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CONVERGENCE IN THE SAHEL: HOW TO LINK HUMANITARIAN CASH ASSISTANCE AND NATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS?

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*Linking Humanitarian Cash Assistance and National Social Protection
Systems, SASPP Flagship Report, World Bank, Washington DC.*



**SAHEL ADAPTIVE
SOCIAL PROTECTION
PROGRAM**

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1 BACKGROUND AND KEY MESSAGES

Convergence is the merging or coming together of separate elements. In the realm of social protection, this translates into the effective coordination and alignment of different humanitarian and development initiatives toward a shared national vision. Convergence between humanitarian operations and national social protection systems has gained momentum in the last few years, as reflected in the humanitarian-development nexus.

In the Sahel, a growing overlap between humanitarian activities and government interventions is emerging, particularly with the advent of adaptive social protection. Humanitarian assistance tends to operate in emergencies and volatile contexts with short-term horizons. In contrast, national social protection systems—including regular social safety nets—typically are longer term, more predictable, and focus on issues such as structural poverty rather than emergencies. However, both types of interventions share a broad goal to protect the poorest and most vulnerable and to promote their resilience to future shocks. Hence opportunities to better connect humanitarian assistance to the national social protection system do exist, particularly in the context of protracted crises.

Increasing convergence with national systems can lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian and government interventions, particularly shock responses.

Convergence can encourage cross-learning, prevent duplication, reduce confusion among beneficiaries, increase coverage of programs, minimize transaction costs, and optimize response time. In the Sahel, compounded crises have increased the pressure on fiscal spaces, which necessitates optimizing resources for maximum impact. Convergence can be seen as a fluid and adaptable concept in which some elements of programs may be more amenable to harmonization than others.

While important, convergence does not always result in better outcomes. Convergence can be a helpful approach to strengthen national social protection systems. However, any measures taken towards it must be appropriate for the country's context and aimed at improving responses to the fast-growing regional needs. Evidence shows that linking the two can present definite benefits but also potential drawbacks.¹

What fosters convergence? Convergence is usually stronger when social protection systems are mature and trusted by the development and humanitarian communities. Having pre-established relationships between partners and government with a history of collaboration and collective learning is critical for enabling convergence.² To create a common history and promote convergence, encouraging long-term thinking and national ownership of adaptive social protection systems is essential.

What hinders it? Several factors can impede convergence, such as irreconcilable program elements, conflicting priorities, and insufficient government leadership. Incompatible data management systems, divergent approaches to data privacy, varying timeframes for financial planning, and political economy dynamics can also pose significant barriers to collaboration.

What could work? Some factors could enable convergence but do not yet do so. For example, implementing global policy commitments related to strengthening convergence would direct humanitarian actors to determine whether their responses could be implemented through existing government systems.

What are other practices, that can both foster, when existing, or hinder convergence, when not? Donor policy and administrative procedures, government leadership, clear and coherent policy objectives, institutional set-up and division of government responsibilities, coordination, and capacity building of government counterparts can either enable or hamper convergence depending on context.

2 HOW IS 'CONVERGENCE' UNDERSTOOD AND ANALYZED?

This policy note consolidates key highlights of a study funded by the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program (SASPP), which explores the convergence between national social protection systems and humanitarian cash assistance in the Sahel. The analysis is based on six country case studies: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. The report provides strategic, policy, and operational reflections on the potential for harmonizing the two kinds of assistance and the potential value added of doing so. It does not assess the qualities of convergence or performance of the systems themselves, but rather it identifies the opportunities to align further the two systems and the key factors that either enable or constrain this convergence.

For each country, different interventions are examined. In Mauritania and Senegal, the analysis focused on responses to recurrent seasonal food insecurity, while that of Chad focused on support to refugees and host communities. The studies on Burkina Faso and Mali described situations in which food insecurity and forced displacement occur at the same time. While in Niger, the analysis focused on COVID-19-related assistance in the context of a protracted crisis.

The interventions studied in each country are assessed for their degree of convergence across 16 elements. These are grouped into four different categories: (i) national policy (1–4); (ii) program objectives (5); (iii) program design (6–10); and (iv) program implementation (11–16).

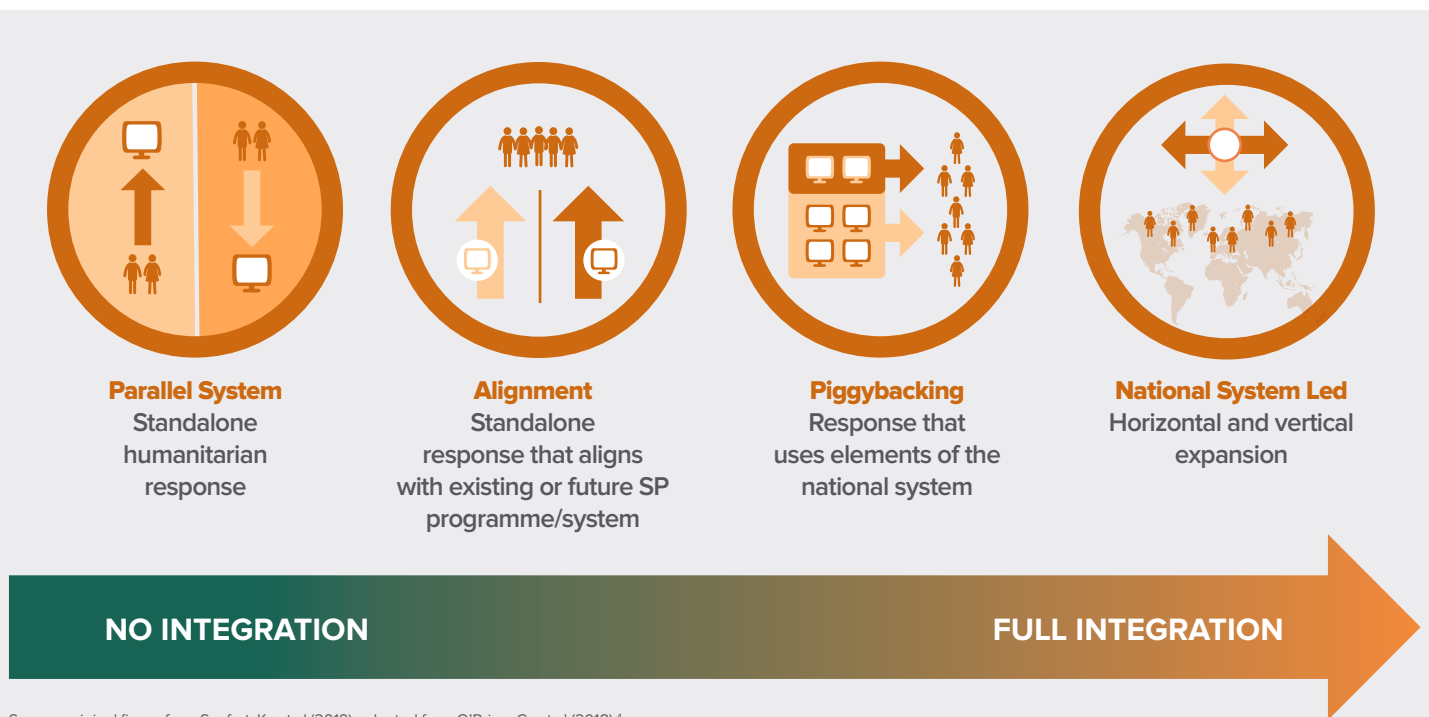
National Policy	Program Design
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Legal and policy framework 2. Financing 3. Governance 4. Coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Poverty/Vulnerability assessment 7. Price and market analysis 8. Targeting design, eligibility, and qualifying criteria 9. Transfer value, frequency, and modality 10. Conditionality
Program Objectives	Program Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Program objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Beneficiary management information system 12. Outreach and communication 13. Registration and enrollment 14. Payment and delivery 15. Accountability to affected populations 16. Monitoring and evaluation



Convergence exists on a spectrum and is not an “either/or” concept.³ At one end of the spectrum, humanitarian and national safety net programs deliver support independently of each other. In the middle of the spectrum, these programs can be aligned in some or all aspects of their objectives, design, or delivery (mimicking each other) but still function separately. Alternatively, they can use some of the same delivery mechanisms, thus piggybacking. At the opposite end of the spectrum, when

all humanitarian interventions are operated and delivered through national social protection systems, full convergence has been achieved (Figure 1). Where program elements fall on this spectrum depends on the degree to which the element is contentious, influenced by the relative weight of the enablers and barriers. The spectrum allows for a more realistic way to approach convergence rather than consider it an either/or concept.

FIGURE 1. Continuum of delivery options for humanitarian assistance



Source: original figure from Seyfert, K., et al (2019), adapted from O'Brien, C., et al (2018).⁴

3 MAIN HIGHLIGHTS

WHY ISN'T THERE MORE CONVERGENCE IN SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMING IN THE SAHEL?

The maturity of national systems and the level of government leadership in social protection influence the degree of convergence in a country. The highest levels of convergence are seen in countries with more developed systems, such as Senegal and Mauritania. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger have relatively nascent systems, which are limited in scale and reach. These countries also face greater needs, lower institutional capacity, and greater poverty and fragility. With competing

challenges, attention to and leadership of the social protection sector are limited. There can be a high cost to converging for partners in such a context, where mandates and roles may not be well defined ex ante or have undergone changes due to the conflict, or where the government is part to the conflict itself. This can hinder coordinated action. While these countries do exhibit convergence on some elements, humanitarian interventions largely run in parallel.

Global commitments toward convergence are present but not fully practiced in the Sahel. Donors and implementing partners have made global commitments to work through national systems when the context and opportunities allow. One such commitment is the Common Donor Approach to humanitarian cash programming, which was signed by various donors in 2019. It established that “donors expect to see cash programs (...) align with local and national mechanisms such as social protection systems, where possible and appropriate.” In practice, possible and appropriate can be challenging and, as a result, numerous interventions still run in parallel. Furthermore, players at the country level are not always aware of these global policy commitments.

Donors can play an important role in fostering convergence through their funding and administrative policies. Funding policies can influence design and implementation of programs in line with other priorities, away from convergence. In this way, donors do not always leverage their potential for encouraging convergence and end up funding parallel systems, even in countries where national systems would allow for a higher degree of convergence. At times, donors nonetheless promote or mandate greater coordination and alignment with national systems, as was the case for the Niger COVID-19 response supported by WFP, UNICEF, and the World Bank. The brevity of humanitarian funding cycles can also be a barrier to convergence, as they tend not to be aligned with government budget cycles or the strategic planning for shock response. For instance, in Mali, the funding cycle supporting the building of the social safety net program *Jigisèmèjiri* follows a longer timeframe than

humanitarian funding cycles. Providing multi-year financing for seasonal cash transfers could create an opportunity to align humanitarian resource mobilization with that of *Jigisèmèjiri*.

While these global policy commitments are limited in their ability to enforce certain practices, they represent a starting point for stakeholders to examine the feasibility of pursuing further convergence and to identify practical ways to do so.

Political economy and institutional interest are difficult barriers to overcome and hinder convergence in all countries. Moving toward convergence can entail a loss of influence and/or resources, creating a context of ‘winners’ and ‘losers,’ which threatens the existence or power of some actors. This can be a strong, mostly unspoken, reason to defer or halt convergence efforts. Competition between agencies impedes convergence. Program design elements can also be intrinsically linked to the identity and *raison d’être* of some actors. Such political economy and institutional interest considerations also apply to governments and their decisions on who to support, how to support them and through which agency. Such decisions can at times make it hard to converge with national systems. A more concerted effort is required to overcome such barriers, requiring action at the political, technical, and operational levels simultaneously.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER CONVERGENCE

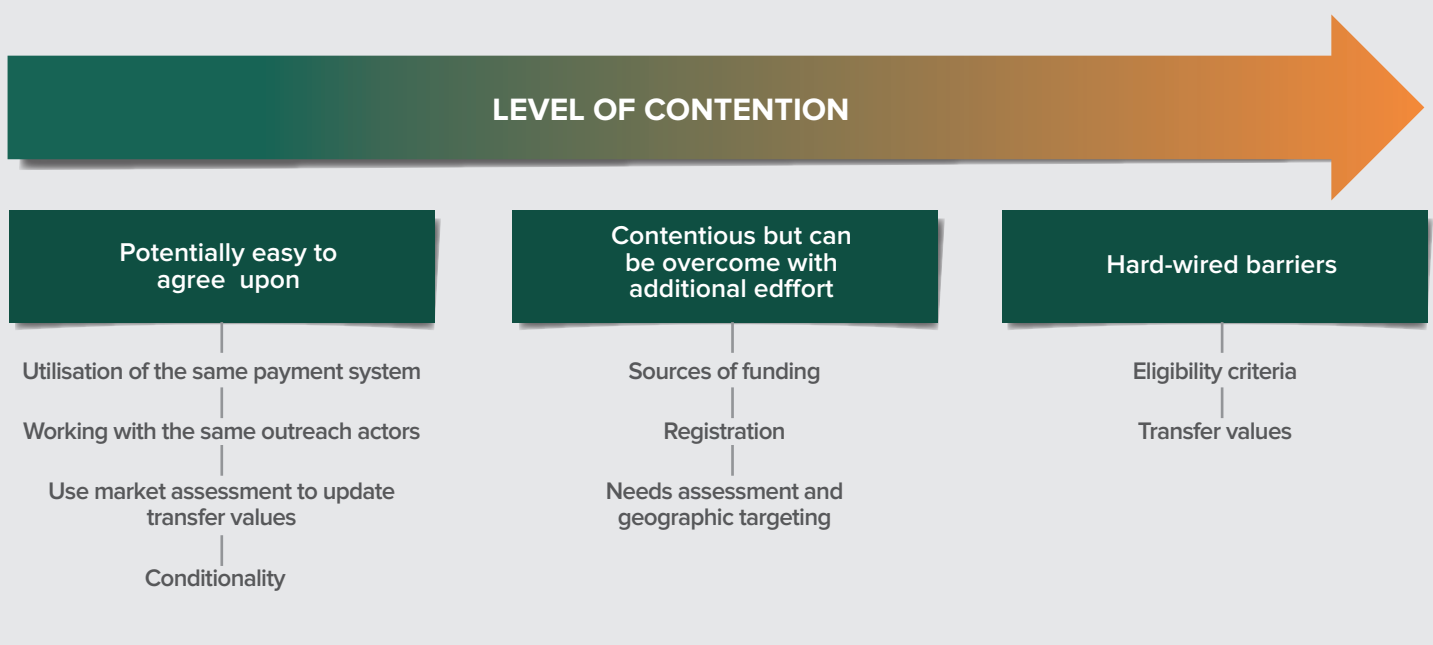
Some program elements are easier to converge than others.

Rather than attempting to tackle all elements at once or focus on the most challenging ones, focusing on elements that are easier to agree on may be more productive. For example, the alignment of payment systems and use (or not) of conditionality are generally easier to converge on, while eligibility criteria and transfer values (a recurrent topic of disagreement) are more difficult as they are more closely linked to program or actors' identity and objectives. Some elements, such as funding sources,

beneficiary registration (which raises issues of data protection and interoperability), definition of vulnerability, and identification of geographical zones of intervention, can be contentious but can be overcome with additional effort.

By focusing on low-hanging fruits, actors can help build momentum toward more complex agreements in the future.

FIGURE 2. Level of contention in program elements



Low-hanging fruit such as payment systems can be catalysts for convergence. While the analysis did not find examples of unified payment platforms, there were cases of actors using the same payment provider, a good starting point toward a shared platform. In Chad, most of the humanitarian cash assistance programs studied use the same financial service provider as the government safety net program, albeit through separate contracting procedures. Untapped potential exists in utilizing the collective negotiating power that comes with shared platforms to reduce fees and step toward increasing convergence simultaneously.

Outreach and communication with participants are another way to increase convergence with minimal effort, as programs tend to leverage the same frontline delivery staff or organizations. The programs studied in the Sahel act

through local authorities and establish partnerships with local civil society to facilitate communication. Programs using the same frontline delivery staff present a great opportunity harmonizing the programs' communication and disseminating messaging. It can also be helpful in implementing an integrated feedback or grievance redress mechanism for all the programs. In Senegal, local civil society organizations, which help the government implement the social safety net on the ground, also work with other cash assistance programs. These social operators are key in enabling convergence, as they ensure that a consistent interlocutor communicates on behalf of various programs.

Registration can be a contentious element, but differences can be overcome. Social registries are, first and foremost, a tool for registering people who are potentially eligible for safety net programs. Ideally, a single national registry in each country would provide the data for all programs to identify eligible households. However, humanitarian actors at times require faster registration processes or different data than is available in the Sahelian countries. High-quality and up-to-date data costs time and money. The absence of such data can disincentivize joint approaches on registration. In Burkina Faso, while previous interventions led to four independently managed databases, a recent recognition of the need to harmonize the registration process has encouraged the development of a roadmap toward building a unified social registry. In other Sahelian countries, significant progress has been made in developing social registries which are leveraged by multiple actors, but additional data collection efforts are also still the norm.

It is important to note, however, that even if convergence is achieved in terms of using the same social registry, the identification of beneficiaries often remains contentious. Beneficiary identification is one of the most difficult — although not impossible — design elements, as it is directly linked to a program's identity and objectives. While governments tend to prioritize coverage, reach, and equity among regions, humanitarian actors often focus on meeting the full needs of fewer selected individuals in prioritized areas. These opposing approaches make it difficult to converge on beneficiary selection criteria and transfer values. In Mali, a complex picture emerged in terms of targeting. The Jigisèmèjiri program and the EU-funded seasonal cash transfers initially looked at ways of harmonizing their targeting. While both relied on the social registry — widely considered to be a strength and an encouraging way forward regarding convergence —, their approaches resulted in a patchwork of targeting criteria and methodologies, even within the same programs.

4 FIVE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Prioritize convergence and make it an explicit goal to avoid funding parallel systems. Partners must work together more efficiently, and donors and implementing partners should translate their global policy commitments at the country level and reduce support for costly and unnecessary parallel delivery systems. The strategic value of convergence is not yet sufficiently recognized by key actors, so establishing a clear vision of convergence and its benefits in each country is crucial before turning to implementation. A starting point is to leverage existing mechanisms (such as coordination groups, national response plans or early warning systems) to better align interventions. The parameters defined by these mechanisms could serve as the basis of converging responses. If disagreement exists on these parameters or mechanisms, then rather than creating parallel ones, donors and implementing partners can collaborate to improve or modify them.

II. Be mindful of the political economy and develop common ground to overcome hard-wired barriers to convergence. Trade-offs on coverage versus benefit adequacy, for example, are generally tied to institutional mandates and hence are more difficult to overcome. Policymakers should consider (1) breaking the silos by bringing actors together physically, technically, and ideologically; (2) building joint knowledge to break down barriers by encouraging more diversity in the composition of teams or broadening the skills of existing staff; and (3) developing shared objectives and creating a coalition of allies working toward common goals.

III. Acknowledge and address the sensitivities when institutional interests create barriers. By definition, vested interests, whether those of government, donors or implementing partners, are at stake in convergence efforts since each program has its own staff, delivery system, and budget, which can be threatened by moves toward greater convergence. Where a disincentive to align is present, use open dialogue to identify solutions that appease such concerns.

IV. Focus on missed opportunities and join forces to increase available resources. Working jointly towards a better articulation of interventions is important, especially with regular cash transfers, shock-response, or productive inclusion interventions. This can be materialized, for example, by identifying shared outreach efforts with local NGOs or leveraging shared payment platforms. Humanitarian resources can be freed up by increasing efficiency along the delivery chain or by leaving the responsibility for recurrent crisis responses to national social safety nets (ensuring it remains affordable for governments and that programs provide adequate benefits).

V. Be prepared for the long haul. Effective convergence will not happen overnight and is not unidirectional. Setting up common tools and procedures for governments and humanitarian and development partners is a long-term endeavor that requires consensus building among actors with, at times, very different views. Sustained coordination is key to overcoming these differences.

ENDNOTES/REFERENCES

¹ Aligning the value of humanitarian transfers with those of social protection programs, for instance, could render them insufficient for crisis-affected people. See for reference:

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² For instance, the annual Cadre Harmonisé processes bringing together governments, development partners, and humanitarian actors to assess the country's food and nutrition situation.

³ Seyfert, K., V. Barca, U. Gentilini, M. Luthria, and S. Abbady (2019). "Unbundled: A framework for connecting safety nets and humanitarian assistance in refugee settings," World Bank Group, Washington, D.C

⁴ O'Brien, C., Scott, Z., Smith, G., Barca V., Kardan, A., Holmes, R., Watson, C. and Congrave, J. (2018), 'Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems research: Synthesis report', Oxford Policy Management, Oxford, UK.

⁵ Governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, EU/DG ECHO, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and USA (2019). "Common Donor Approach to cash programming," <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/common-donorapproach-feb-19.pdf> p.2.

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