to link plus components to mitigating structural barriers and promoting livelihood transformation rather than using off-the-shelf approaches.
- Impact evaluations of programmes in crisis contexts are uncommon. They assess economic aspects rather than socio-political outcomes, resulting in a limited evidence base on what works in crises.

Introduction

Cash-plus, graduation, and productive inclusion models are popular development interventions that are being implemented across the globe. This Policy Briefing builds on the findings of a recent Working Paper by Lind, Sabates-Wheeler and Szyg (2023) that assessed 97 cash-plus programmes in protracted crises in 16 countries. A starting point was the notion that ‘protracted crises’ is not a homogeneous category, but one that covers a range of security settings, levels of violence, and institutional and political capacities. We accordingly mapped protracted crises settings considering the intensity of the crises and the strength of national social protection systems. We then took the findings of that review further by enhancing and validating its insights and recommendations through a virtual roundtable with academic, policy, and practice stakeholders. This Policy Briefing captures what emerged from both the research and the roundtable.

Why and how cash-plus programming is used

Over the past decade, the development and humanitarian sectors have stepped up efforts to experiment with cash-plus programmes in protracted crises. The choice of such programming usually stems from the conviction that cash augmented with various complementary forms of support will, over time, strengthen livelihoods and improve food security for those who receive it. The plus components of the programming rely on a theory of change similar to that in broader resilience-focused aid approaches, in which problems of poverty are conceptualised as deriving from individual shortcomings. Activities offered and supported include training and capacity building, therefore focusing primarily on individuals and households.

In severe crisis settings, a range of stakeholders implement the cash-plus programmes alongside the state. INGOs and

“ Programmes may exclude those most vulnerable to a crisis due to uncoordinated targeting approaches ”

UN agencies engage in almost half and a third of the programmes reviewed, respectively. They are also the main implementing bodies in places where state-directed social protection systems are weak. This finding underlines the crucial roles these agencies play in providing essential support in the most complex and challenging contexts. Government entities are involved in implementing almost half of the programmes reviewed, mostly at national level. Only a quarter of the programmes specify the involvement of state officials at sub-national level, which could suggest the need for greater coordination and integration at the different government levels. National and local NGOs and the private sector are involved to a lesser extent, suggesting that there is room to strengthen those local actors’ roles.

Gaps and opportunities

The research revealed gaps in how cash-plus programming is applied in protracted crises. It found that few cash-plus programmes explicitly connect their objectives, plus components, targeting criteria, and MEL to the conditions and dynamics that contribute to vulnerability in protracted crises.

The objectives of cash-plus programmes in protracted crises are broadly the same as those in stable settings – that is, to improve food security and enhance productive capacities for households and individuals. This focus on individuals does not encompass recognition of structural barriers or efforts to counter vulnerability drivers. Only rarely are objectives directly linked to the dynamics of protracted crises – examples would be to promote social cohesion, rebuild infrastructure and assets, or promote peace. When links are made, the instruments and activities implemented do not align with indicated objectives. The emphasis is on minor adaptations to delivery processes to work **in** protracted crises – but not necessarily **on** a design to work on the protracted crisis agenda. This raises questions about whether cash-plus programmes can and should aim to address the specific drivers of vulnerability in crisis-affected contexts.

Plus components currently reflect the focus on individual support rather than recognition of structural problems. Evidence from stable settings, with more established public services and administrative capacities, supports the rationale for such components, albeit depending on the type, amount and duration of help. In protracted crises, however, poverty and insecure livelihoods often extend beyond individual shortcomings. They relate to wider dynamics of violence, exclusion, legal limbo and inadequate protections for certain vulnerable groups. Plus components may also support recovery and rehabilitation, and encourage social cohesion particularly in post-conflict settings, where state institutions may be functioning and trusted. In settings of active violent conflict, by contrast, public authority itself may be contested and the state may be a party to conflict. Cash-plus programmes linked to wider state structures in such places may not be appropriate at all.

Targeting in programmes in protracted crises is often based on specific demographic groups, such as women and young people. Some examples exist where targeting criteria goes beyond demographic groups, but these are relatively rare. Also uncommon are layering approaches, where categorical targeting is complemented with a mapping of minority groups or those defined by crisis-related vulnerability markers. These are gaps in targeting approaches that mean that programmes may be excluding those most vulnerable to the crises.

The noted lack of involvement of local actors in programme implementation could point a way forward on this. Local NGOs may have a better understanding of the context where state presence is often limited and could be more attuned to the needs of affected communities. There may also be untapped opportunities for leveraging private sector resources, expertise, and potential to influence objectives based on demand.

“ Interventions must be conflict-sensitive – and not inadvertently worsen existing dynamics of violence ”

Impact evaluations were identified for only half of the cash-plus programmes reviewed. The most frequent evaluation method used was quantitative-only, implying a limited capacity to understand the ‘how’ or ‘why’ of findings in programmes evaluated. The most common indicators used to evaluate impacts and outcomes were economic, reporting for example, on incomes and economic inclusion followed by food security and assets. Markers reflecting socio-political outcomes, such as social cohesion, inclusion and peace-building, were less frequently measured.

Only seven evaluations compared cash-only and cash-plus treatments, with significant and positive impacts reported from the latter compared to cash-only, particularly when providing frequent unconditional cash transfers. Overall, the results revealed a range of mixed impacts that appear to be nuanced depending on context, the bundle of components used, and types of indicators measured.

Future research

By design, most cash-plus programmes target households or individuals and, hence, are often in a weak position to address wider, structural drivers of vulnerability. In protracted crises, conflict-related processes are often the root of weakened livelihoods and food insecurity. It is a stretch for many cash-plus programmes in isolation to influence these drivers. Yet, more could be done to identify ways to link the programmes with wider efforts of addressing conflict and building peace – given that such efforts could have transformative impacts on people’s lives and livelihoods. This remains an open area for research, underscoring the need for further investigation and evaluation of impacts on root causes.

Policy recommendations

Given the mismatch between objectives, intervention modalities and outcomes measured, policymakers and practitioners should consider the following:

- 1. Prioritise adapting programme design to the specific crisis context.** Align plus components to precise objectives, MEL criteria and a layered targeting approach focusing on those most vulnerable to the crisis. Flexibility in crisis contexts is key, especially where socio-political dynamics are constantly shifting. Involve local actors in programme implementation to better gauge communities' needs and to find alternative ways to navigate the crisis.
- 2. Explore ways to link plus components to structural change and livelihood transformation.** Address infrastructure, socioeconomic development, integration of groups with intersecting vulnerabilities, and power dynamics. Ensure more equitable access to resources. Analyse access and discrimination barriers at the outset rather than opting for off-the-shelf components.

- 3. Be conflict-sensitive.** Ensure interventions do not inadvertently worsen the existing dynamics of conflict. Identify mismatches between cash-plus objectives and crisis drivers – i.e. political tensions and ethnic difference. Attempts to align these may cause tensions at local level, especially if the government is both party to the conflict and an implementer of the intervention. Be mindful not to: (i) further entrench distrust and social tension; or (ii) introduce interventions that are maladaptive, such as promoting livelihoods that are not sustainable.
- 4. Contribute to building an adequate evidence base of what works.** Measure and monitor programme impacts of what works, for what purpose, where, for whom, why, and how, through research and MEL, with deep-dives into programmes and contexts. Data currently being collected by different stakeholders can support this and can contribute to institutional coordination, albeit while recognising different mandates.

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Further reading

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