



# **Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems Research**

Working Paper 3: Shock-Responsive Social  
Protection in the Sahel: Community Perspectives

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## About the project

The Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems study is a two-year research programme led by Oxford Policy Management (OPM), in consortium with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) and INASP. It runs from March 2015 to March 2017.

The aim of the Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems study is to strengthen the evidence base as to when and how social protection systems can better scale up in response to shocks in low-income countries and fragile and conflict-affected states, thus minimising negative shock impacts and reducing the need for separate humanitarian responses. It draws on a series of six case studies: three in-depth country studies in Mali, Mozambique and Pakistan; two lighter reviews in Lesotho and the Philippines, and a light study of region-wide initiatives in the Sahel.

The research is funded by UK aid as part of the UK Department for International Development's (DFID's) Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence Programme (HIEP). HIEP is a joint initiative between DFID's policy, operations and research departments to improve the quality, quantity and use of evidence in humanitarian programming.

## About this paper

This is the third in a series of working papers from the ongoing research. Together, the set of papers explore perspectives about the interface between social protection, humanitarian assistance and disaster risk management (DRM), to complement the formal insights from our case studies across sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

This working paper focuses on community-level practices and perceptions of social protection in the Sahel, exploring both informal mechanisms of risk management and response, as well as the social dynamics arising out of the intersection of formal and informal systems. The aim is to contribute to reflection as to how community-sensitive 'shock-responsive' social protection can build on, complement and reinforce local mechanisms in a manner that integrates shock responsiveness within a broader social protection continuum.

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## List of acronyms

ACF	Action Contre la Faim
CRF	Croix-Rouge Française
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
FEWS NET	Famine Early Warning System Network
GDP	gross domestic product
HEA	Household Economy Approach
IRC	Institut des Régions Chaudes, Montpellier
LASDEL	Laboratoire d'études et de recherche sur les dynamiques sociales et le développement local
MMD	Mata Masa Dubara (Niger)
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
RIM	Islamic Republic of Mauritania
ROSCAs	Rotating Savings and Credit Associations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Associations

# 1 Introduction

This working paper provides an analytical contribution to our overall study of region-wide shock-responsive social protection initiatives in the Sahel. The Sahel study as a whole is focusing on the role of sub-regional networks and platforms such as the Food Crisis Prevention Network (*Réseau de Prévention des Crises Alimentaires*) as well as emerging evidence from regional initiatives such as the Global Alliance for Resilience and the Adaptive Social Protection Programme led by the World Bank, among others<sup>1</sup>. It seeks to answer the question of how to envisage integrated social protection systems that are capable of responding to recurrent shocks in the region, particularly the food and nutritional crises that have become quasi structural features of the environment, and for which the response up until now has been largely based on annual humanitarian assistance through targeted household transfers (food, cash, coupons or other inputs).

This paper on community-level practices and perceptions of social protection in the Sahel is organised as follows:

**Chapter 2** draws on literature beyond the Sahel to set out the **importance of informal social protection systems and mechanisms**, examining their functions and exploring their strengths and limitations. It puts forward a 'social capital' framework as a means of opening up new ways to conceptualise such mechanisms, and to assess and support their capacity to respond to both idiosyncratic and covariate shocks.

**Chapter 3** identifies a **diversity of local informal social protection systems and mechanisms that have been documented in the Sahel**, highlighting their specific strengths as well as assessing the particular challenges that these mechanisms face in response to idiosyncratic and covariate shocks. The chapter suggests how ongoing efforts to strengthen 'shock-responsive' social protection could usefully focus on developing complementarity between formal and informal systems.

**Chapter 4** focuses attention on **pastoralists** as a relatively neglected and marginalised group in the Sahel. Pastoralists' livelihood and risk-management strategies represent one the most adaptive responses to the shocks and stresses of an arid environment, but they find themselves increasingly vulnerable in the face of changing circumstances. This chapter argues that shock-responsive social protection programmes must be tailored to the particular contours of pastoral livelihoods and well-being.

**Chapter 5** presents and discusses some of the key findings emerging from recent studies of **community responses to seasonal cash transfer programmes** in selected Sahelian countries. These findings highlight in graphic detail some of the social complexities arising from this new form of assistance. The chapter focuses in particular on ambiguities arising from selective household targeting within a culture of broader community solidarity.

**Chapter 6** summarises the **key findings of the analysis**, and suggests that further reflection on 'shock-responsive' social protection in the Sahel needs to be built into ongoing efforts to develop overall systems that can span the continuum from protection, prevention, promotion and transformation, converging thus within an increasingly important agenda around resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> The overall case study of the Sahel is expected to be published during 2016 at <http://www.opml.co.uk/projects/shock-responsive-social-protection-systems>.

## 2 Informal social protection and ‘shock-responsiveness’

### 2.1 Diverse forms of informal social protection

Informal social protection systems and mechanisms continue to play a critical role in the lives of local populations in sub-Saharan Africa, including the Sahel. In the absence, or inadequacy, of formal state-provided social protection, the majority of rural dwellers, and those engaged in the informal sectors in urban areas, largely depend on the reciprocal ties that bind them to extended families, neighbours and the larger community for the exchange of services, sharing of food, loaning of assets, pooling of resources and other forms of assistance in times of need.

Socio-economic transformations may be eroding some of the communal values that these informal social protection systems depend upon, and generalised poverty may be blunting some of the mechanisms themselves. However, most evidence points to their continued vitality as a form of social capital that is often the first line of defence against common contingencies and idiosyncratic risks. Yet strategic thinking about how such systems could be supported to help communities cope with broader covariate risks and shocks has been largely absent from national social protection strategies and from discussions about ‘shock-responsive’ social protection (see Box 1).

#### Box 1: The importance of informal social protection

The rise of formal social protection (delivered by governments or donor agencies) has generally overlooked the array of informal social protection mechanisms (delivered by extended families and communities) that were already in place in rural and urban communities throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The assumption that these informal mechanisms are irrelevant or have disappeared is incorrect.

Traditional solidarity networks, based on kinship and extended families, continue to provide the first source of support in many African communities, especially “for coping with contingencies and shocks”. Informal mechanisms remain widespread and their contribution remains significant, especially given the limited outreach and unreliability of formal social protection schemes, which could also learn many useful lessons from the former.

(Devereux and Getu 2013: 4)

There are many different forms of local solidarity, often organised around life-cycle or livelihood risks and vulnerabilities. These include shared child care, formal or informal child fostering, the sharing of meals, participation in the collection of funds and social ceremonies around birth, marriage, and death, and regular remittances from labour migration. They may be inspired by religious values of charity and redistribution (such as Zakat for Muslim groups, and church-based tithing among Christians). Informal social protection mechanisms may be based on kinship and extended family ties including lineage or clan structures, and may also embrace neighbours.

Some mutual support mechanisms arise out of common livelihood needs (such as labour exchange on each other’s fields at times of intense agricultural activities, or the loan of animals among pastoral groups). Some mechanisms are particularly strong among women (such as the ubiquitous rotating savings and loans associations commonly known as ‘tontines’ in West Africa). Others involve whole communities and may be based on traditional redistributive mechanisms established by local chiefs but adapted to changing circumstances such as cereal banks, an institution established in recent decades in different parts of Africa (especially in the Sahel), to provide an in-kind savings facility, functioning as village cooperatives that buy, store and sell food grains (Bhattamishra and Barret 2010).

Local social protection structures may include ‘vertical’ transfers, built up upon asymmetrical relationships within hierarchical societies wherein the ‘assistance’ provided by the benefactor may

contribute to cementing power differentials (such as within traditional chieftainships or in caste-based societies). They may, on the other hand, arise out of more egalitarian relationships (between neighbours, for example, or age cohorts) cemented by 'horizontal' transfers and reciprocal sharing (see discussion in Devereux 1999).

Local social protection mechanisms may derive from contributory systems (such as the tontines) based on direct reciprocity. They may also be non-contributory – based on a diffuse sense of either delayed reciprocity (a neighbour lending food without expectation of immediate return, but some notion that benefits may accrue as necessary at some later time) or notions of social obligation to less fortunate members of society for which no concrete return is expected (although moral or spiritual returns may be strong, as may be the social prestige that accrues to 'largesse').

Finally, local solidarity mechanisms may be more or less structured – some guided by written rules and regulations, others more implicit in the local 'social contract' and system of norms and cultural values guiding behaviour. In many cases, social solidarity in one form or another is felt strongly as an obligation and central to one's sense of belonging to an extended family or broader community.

## **2.2 Capacity of informal mechanisms to respond to covariate shocks**

Much literature on the topic suggests that informal mechanisms are most equipped to respond to 'idiosyncratic' shocks linked to individual household or life-cycle events such as illness or death, but may have less resilience in the face of broader 'covariate' shocks of different sorts that affect the livelihoods and well-being of a wider community (see for example Morduch 1998). Alderman and Haque (2007, 1-4) suggest that traditional informal insurance mechanisms remain limited and tend to break down under the covariate nature of weather-related shocks, and that the overall effects are the worst for the poor whose mutual assistance networks may be the most resource-constrained to begin with. Arias et al. (2005) observe that the local pooling of risk that services households under normal conditions often fails under conditions of prolonged covariate shocks arising out of economic downturns, such as those experienced in Latin America, which increase the vulnerability of all households. Another study illustrates how civil conflict in Côte d'Ivoire led to the contraction of informal kinship-based safety nets as individuals limited their assistance to nuclear family members rather than the community, thus reducing coverage (World Bank 2012).

Community-based risk management arrangements have the potential to fill the gap between household-level and national-level strategies for risk management (Bhattamishra and Barrett 2010). These can help households cope with idiosyncratic shocks, but are likely to break down in the face of covariate shocks unless they find ways to transfer risk outside the community. The ability to broaden the pooling of risk may be seen in particular within the informal form of mutual insurance made up of remittances of workers outside the home community, which can be highly responsive to shocks in the home community itself.

Some analysts suggest that the dynamism of informal arrangements has not been sufficiently understood or explored within the large literature on resilience and adaptation to natural disasters, climate change and other covariate risks, and that their strength has been underestimated (see also Agrawal et al. 2009; Azibo and Buchenrieder, 2011). Balagh and Buchenreider (2013) draw on empirical case studies to show that the evidence does not support the supposed superiority of formal instruments over informal responses to covariate shocks in all instances. They suggest that the potential and efficacy of informal mechanisms should be better analysed from the full spectrum of the social risk management framework (risk prevention, mitigation and coping). Many analysts suggest that formal (state and market-based) and informal (household or community-based) social protection serve complementary functions, and should both be strengthened to offer optimal protection in the face of shocks.

## 2.3 A conceptual framework for ‘shock-responsiveness’ in informal mechanisms

Recent application of the concept of ‘social capital’ to the analysis of household and community resilience in the face of shocks and stresses opens up new ways to conceptualise informal social protection mechanisms, and to assess their capacity to respond to both idiosyncratic and covariate shocks (Frankenberger et al. 2013; Blackburn et al., 2014).

Social capital is seen to be a driving force behind informal institutions that make collective action possible, including in response to shocks and stresses, and is seen to take several forms (see Box 2). The community-based collective actions taken by these groups may be supported or constrained by formal or external initiatives, including formal social protection programmes.

### Box 2: Different forms of social capital

Aldrich (2012, cited in Frankenberger et al., 2013) lists three types of social capital that assist communities to prepare for, cope with, and recover from covariate shocks and stresses:

- **Bonding social capital**—the bonds between community members or within networks. It involves principles such as trust, reciprocity, and cooperation, and is often drawn on within the disaster context, where survivors work closely to help each other to cope and recover.
- **Bridging social capital** connects members of one community or group to other communities / groups. This can facilitate links to external assets and broader social and economic identities, making a direct contribution to community resilience, since those with social ties outside their immediate community can draw on these links when local resources are insufficient.
- **Linking social capital**—trusted social networks interacting across explicit formal boundaries in society. This is often conceived of as a vertical link between a network and some form of authority or power. Linked networks are particularly important for economic development and resilience, because they provide resources and information that are otherwise unavailable.

The conceptual framework suggests that communities able to mobilise the highest level of ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ social capital will have the highest level of resilience, particularly in the case of covariate shocks, as this would permit them to draw on resources outside of the local group that has been affected by some type of disaster. It is emphasised, however, that, ‘To ensure community resilience to shocks and stresses over the long term, each of the different types of social capital must be promoted and sustained together’ (Frankenberger et al., 2013, 16). In this way, communities can take actions that enhance their *absorptive capacity* (the ability to minimise exposure to shocks and stresses and recover quickly when exposed); *adaptive capacity* (making proactive and informed choices about alternative livelihood strategies based on changing conditions), and *transformative capacities* (to change and improve the conditions under which they are living) (Frankenberger 2013, pp.10, 16).

It is also noted, however, that social capital is just one form of capital among many that have a direct bearing on household food security, nutrition, livelihood security, and resilience. Moreover, community resilience does not necessarily equate to uniformly resilient individuals or households, since communities are both complex and heterogeneous. Individual households (as well as the individuals within them) pursue their own livelihood strategies within the possibilities available to them, and these are based on their differential capacities. It may be, in fact, this potential tension between households and communities and the social dynamics at community level which explains some of the ambiguities in the encounter between formal and informal social protection mechanisms (see chapter 5).

### 3 Informal social protection in the Sahel: what exists and what is the capacity for shock-responsiveness?

#### 3.1 Kin-based systems

Most evidence on the extended family in Sahelian countries points to the primacy of kin-based structures as social safety nets. These continue to exemplify very strongly the notion of 'bonding capital' discussed above. Some examples:

- **In Mali** one of the most widespread mechanisms for informal social protection is the transfer of resources between households through the exchange of 'gifts' (in food, in kind or in cash) (Perezniето and Diallo 2008).
- **In Mauritania** extended family structures may adopt a practice wherein all adult male members contribute to a common fund raised in response to catastrophic circumstances, such as fire, or payment of compensation in cases of accidents or murder (Ballet and Hamzetta 2003).
- **In Senegal** systems of child fostering arrangements demonstrate the fluidity of household composition that may be partly seen as a social protection response (Beck et al. 2014).
- **In Chad** the extended family functions as the "first point of support and social safety net provider" in urban and rural communities. It expands to take in members from less well-off households and organizes life course support through contributions and gift-giving known as '*oudour*'. Women in particular play a strong role in the organisation and maintenance of these extended family support systems (Watson et al. 2015; World Bank 2016).

A number of analyses measure the overall weight of family assistance and inter-household private transfers within household budgets, and their importance as a mechanism of solidarity. In Mali, for example, 18% of the revenue of poor households comes from private inter-household transfers (UNICEF and ODI 2009). This rises to 26% among female-headed households and so is important in reducing gender-specific vulnerabilities (Perezniето and Diallo 2008). Some evidence suggests that such basic social support systems often continue to function, even when the whole community is under stress, such as in the 1997 harvest failures in rural Burkina Faso (Roncoli et al. 2001).

With the rise in labour migration (urban/rural within a country; to urban centres abroad), remittances are an increasingly important social protection mechanism in the region. Globally, remittances seem to have stronger poverty-reducing impacts than formal cash transfers, reaching a greater share of the population, and more poor households; they are often higher in value than cash transfers, and may be used particularly for productive investments (Hagan-Zanker and Himmelstine, 2014). Data from the Migration Policy Institute suggest that inflows of remittances reached as much as 7% of GDP in Mali in 2014, and 10% of GDP in Senegal. In Mali many of these resources go to strengthening household incomes, or for community development activities such as building schools or health centres; in Ghana they are largely used to cover 'family maintenance' costs such as school fees, social activities, including funerals, and living expenses (GJAS Partners 2007, cited in UNICEF and ODI 2009; Perezniето and Diallo 2008).

The importance of remittances as a form of 'shock-responsive' social protection, which may be intensified or scaled up in times of crisis, may also be critical. An example from Niger (see Box 3) illustrates that such mechanisms can and do provide the 'bridging' social capital necessary to be 'shock-responsive', by widening the scope for risk-sharing within households in the case of severe drought.

**Box 3: The role of household remittances in response to the 2005 food crisis in Niger**

A study of remittances in a village in northern Niger during the 2004/05 food crisis found they contributed significantly to maintaining families in the village, in complementarity with official food distributions.

Seasonal and longer-term male out-migration to coastal cities has long been a response to ecological crises and seasonal food shortages. Temporary migration is seen as a route to both social recognition for the migrant (who is seen to care for his family) and economic well-being for his family. Seasonal migrations during the lean period before the harvests serve both to diversify households' income sources and to relieve the burden of feeding an additional mouth during a time of scarcity.

Migration intensified in response to the 2004/5 food crises as family stocks diminished; migrants left earlier for the cities, prolonged their stays and increased both the amounts and the frequency of transfers sent home. This contributed significantly to household well-being, but also led to a feminisation of agricultural labour for the longer periods that the migrants passed outside of their village. Though some families received the transfers through money services such as Western Union in the regional capital, local traders also played a part in the transactions around remittances, and the crisis strengthened their positions within the village.

Migrant families used the remittances essentially to buy food, both through the subsidised cereal banks and on the local market. At the height of the crisis, when cereals became rare in the local markets, migrants shifted the modality of transfers and sent home food directly.

Oumarou 2008; additional personal communication from Olivier de Sardan, 2016

Remittances may not always rise to the occasion of covariate shocks. Czukas, Fafchamps, and Udry (1995) found little evidence that transfers offset income shocks in the Burkina Faso droughts between 1981 and 1985 (reported in Morduch 1998); and Kazianga et al. (2004) also found almost no risk sharing among drought-stricken households in Burkina. Bhattamishra and Barrett (2010) see this as evidence of the common failures of such local household or community-based risk management arrangements in such situations.

The capacity of households and families to take in additional members or provide support to kin residing elsewhere can be limited by many factors. Some suggest kin-based solidarity systems are being eroded by high levels of poverty and limited economic opportunities, growing urbanisation, modernisation and changes in the nature of the family and cultural values of solidarity (UNICEF and ODI 2009; Oduro 2010). Many analysts note the undue burden placed on women who are often expected to assume much of the care-giving in extended family arrangements. As women in Chad noted, "We must recognise also that the family itself is vulnerable and so there are limits to the aid they can offer" (cited in Watson et al. 2015; World Bank 2016).

### 3.2 Faith-based mechanisms

Faith-based systems of solidarity and support play a significant role in many communities, based on a system of shared principles and values. They are an example of both 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital as they tie together members of the same faith in one locality, but can also contribute to a wider sense of identity and ties of solidarity across ethnic lines, geographic boundaries and language groups. In the context of global support from faith-based humanitarian agencies, they also at times serve the function of 'linking' social protection across a wider international network and hierarchy of institutions. While both Christian and Islamic mechanisms are important in the Sahel, this section focuses particularly on Islamic systems, given their significance in the region.

Among Islamic communities, the major forms of social 'giving' include *sadaqa* (voluntary charity), *waqf* (a type of endowment), and *Zakat* (obligatory alms). *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam that obliges those with a minimum level of wealth (*nisab*) to set aside 2.5% of the total to support the poor and needy as a way of 'purifying' one's riches. *Zakat-al-Mal* is assessed annually, while *Zakat-al-Fitr* is a one-off payment or offering of a meal to the needy during the holy month of

Ramadan. The eight categories of intended beneficiaries of Zakat correspond quite closely to the categories of population in need of social protection; in some Muslim countries, Zakat is institutionalised as a type of tax system and explicitly intended to reduce inequality. It is widely used to fund domestic development and poverty-reduction efforts (Fleurs d'Islam n.d.; Eldjazaairi 1999; ten Veen 2009; Stirk 2015).

In the secular states of the Sahel – whose populations have diverse faiths – Zakat is left up to the individual, and it is hence difficult to assess its contribution to social protection. While an important feature of social relations within Muslim communities, there are some suggestions that the giving of Zakat is restricted to one's family or immediate entourage, limiting its role to 'bonding capital' as described above. Islamic leaders in Chad, for example, feel that for the most part Zakat is not fully contributing to goals of reduction of poverty, vulnerability and social inequalities since it has not been institutionalised in this way (reported in Watson et al. 2015 and World Bank 2016). An analysis of a largely Islamic agro-pastoral zone in Chad indicated that Zakat in the form of food assistance accounts for less than 1% of household needs (Oxfam 2012). Community members in this region explain that this is a function of growing impoverishment, leaving community members little to offer each other. In Mauritania, Islamic precepts about wealth-sharing are often assimilated into cultural traditions and norms, but the use of Zakat as an instrument for poverty reduction was identified as one of the 'open questions' in the national poverty reduction strategy of 2006-2010 (RIM 2006, in Watson and Fah 2010). One constraint in the secular states of the Sahel is that faith-based social protection mechanisms specific to particular religions may exclude the non-faithful from the systems, and can create potential divisions rather than strengthen social solidarities.

Transnational Islamic NGOs are increasingly extending their work abroad, including in the Sahel, building upon (to a greater or lesser extent) Islamic principles of solidarity and giving. Activities may include emergency relief including food distributions and refugee support, care for orphans, medical care, and the construction of social infrastructure such as wells, mosques and schools. In Mauritania in 2012, the International Islamic Relief Organization announced a programme to distribute provisions to drought-affected families, and plans to expand activities to address other humanitarian problems, such as the influx of refugees from Mali (Thurston 2012). In Mali, the [Zakat Foundation](#) of America is also providing humanitarian support in the wake of the 2012 crisis.

Zakat's potential as an international source of financing for 'shock-responsive' social protection is clear, and represents a transnational form of 'linking' capital. Globally between 2011 and 2013, international humanitarian assistance from governments in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation grew from \$599 million to over \$2.2 billion, representing a growth in the share of total international humanitarian assistance from governments from 4% to 14% (Stirk 2015). The research also showed that globally between 23% and 57% of Zakat collected is used for humanitarian assistance, depending on the context.

### **3.3 Revolving savings and credit associations**

Revolving savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), or 'tontines', are common throughout sub-Saharan Africa, including West Africa and the Sahel. They are formed by a group of individuals (friends, relatives, neighbours or colleagues) who pool their savings through regular monetary contributions to a common pot. The proceeds are given out to one member at a time, usually according to a pre-set schedule that continues through a full cycle until everyone has benefitted (World Bank 2012; Mathieu n.d.). Depending on the number of participants and the contributory amounts, capital accumulation can be considerable, and can allow individuals to make investments or cover specific social costs. In a study of an urban tontine in Chad for example, women members were able to pay school fees, meet medical expenses, buy land and construct houses, contribute to funeral costs and generally cover household needs, including purchase of large sacks of rice or millet to store for family consumption (Watson et al. 2015; World Bank 2016).

Evidence from the literature indicates a higher participation of women in tontines (Anderson and Baland 2002, cited in World Bank 2012), although in Mauritania, where its modern form is evolving in the context of rapid urbanisation, more men are also beginning to take part (Hamzetta n.d. in Watson and Fah 2010). In addition to their economic value, tontines strengthen solidarity and support among members and widen social networks. They can also strengthen women's position within the household. In Mali, research also noted the importance of local social networks and particularly women's associations as contributions to resilience and support in the face of shocks or stresses (Tulane University, 2015).

Dercon (2002; 2004) and Clarke and Dercon (2009) suggest that existing informal insurance systems could be strengthened by providing cost-effective risk-pooling and reinsurance solutions that offer protection for risks they cannot help on their own (most notably covariate and catastrophic risks). In Niger an international NGO built upon a traditional ROSCA, offering technical support and adding specific design features to create village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) which are helping to build broader resilience to climate change (see Box 4).

#### **Box 4: Building on a rotating savings and credit associations to enhance resilience**

The Mata Masa Dubara (MMD) or 'Women on the Move' movement in Niger, with support from CARE, is an example of a VSLA that builds on a traditional rotating savings and credit association. CARE encouraged the following features in the groups: interest charged internally to grow the fund; internal by-laws and a committee to improve governance; a cash box and oral record-keeping system to ensure security; technical support to members in managing the associations; and support for income generating activities as well as the establishment of cereal banks.

The VSLA activities have helped communities cope in a food crisis and build up longer term household food and nutrition security over time, with children reported to be better nourished. Women who save can afford to buy more grain to store over the lean period, while the ongoing support received by other members of the group for traditional ceremonies (around birth, marriage, death) means that they are able to remain debt-free following a family celebration or emergency.

VSLA groups also increase the solidarity of communities in times of wider crises, since they have begun to operate in a network which allows them to support vulnerable groups, such as displaced families, until food supplies are distributed. As VSLA groups grow and mature, both income generation activities and the assistance provided to vulnerable families have increased, and the community has become more resilient.

Hamadziripi (2008) and CARE International (2015)

Nevertheless, contributory systems (such as the tontines, but also participation in birth, marriage, and funeral ceremonies) can be onerous for the poorest who cannot always contribute in either cash or kind, and may therefore be excluded from full participation (Oduro 2010). Where equal contributions are obligatory, this may unfairly advantage the wealthier groups who control decision-making. In Mauritania, for example, the clan-based system of *lahwas* requires all adult males to contribute equally (independently of their means), with failure to comply risking exclusion from the group (Ballet and Hamzetta 2003). As occasions for the practice of *lahwas* multiply, the poorest members can be reduced to selling off assets in order to meet their contributions. In cases of collective payment of medical expenses, the system is seen to be especially unequal, as the local chiefs or 'marabouts' often set the amount not only on the nature of the illness, but the wealth of social status of the one who is sick, "the poor must therefore pay more for the illness of the rich than the rich for the same illness of the poor" (Ballet and Hamzetta 2003: 650).

### **3.4 Rural livelihood support and solidarity mechanisms**

A number of specifically rural forms of community solidarity systems have been identified in the Sahel. Many are designed to function as mutual support responses to recurrent livelihood stresses, or as redistributive mechanisms to support the most vulnerable members of a community. There is less conclusive evidence of how or if these can be scaled up or adapted to respond to covariate

shocks affecting entire communities, though some examples exist. Joint cultivation (pooling of labour) among farmers in the region is practised as a means of insuring against losses due to farmers' illnesses (Fafchamps 1992), as well as a means of meeting seasonal labour needs in periods of intensive cultivation. In Mauritania this approach is applied to both agricultural labour and the construction or repair of houses, and has evolved to include community infrastructural development (construction of dykes, weirs, schools) (Hamzetta n.d. and Ould Khtour 2002, in Watson and Fah 2010). Other examples of rural community solidarity in Mauritania include granting usage rights over animals or other assets (such as a house).

Many households and communities across much of the Sahel depend on pastoralism and agro-pastoralism for livelihoods. Shared ownership of livestock is a backbone of social relations among nomadic pastoralists in particular where animal loans function as a key means of generating and maintaining social capital. Such loans also serve as an effective form of safety net to vulnerable groups or individuals, particularly in times of individual household shocks or loss. Although many different forms are found in the Sahel, the loans usually entail use of milk products and variably retention of the first two offspring, after which the original animal is returned to its owner.

An example from Niger shows how a 'shock-responsive' mechanism that offered an effective response to drought affecting entire communities was designed on the basis of the idiosyncratic response systems in place and illustrates how external support can strengthen such local systems in the face of covariate shocks (see Box 5).

#### **Box 5: Habbanae: The animal of friendship in Niger**

In central Niger, after the massive drought of the 1970s which decimated herds across the Sahel, the traditional *habbanae* system of animal lending was the basis for a pioneer initiative supported by Oxfam. Through this project, about 500 destitute households were 'lent' an average of two or three cows and/or camels (plus two or three sheep and sometimes a donkey), to restock their herds.

The project was run according to local traditions (to manage conflicts, for instance), and was locally managed by community leaders. Reimbursement rates were very high: after five to eight years, the original animals were given back to the project management. The older animals were sold in the market, while different arrangements were made to leave younger animals with the 'borrowers' through alternative reimbursement of other animals. The money from the sale of animals was given back to Oxfam and re-injected to finance other community-based initiatives in the 1980s. This approach has subsequently been adapted and applied in a number of projects in Niger and elsewhere.

Bonfiglioli with Watson (n.d.)

### **3.5 Challenges and opportunities for shock-responsive social protection**

While local solidarity systems are important sources for the mobilisation of individual, household and community resources for redistribution and social assistance, they nevertheless face certain challenges and limitations in response to both idiosyncratic and covariate risks. Both the strengths and weaknesses would therefore need to be recognised and addressed in any efforts to scale up or adapt such systems for effective 'shock-responsive' social protection.

There continues to be a need to strengthen the knowledge and evidence base on the changing forms and dynamics of informal social protection mechanisms in the Sahel, in order to enhance understandings of their limits and capacities in the face of covariate shocks. It may be necessary to provide inputs to counter existing weaknesses in community mechanisms such as – in contributory systems in particular – potential exclusion of the most vulnerable, or the hardening of vertical relations of hierarchy and tribute. This could be done, for example, by subsidising the contributions of the poorest individuals to community pooled funds, and by establishing broadly representative community management committees around projects.

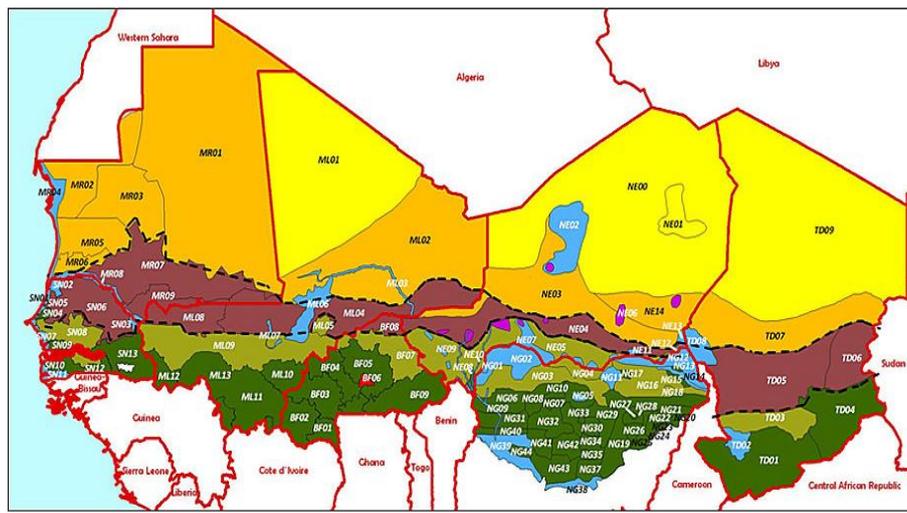
## 4 Pastoral livelihoods and social protection: Adaptive local systems under threat

This section goes beyond particular examples of informal social protection, to examine an entire livelihood system that is largely designed as a strategic adaptation to the ever-present threat of drought as a covariate shock. It highlights some vulnerabilities and survival strategies of pastoralists in the Sahel; identifies challenges facing the design and implementation of social protection for pastoralist populations; and offers considerations for appropriate shock-responsive social protection within the broader framework of more effective social protection overall.

### 4.1 Key characteristics of pastoral systems

Pastoralism is based primarily on raising livestock, and is widespread in the Sahel, particularly in the north (see the orange areas on the map, Figure 1) where it well adapted to the region's arid ecosystem. Climatic variability and drought are the norm in the Sahelian drylands – not an anomaly – and pastoralists have developed numerous strategies to deal with the risks and hazards in their environment that contribute to overall resilience (Hesse et al. 2013). These include mobility as a means of managing scarce resources (primarily water and pasture); diversification of herds; maintenance of access to markets to sell livestock and to buy essential grains; cultivation of social and economic relations with sedentary agriculturalists (exchange of animal and crop products, fertilisation of fields); and in zones that permit agriculture, the adoption of a combination of herding and agricultural livelihoods through various forms of agro-pastoralism (see the reddish brown areas in Figure 1) (cf Hesse et al. 2013; Little and McPeak 2014; Kräfli et al. 2013; 2014).

**Figure 1: Livelihood zones in West Africa**



Source: Save the Children (2014). Note: 'Pastoral' areas are in orange. 'Agro-pastoral' areas are reddish brown. See [www.hea-sahel.org](http://www.hea-sahel.org) for the full legend.

Yet pastoralists and their livelihoods are under constant and increasing threat, due to factors that are often intertwined. These include loss of pasture and the closure of customary transhumance passages due to the encroachment of farmland and privatisation of land ownership; demographic changes contributing to population pressure; inappropriate development interventions; growing violence and insecurity; overall lack of voice and both physical and political marginalisation (Little and McPeak, 2014; African Union, 2010). Relations with the central state are often fraught with ambiguity. Service provision has been minimal in most pastoralist areas, where access to appropriate health services (both human and animal) and education is particularly lacking. Developing the most appropriate forms of social protection provision has also faced particular

challenges. The combination of these factors renders pastoralists ever more vulnerable to food insecurity and seasonal or periodic drought conditions in the Sahel (Ali and Hobson, 2009). As Krätli et al. (2013: 30) observe:

“ A degree of vulnerability is inherent to pastoralism as it is inherent to any system operating by harnessing risk and instability [...] When addressing vulnerability in pastoralism it is therefore crucial to distinguish between this ‘baseline vulnerability’, which is strategic, and which the system is designed to manage, and the unnecessary and dysfunctional vulnerability that arises from the sudden or cumulative incapacity to operate the system due to structural changes triggered by external forces, internal adjustments, or disasters.”

## 4.2 What can we learn about pastoralists from HEA assessments?

The Household Economy Approach (HEA) has become widely used as a framework for understanding food security, livelihoods and poverty. It profiles how people from different wealth groups within defined livelihood zones typically access food and income, what types of major shocks and hazards are experienced, and how households cope. It is being used increasingly in the Sahel by government-led early warning systems and by FEWS NET to predict how households will be affected during the year to come. In its delineation of different wealth groups, HEA has also been used as a tool for targeting social transfer projects – particularly the seasonal transfers led primarily by NGOs. A consolidated atlas for the Sahel created in 2014 from 68 HEA profiles completed in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger offers a wealth of information on agro-pastoralists and pastoralists. It paints a portrait of highly unequal and stratified rural societies where wealth (mostly animal herds) is concentrated in a minority of households and the poor live on the very edge of survival (see Box 6 for key findings).

### Box 6: Findings on pastoralism from HEA assessments

- The livelihoods of both agricultural and pastoralist rural populations are highly monetised: 50% of rural households depend on the market for at least half of their calories.
- In the vast majority of both agro-pastoral and agricultural zones, the very poor do not own enough livestock to provide more than 25% of total income (food plus cash). With the exception of pastoralist zones where even poor households may own a dozen small ruminants, most of the poorer households may have a few female animals but the frequency of shocks obliges them to destock frequently and sometimes to decapitalize entirely to pay for essential food.
- The majority of poorer farmers and herders earn most of their cash income by working for others. Other forms of income for the poorest include collecting firewood or making charcoal, brick-making, handicrafts and various skilled minority occupations (pottery, tanning, weaving).
- Rain failure, considered as the ‘default risk,’ is the greatest threat overall to both farmers and pastoralists / agro-pastoralists; livestock disease is also considered a top hazard, along with animal thefts.
- The most important coping strategies in the face of shocks or lean season scarcities include reductions in the amount and type of food eaten; expenditures on ceremonies and social obligations; and schooling.
- Throughout the Sahel, very poor households spend just 5% of their household budget on health and education – pastoral and agro-pastoral households spend less than agricultural households (possibly because of fewer services available). Generally for poor households, health takes up more of the household budget than education.

Save the Children 2014, 2015

### 4.3 Weaving appropriate safety nets for pastoralists

Recent analysts point to a number of challenges for social protection for pastoralists; most derive from experiences with pastoralists in eastern Africa, but have relevance as well to the Sahel. Pastoralists face different vulnerabilities to sedentary populations: climate change is a significant risk, but the “fundamental marginalisation” of pastoral societies is a critical source of vulnerability (Devereux and Getu, 2013; Ali and Hobson, 2009). The delivery of social protection is difficult because of low population density, mobility, conflict / insecurity, and limited road and communications infrastructure. Many pastoralists rely heavily on informal mutual support systems; the formal systems that are extended are often inappropriate. Moreover, the illusion that pastoral areas are in a perpetual state of humanitarian crisis for which food aid is the only response has,

'allowed governments to continue with low levels of investment in pastoral areas and constrictions on policies. This in turn obfuscates the need for interventions in pastoral contexts that can tackle issues of vulnerability, such as social protection instruments.' (Ali and Hobson, 2009, p. 3)

The authors claim that such food aid has not strengthened pastoralists' resilience to shocks, but has rather worked to undermine local coping strategies (p. 8).

Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2013) identify features within pastoral groups in Ethiopia that undermined the aims of the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), as it emphasised targeting those most in need, and providing them with transfer levels that were perceived to enable them to escape food insecurity and accumulate assets. They point in particular to: i) the intense pressure to share out benefits within horizontal networks that ‘dilutes’ the level of transfers provided to any one household; and ii) the strong role of informal authority structures in influencing decisions on targeting and transfer size, as well as in appeals decisions. The researchers recognise that network-based distribution provides important functions in mitigating the consequences of livelihood crises and that local authority structures provide functions on social and economic issues beyond the interface with external assistance. They thus suggest that:

“While practices of sharing clearly challenge standard assumptions of household asset accumulation and “graduation” in the design of productive safety nets, sharing can expand and/or deepen claims to other social support in the future [...] rather than framing sharing practices as a “problem” for achieving program outcomes, this calls for a serious questioning of the appropriateness of transplanting social protection systems across different contexts. (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2013: 8-9)

### 4.4 Considerations for ‘shock-responsive’ social protection

Pastoralists are increasingly vulnerable to covariate shocks such as massive drought. Between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s the Sahel experienced one of the most dramatic long-term changes in climate observed anywhere in the world in the 20th century, with rainfall declining on average by more than 20% (Hulme et al., 2001). This period was associated with very severe droughts, during which hundreds of thousands of people and millions of animals died (Glantz, 1976, 1996). A classic case study of the drought of 1968–73, and the famines of the 1970s in Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta, Niger, and Chad found that the most susceptible groups were nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists (Sen 1983). With the increasing marginalisation of pastoralists eroding adaptive capacities even further, they are becoming even more susceptible to climate change and covariate shocks than other communities (Brooks, 2006).

It is critical, therefore, to place reflections on ‘shock-responsive’ social protection for pastoralists within the broader framework of pastoralist-appropriate routine social protection that can enhance their ability to adapt to ‘normal’ seasonal drought in the Sahel (i.e. through ex-ante support). At the same time, appropriate mechanisms are needed in the event of more massive or recurrent drought and/or displacement, to allow pastoralists who have lost their herds to recover a means of livelihood and re-establish their household economies (i.e. through ex-post support). Many of the needed measures, of course, go well beyond social protection – linking into broader policies of integrated rural development, rangeland management, sustainable land use and the like, but some measures may be built into social protection programmes. Key considerations include:

#### **4.4.1 Designing social protection for enhanced resilience of pastoral livelihoods**

Hesse et al. (2013) identify ‘adaptive’ social protection mechanisms as important in helping to build the productive assets of the most vulnerable. Adaptive social protection for pastoralists would include long-term predictable transfer programmes that allow benefits to accrue and enable investment in pastoral livelihoods; ‘climate-smart’ targeting and implementation arrangements that are sufficiently flexible to allow expansion and contraction in response to risks; targeting and delivery processes that are not socially divisive (building on customary social solidarity mechanisms while addressing any inequities that these may reflect); and integration with other social and economic measures that address multiple dimensions of risk and vulnerability and promote pastoral asset-building.

In adaptive social protection programming, seasonal transfers linked to additional resilience measures for pastoral livelihoods would – among other things – need to 1) develop modalities for delivery based on seasonal movements; 2) reflect on timing needs linked to seasonal dimensions of the pastoral calendar (seasonal calendars produced through HEA assessments, for example, suggest that pastoralists experience different risks at various times throughout the year and that the lean season for household food security may not correspond to that of more sedentary agrarian groups); and 3) offer livelihood inputs of the most relevance to the household economy.

#### **4.4.2 Linking social protection to more effective early responses to shocks**

Future Agricultures (2014) has highlighted the importance of linking social protection to more effective early responses to shocks. They urge greater reflection on the most appropriate modalities to address acute vulnerability to shocks and fluctuations in contexts of chronic poverty (such as drought contingency financing to scale up safety nets rapidly in response to shocks as has been built into the Hunger Safety Net Programme in Kenya) through an “integrated predictable and humanitarian response.” Greater attention may also be needed to the early warning systems themselves (for example, consistent monitoring of forage production and other key pastoralist livelihood asset, resource and entitlement indicators) to ensure that they are fully capable of detecting drought stress on pastoralists and of providing adequate information for interventions to support pastoralists during droughts (Sommer 1998).

#### **4.4.3 Calibrating interventions to the different phases of a drought**

Options for interventions during the different phases of a drought are shown in Box 7 below: some fall directly within the domain of social protection, others depict broader complementary support which may or may not be possible to plan as a social protection ‘plus’ initiative.

## Box 7: Timely interventions for pastoralists during a drought

### First phase: Growing imbalance between number of animals and fodder

- **Support for livestock movement:** Information where forage is available; management of conflict over access to resources (water points, forage); transport infrastructure / subsidies (and / or subsidised distribution of fodder)
- **Support for marketing of livestock:** To ensure purchasing power and avoid waste of assets
- **Provision of cash transfers or credit:** To enable herders to buy their own fodder

### Second phase: Continued squeeze on income and need for cash

- **Food aid:** To relieve pressure on food prices and supply grain directly to pastoral populations
- **Subsidies / price control:** To ensure pastoralists' purchasing power selling animals / buying food
- **Cash transfers or credit :** To fund cereal purchases and avoid unnecessary livestock sales
- **Health / nutrition:** To control disease outbreaks and protect nutrition of vulnerable groups
- **Veterinary campaigns :** To avoid large-scale livestock deaths during drought

### Post-drought rehabilitation phase

- **Restocking:** Allow reconstitution of herds (could include cash or distribution of animals)
- **Alternate livelihoods:** Enable destitute herders to take up other livelihoods, temporarily or permanently
- **Continued cash transfers:** Respond to continuing survival needs and build resilience

Adapted and expanded from Sommer 1998

## 4.4.4 Getting the mix and design of interventions right within a holistic framework

Little and Peak (2014) suggest that two kinds of safety net are needed for pastoral - and other - populations: one to prevent households from falling into poverty, and another to pull people out of poverty. Devereux and Tibbo (2011) reflect on the need for differentiated social protection in pastoral areas based on livelihood potential. This includes livestock insurance for medium herders with additional cash transfers to the poor, and alternative livelihood support coupled with cash transfers for those who no longer pursue a pastoralist livelihood and non-pastoralists.

Devereux and Tibbo (2011, 2013) also remind us that social protection for pastoralists must embrace all pillars of social protection: social assistance for the poor; social insurance for the vulnerable, who face uninsured risk; and social justice for the marginalised. As many pastoralists fall into all three categories, they need expanded access. Social assistance remains central:

'Regular transfers such as cash transfers or food packages are required for chronically poor people in pastoral areas, as elsewhere, while temporary transfers must be mobilized promptly when lives and livelihoods are threatened.' (Devereux and Tibbo 2013: 220)

Beyond protection is prevention. It is suggested that social insurance for pastoralists should focus on risk management strategies e.g. livestock destocking, drought risk management, and innovative index-based livestock insurance as well as, presumably, human health insurance. Moreover, as Future Agricultures (2014: 4) notes, 'Investment in infrastructure and improved access to basic services is also necessary to improve the effectiveness of social protection in pastoral areas.'

As Ali and Hobson (2009) argue, therefore, social protection in pastoral areas must be grounded in an understanding of both the inherent strengths of the pastoral system and the vulnerabilities that are faced, as well as an understanding of the factors contributing to vulnerability. This will help the shift from short-term emergency responses to long-term investments in livelihoods. It will also help to ensure that 'shock-responsive' social protection is set within the broader, holistic framework of social protection that still needs to be built around the overall aims of protection, prevention, promotion and – ultimately – transformation.

## 5 Community encounters with formal social safety nets

### 5.1 Investigating the social dynamics around cash transfers

In a recent piece on the evaluation of social protection programmes, Devereux et al. (2013) make the case for a stronger focus on social dynamics and an exploration of how the processes and impacts of programmes are experienced locally. This chapter reviews evaluations of cash transfers in Niger, Mauritania and Chad that highlight the complexity of these issues. The studies include:

- An anthropological study of seasonal cash transfer programmes implemented by NGOs in Niger undertaken by LASDEL (Olivier de Sardan 2013, Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013, 2014)
- An evaluation of the effects of a cash transfer project in one commune in Mauritania implemented by the French Red Cross (CRF) and partners, 2011–13 (CRF/IRC 2013).
- An impact evaluation of the seasonal cash transfers implemented by Action Contre la Faim (ACF) to support 8,000 households in the Kanem, Chad in the lean season (Meunier 2014).
- An evaluation of the socio-economic impact of Oxfam’s cash transfer programmes in three regions of Chad through projects implemented between 2012 and 2014 (Belemvire 2015).

These programmes are all ‘shock responsive’ in that they are implemented as temporary safety nets in more or less regular fashion year after year, to respond to the seasonal household food deficits that have become a structural feature of the landscape in Sahelian countries. They do not build upon longer, predictable formal transfers, as these are just now being built up, and they are largely run by NGOs. As targeted programmes to selected households, nor are they responses to broader covariate shocks affecting entire communities. Nevertheless, findings provide insights that are important for the design and implementation of shock-responsive social protection.

### 5.2 Cash as a new form of assistance in complex social settings

#### 5.2.1 Niger

The rural context in Niger is marked by years of food assistance in which the capture of ‘development rent’ is highly developed (peasants and chiefs; electors and mayors; researchers and project personnel). It is characterised by fragmented villages with visible and invisible conflict. These create fertile ground for suspicion when assistance is injected as ‘free’ cash (what the authors dub ‘manna from heaven’). In spite of the positive effects on beneficiaries’ food security:

“the specificities of the cash transfer mechanism (diffusion of a new ‘product’ through the importation of new ‘rules of the game’) concentrate or exacerbate the principal ambiguities, contradictions, difficulties and inadaptations of all of the current interventions of development agencies when they confront local systems of logic” (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013: 5, translated by the author throughout).

This cash is seen to differ radically from habitual local forms of cash assistance, such as charity, loans or assistance from neighbours. The ‘rules of the game’ are new. The free distribution of cash coexists in the same aid environment with cash- or food-for-work programmes which demand something of beneficiaries in return. All this, when set within the differences between cash transfer programmes by different NGOs, creates a sense of confusion and a terrain ripe for opportunistic behaviours and attempts to bypass or manipulate the rules (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The authors focus on NGO-led seasonal ‘emergency’ cash transfers, suggesting there may be differences between their social dynamics and those of the regular long-term transfers of the recent national safety net programme.

## 5.2.2 Mauritania

The socioeconomic context is one of constant uncertainty – about climate conditions and rainfall, market prices, the amount of remittances from household members in urban areas, and assistance from government or development partners: “In the end, in terms of household strategies, the only element that is found at all levels of analysis is the uncertain character of the milieu” (CRF/IRC 2013: 22). As in Niger, cash transfers have arrived in a context marked by systematic yearly food distributions since at least the 1970s. These food distributions – generally targeted to the most vulnerable households – are regularly redistributed within villages so that all households receive something, as, according to common beneficiary perceptions: “This aid comes from outside. We are all poor in the village. Therefore everyone has a right to a share” (CRF/IRC 2013: 40).

## 5.2.3 Chad – ACF

The Sultanate of Kanem was historically a hierarchical society based on livestock – owned by the higher castes – while agriculture and other work was relegated to lower castes. Today, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists remain the upper class and rights-holders over land while the lowest class have no land rights. The traditional chieftainship has been maintained in parallel with the state administrative system and takes charge in case of legal or family disputes (Meunier 2014). Since 2012, cash transfers have spread rapidly, and today reach about 20% of the population. The distribution of resources was in the past commonly reserved for traditional authorities and often took the form of Zakat. With external projects now distributing such resources, relations between authorities and communities are altered, as the authorities are themselves disinvested of the power to assist extremely vulnerable groups, which in turn takes away their power and thus their legitimacy (Meunier 2014). Moreover, the unconditional transfers (both food and cash) are seen to have become ‘institutionalised’ (Meunier 2014: 33) which, it is suggested, may block the necessary transformations in productive development and land use that could promote longer-term resilience.

## 5.2.4 Chad – Oxfam

While the principle of cash as assistance to vulnerable people is now accepted, some local authorities report a preference food, to ensure it goes to the poor: “Here, when it is a question of food, the middle class and wealthier groups are ashamed to line up to collect it; but with cash it is another matter – the rich will always be served.” (reported in Belemvire 2015: 23). Moreover, the legacy of universal food distributions was seen to contribute to difficulties in the transition to targeted cash assistance. As in Niger, the situation is complicated by multiple humanitarian actors operating projects in some of the same zones (Belemvire 2015). Oxfam’s programmes are mostly designed to combine seasonal cash transfers with longer term support for livelihoods, as well as to link training and awareness-raising around nutrition. However, the interventions are not always in the same communities. Moreover, as in the other Chadian case, these annual ‘emergency’ cash transfers are seen to militate against the build-up of resilience and to promote dependency.

## 5.3 Programme targeting vs community redistribution mechanisms

### 5.3.1 Niger

For LASDEL, the findings are clear: “The targeting norms imposed by the institutions implementing CTs [cash transfers] [...] appear incomprehensible to local populations: they are in contradiction to local norms, marginalise local authorities, incite suspicions and sharpen diverse conflicts” (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2014: 1). Again, “It is the targeting that poses by far the most problems” (ibid.: 5). Targeting is perceived by beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries to be personalised, and a menace to the social cohesion of already fragile villages.

Geographic targeting for the selection of communes and villages is seen to be either a matter of chance, or a function of the influence of chiefs or elected representatives. From the community perspective, little in terms of socioeconomic conditions separates a village that has been selected from one that has been excluded. Moreover, the selection of beneficiary households also appears arbitrary, arising from an attempt to distinguish between ‘vulnerable’ and ‘very vulnerable’ when “living standards and consumption patterns are quite similar, in spite of economic inequalities” (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013: 24). The ambiguity is complicated by the imposition of a ‘quota’ of households, which can cut directly through the categories of vulnerability that have been identified. Such ambiguities lead to opportunistic behaviours as households adapt the ‘rules of the game’ to maximum benefit. Prior to the targeting, for example, they may try to present themselves as eligible while after targeted distributions, there is often a generalised redistribution of the benefits:

“In the face of non-beneficiaries’ discontent, and with the aim of manifesting community solidarity [...] a pooling of resources would sometimes occur, usually at the initiative of the chief as soon as the representatives of the NGO or financial institution leaves.” (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013: 37-38).

This pooling can be partial, in the form of a contribution for a community objective (e.g. repair of a community building). Other forms include giving a share to the chief, NGO agents or authorities, the person who held the distribution, neighbours or relatives). As one woman said:

“It is a good thing to share the money with everyone... because today it is you who benefit but tomorrow it may be your neighbour... therefore if you have shared previously, your neighbours will also think of you when it is their turn...” (cited in Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013: 56).

Pooling and redistribution, therefore, fall back onto local values privileging the build-up of social capital based on reciprocity; they are seen as a guarantee of reciprocal aid in the future and as a means of attenuating suspicions incited by the processes of selective targeting. They are seen in this way as a reversion to local ‘rules of the game’ (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013: 52).

### **5.3.2 Mauritania**

In Mauritania, of 38 localities covered by the cash transfer, 17 redistributed the amounts. In six of these, benefits were divided equally for all households in the village, regardless of poverty status. Elsewhere the cash was redistributed, but a greater share given to the poor, either by beneficiaries or in collaboration with village authorities. This slashed the amount beneficiaries received (often by half), though after NGOs held community discussions, the practice diminished (CRF/IRC 2013). The evaluators found that while beneficiaries and project committee members overwhelmingly preferred cash assistance to food aid (more choice, more dignity), members of the committees established by the project voiced a number of concerns about the complexity of determining the selection, especially as non-beneficiary households were in the majority in the village.

The problem of targeted social transfers in a context of generalised poverty remains. In the absence of other development support, the situation for many households remains unstable and “Many households can fall rapidly into poverty traps” (CRF/IRC 2013: 42) such that a household identified as ‘non-poor’ at the time of project targeting may become poor in the course of project implementation. Moreover, the term ‘community’, denoting an idea of a unified ensemble, is itself a construct that masks the heterogeneity of communities that are often made up of a variety of distinct socio-specific groups, tribes or fractions which are not always easily apprehended by external aid agents (Baidani, Haratins, Halpoulaar). This potentially leads to pitfalls in the ‘impartiality’ of the targeting criteria and processes that are established (CRF/IRC 2013: 48).

### 5.3.3 Chad – ACF

As in Mauritania, a key complexity for targeting in Chad is the ‘volatility of poverty’. While the cash transfer enabled the ‘very poor’ beneficiaries to maintain an ‘acceptable’ level of access to food over its four-month duration, ‘poor’ non-beneficiaries saw their wellbeing steadily diminish to the extent that at the end of the period they found themselves in the same situation as the ‘very poor’ were at the beginning. “Targeting is therefore obsolete a few weeks after the survey and the first distribution” (Meunier 2014: 31, translated by the author here and throughout).

As in Niger, the process whereby a ‘long list’ of eligible households is later subject to a quota is a source of potential conflict. This leads to a sense of injustice and lack of understanding of why households originally on the list are no longer there. In conferring decision-making authority on project managers, it allows local authorities to deny responsibility in selection (‘the computer chose’); however, it shifts the balance of power, turning local authorities into mediators between project managers and the community. The short-term nature of the transfer, coupled with internal community redistribution, helped limit the potentially strong negative effects on social relations. But the project did not promote resilience at community level because it did not reinforce local solidarity mechanisms through which better-off households normally support the poorest. The targeting of the ‘most vulnerable’ may have helped the poorest in the short term, but not in the longer-term as it brought no benefits to those who would be in the best position to offer support post-project.

### 5.3.4 Chad – Oxfam

Targeting on the basis of HEA was seen to have effectively identified the poorest; nevertheless, there was a considerable redistribution to better-off households. Leaving the middle and rich out of benefits was considered risky, as these households normally assist others. Other problems arose when those classified as poor / very poor were left off the final lists, due to the quotas (Belemvire 2015). To compensate, as in previous examples, households and communities adopted different strategies. Households commonly lied about wealth status to appear on the lists. Many benefits were redistributed. Many considered the money ‘unearned’ and therefore something to be shared. Women beneficiaries in two sites organised tea parties with non-beneficiaries “to share the luck” (cited in Belemvire 2015: 50), reinforcing social bonds. The money is considered a ‘gift’ and it is not ‘social’ to spend it on one’s immediate family only. The redistribution (even if very small, around 5% of the total) forms part of the framework of consolidating family ties through sharing.

The cash transfers were not seen to be disruptive of local solidarity mechanisms, partly because the value was small, but partly because of the redistributions. Some middle households reported relief that cash assistance targeted the poorest, as that relieved them of the burden of support. The evaluation suggests this withdrawal of support was temporary, as poor households remained poor and in need of assistance. Traditional mechanisms of loan of milk animals and Zakat continued.

## 5.4 Intra-household and gender dynamics

### 5.4.1 Niger

Olivier de Sardan et al. (2013) note the blurred boundaries between definitions of the household (iyali), which today functions as a unity of production and consumption, and the extended family structure (gida), which used to serve that purpose but was made up of multiple households. This leads to a certain ambiguity that households exploit when, for example, inflating the numbers of household members when the amount of cash depends on household size, or fractioning the household into small units when the cash is provided per household independently of size.

**Box 8: Problematising ‘the household’**

The ‘household’ has always been a problematic category for social analysts. In an influential article, Guyer and Peters (1987) argued that the household was not an appropriate unit of analysis in Africa because: 1) it is not a discrete bounded group – people draw on networks and structures of extra-domestic kinship for support and access to resources; 2) it is not homogeneous but rather fractured according to gender and generation; and 3) it is not a fixed form, but a constantly evolving process (cited in O’Laughlin 2014: 6).

One conclusion is that comparison of households as discrete groups leads to incorrect assessments of poverty and well-being: “Whether one employs the universal categories of the typical demographic and health survey or the flexible culturally specific approach to domestic groups [...], questions and interpretations are shaped by the theoretical premises that guide the research. Each is a construction in theory, an approximation of reality, but some are better approximations than others, and these differences matter.”

(O’Laughlin 2014: 20)

There is also significant redistribution within the household. While NGOs often designate women as the recipients of cash, wives frequently give the money to their husbands. This is particularly the case with the seasonal cash transfers which NGOs have emphasised should be used primarily for household food security, as men are customarily responsible for providing for household food. The situation was slightly different for the longer-term cash transfers provided through the World Bank-supported government safety net programme, in which women were encouraged to invest in collective savings and loans groups or ‘tontines’ (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013, 2014).

In polygamous households the husbands normally designate the first wife to be the recipient, though she can designate a co-wife. “Whatever the case,” Olivier de Sardan et al. (2013: 36) suggest, “the wife is but an intermediary – the money returns to the husband.” The project designation of women as the recipients does, they say, confer a ‘collective’ character and moderate the risk of the husband using it for personal purposes, but when women occasionally try to hang on to it, there have been instances of violence (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2013: 37).

**5.4.2 Chad**

As in other countries, the notion of household as a unit for targeting is problematic in Chad as the sharing of resources is based on broader networks of caste, clan and kinship. The notion of an ‘extended family’ sharing resources is more appropriate than that of a household living under one roof (Meunier 2014). One chief suggested that food assistance is more conducive to household unity, as it is used to feed all in a common meal. Intra-household allocations of cash are more problematic since household members have different needs. Polygamous households were seen to have the most problems in distributing the money among sub-units. Project modalities were inconsistent in targeting polygamous households as one entity or separately (Belemvire 2015).

**5.5 Community approaches to food security****5.5.1 Niger**

NGOs often stress to beneficiaries the importance of using benefits to strengthen household food security, and then monitor the extent to which this is done. Community-level investigations by LASDEL, however, suggest that sometimes ‘social expenditures’ may be as important as ‘economic’ expenditures (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2014: 17). This is in line with the importance of social capital and the extended family as primary mechanisms for social protection as well as food security in rural societies in the Sahel, and was demonstrated particularly in relation to women beneficiaries in the project. While immediate food purchases were important, households often had a number of other inter-related priorities.

One woman explained: “It is with this money that I will pay a dowry for my son to marry because he is the one who cultivates the fields in order to feed me. If he is not married, I am afraid that he will go off and leave me.” (Olivier de Sardan et al. 2014: 17). Other expenses, such as paying off debts or buying an animal were also important, though often discouraged by NGOs, whose projects were aimed at immediate food security needs; purchase of an animal may disqualify a household for further assistance as this would raise one’s status beyond the threshold of ‘vulnerability.’

### **5.5.2 Mauritania**

As in Niger, households spent benefits on both food and non-food purchases, and these were found to vary according to the period of transfer. During the month of Tabaski (Eid al-Kabir), an important event in the Muslim calendar, for example, the purchase of new clothes rose from 3% to 30% of total household expenditures, since new clothes are a sign of dignity and respect, contributing to the maintenance of social capital (CRF/IRC 2013). A significant percentage of income went to debt reimbursement. Debt is linked to food, as most debts are contracted with shopkeepers for food. Expenditures on debts can thus be seen as additional food expenditures. Shopkeepers show more willingness to lend to cash transfer beneficiaries who are seen to have the ability to repay (CRF/IRC 2013).

## **5.6 Considerations for ‘shock-responsive’ social protection**

Seasonal emergency cash transfers run largely by NGOs in the Sahel have become a more or less permanent feature in many Sahelian countries, joining the older tradition of food distributions. As the evaluations have shown, communities often adapt the ‘rules’ of this assistance to conform with local values of reciprocity and to reflect local power structures, particularly through redistribution of benefits that have been so painstakingly (and at considerable expense) ‘targeted’ to the ‘most vulnerable’ by the NGO operators. This raises questions about targeting, both in terms of the merits of universal provision vs. rationing, and the units of analysis (household? community?) that serve as the basis for most targeting. Beyond the seasonal transfer programmes, such questions continue to arise in efforts to design and promote ‘shock-responsive’ mechanisms that depend upon specific indicators to trigger effective responses to communities affected by covariate shocks.

As longer-term, predictable national safety net programmes get underway in the region, it is important to draw lessons from the seasonal safety net evaluations and to determine which of their design features can be applied to strengthen ‘shock-responsiveness.’ It would also be important to apply such in-depth social analysis to the longer term programmes and to reflect on differences in findings that might arise in the social dynamics of their implantation in different communities. With more at stake in programmes delivering regular monthly sums over more than a year (compared to the four-month sums in seasonal transfers), one can imagine that the social dynamics – both within the household and more broadly within the community – will be both complex and powerful.

It is critical to build a way to capture both poverty and vulnerability dynamics into targeting methodologies that can effectively respond to both sudden onset and longer term shocks and stresses. This is not fully taken into consideration in current targeting methodologies which capture (at best) only a snapshot of current poverty / vulnerability and, in a restrictive targeting of the absolute poorest, fail to consider how those just above the ‘cut-off’ at the time of targeting may dip below thereafter. For longer-term social protection programmes, this would mean regular recertification, with its entailing costs and complexities. It also implies regular / ongoing enrolment campaigns for new beneficiaries. For ‘shock-responsive’ systems in particular, this would imply a mechanism sensitive enough to capture distress in both current recipient households, and households within the wider community – which again takes us back to the appropriate unit of analysis of ‘vulnerability.’

## 6 Conclusions

The previous chapters have attempted to draw insights from community perspectives on and experiences of social protection and shock-responsiveness from three different angles: 1) through a review of some of the literature on informal social protection and risk management / response mechanisms, and an examination of the large role these continue to play in the lives of individuals in both rural and urban areas of the Sahel; 2) through a focus on a particularly vulnerable and neglected livelihood group – mobile pastoralists – whose adaptive livelihood systems are under threat, and for whom appropriate social protection is particularly critical for both idiosyncratic and covariate shocks; and 3) through an analysis of the results of selected evaluations of community experiences of seasonal cash transfer programmes that have been among the dominant modalities of assistance in response to seasonal food deficits. The paper has been exploratory rather than comprehensive in nature, and seeks primarily to contribute to further reflection on the kinds of analytical and programmatic efforts that might further contribute to the development of community-sensitive ‘shock-responsive’ social protection in the Sahel. Key findings are summarised below.

### 6.1 Informal social protection mechanisms

In the absence or inadequacy of formal social protection provision across much of the Sahel, informal social protection mechanisms serve as vital safety nets for the majority of individuals and households. They take forms that can change over time and are based on ties of social solidarity deriving from shared kinship, religion, locality or friendship. They serve as examples of social capital that bind individuals and groups together, promoting a pooling of risks and shared responses to common life-cycle and livelihood risks. Such mechanisms are themselves, however, vulnerable to shocks and stresses, and there is evidence to suggest that they are more effective in response to idiosyncratic shocks than to covariate shocks affecting broader communities. There are nevertheless promising examples of how external assistance can build on and help to strengthen the linking social capital functions of such informal mechanisms, enabling them to contribute more effectively to ‘shock-responsive’ social protection. These should be seen as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, formal social protection, which remains the responsibility of the state.

### 6.2 Social protection and pastoral nomads

Pastoral nomads have developed livelihood systems that are themselves an adaptive response to the arid and semi-arid conditions under which they live, and to an environment where risks of all sorts are the norm rather than the exception. Such adaptive strategies are under threat due to the combined impact of climate change, land encroachment, unfavourable rural development policies, and social, economic and political marginalisation. These leave pastoral groups among those who are most vulnerable to recurrent shocks and stresses in the form of seasonal rainfall and pasture variabilities as well as to covariate shocks in the event of widespread drought or other disasters. But appropriate social protection for pastoral nomads is largely absent in the region, and the challenges encountered in extending social protection to pastoralists are many.

Reflection on the specific needs for ‘shock-responsive’ social protection for pastoralists must be situated within a broader context linked to the overall development and implementation of climate-sensitive and adaptive social protection systems as well as to appropriate pastoral development programmes and policies. Early warning systems for shock-responsive social protection need to include specific indicators linked to pastoral risks and vulnerabilities; drought response mechanisms need to be linked to the different phases of drought and their effects on livelihoods; and complementary measures need to focus on strengthen household resilience and livelihood options in pastoral areas. Targeting mechanisms need to be sensitive to community values and interventions can usefully build on and help to strengthen local solidarity systems and traditions.

### **6.3 Community responses to formal social safety nets**

Recent evaluations of seasonal cash transfer programmes run by NGOs in response to annual food deficits experienced by vulnerable households across the Sahel reveal that community perceptions and experiences of such programmes are ambiguous at best. Cash transfers are a recent phenomenon in most of the countries of the Sahel, and come onto the scene within a context of widespread food aid as the prevailing form of humanitarian assistance in response to seasonal food deficits and recurrent droughts. While the benefits of these programmes are many, the plethora of actors in the field, the different 'rules of the game' in each case, and the different values attributed to food and cash combine to create confusion as well as opportunities for manipulation of the system on the part of local actors and communities. Particular ambiguities surround targeting processes and procedures which, in their selective choice of individual households as beneficiaries, are seen to run counter to the cultural of solidarity that dictates broader sharing of external benefits within the community.

In fact, local values often seem to prevail as beneficiaries commonly redistribute benefits to others. Regional targeting of 'food deficit' areas and the establishment of 'quotas' per village are also seen as unjust, as both inter- and intra-community differences are felt to be minimal and the criteria for such targeting is not clearly understood. External control over the distribution of both cash and food benefits (on the part of NGO operators) is seen to undercut local systems of power and authority, while the focus on the 'very poor' is seen by some community members to deprive the middle strata of the resources they would need to continue to offer informal support to their more vulnerable neighbours. Lessons learned from such community responses to these seasonal safety nets can usefully feed into reflection on appropriate design features for community-sensitive shock-responsive social protection.

### **6.4 Shock-responsive social protection within a continuum that remains to be built**

This paper has attempted to capture community practices and perspectives on both formal and informal mechanisms of social protection in the context of the Sahel, where risks of all sorts – both idiosyncratic and covariate – are ever-present, and formal systems of social protection are weak, non-existent, or just being initiated. Within such a context, it would seem that further reflection on 'shock-responsive' social protection as a specific mechanism or systemic component needs to be built into ongoing efforts to develop overall systems, which will be able to span the continuum from protection and prevention to promotion and transformation, converging thus within an increasingly important agenda around resilience. Borrowing from disaster risk management terminology, this implies an integrated focus on prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and rehabilitation. Communities themselves have developed and practice specific strategies to confront, respond to and guard against key life cycle and livelihood risks and vulnerabilities. These have both strengths and limitations, and merit further study and analysis in order to draw out more fully the programme and policy implications for the design of formal systems of social protection that can offer a continuum of assistance and support in different contexts and settings and enhance overall shock-responsiveness.

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