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From Emergency to System Strengthening:

WFP Caribbean Cash Transfer Responses Through Social Protection (2018-2023)

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Foreword

In the wake of Hurricane Maria's devastation in 2017, the need for robust, proactive disaster preparedness and response was clearer than ever. This pivotal year led to the inception of WFP's Multi-Country office in the Caribbean in 2018. WFP set out with the goal to bolster regional and national emergency preparedness and resilience, in close partnership with Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and governments.

Our engagement has centred on building evidence to support policy, learning from emergencies and advocating for resilient systems, communities, and people. Building on our strong experience in the Hurricane Maria response in Dominica, the newly created office rapidly spearheaded ambitious research and learning agenda on shock-responsive social protection. The research revealed that many countries are able to piggyback on their social protection systems to respond to shocks. With COVID-19 significantly accelerating the governments use of social protection to provide support to the most vulnerable. This priority, coupled with WFP's tailored approach strengthened our partnerships with governments, enabling us to work side by side to turn evidence into tangible investments in the region's social protection systems.

Providing people with cash transfers when shocks and disasters strike has been central to our efforts. Cash assistance not only provided immediate relief during response periods, but empowered individuals with the agency to manage their recovery. The versatility of cash, coupled with innovative delivery mechanisms such as digital transfers, has enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of assistance provision. Cash transfer responses have allowed governments and WFP to better identify gaps within the social protection programme lifecycle to scale up in a crisis and for routine social protection programming.

By working side by side with governments on these responses, we have accumulated a rich body of lessons and fostered ongoing technical collaborations that emphasize the significance of investing in social protection systems and strengthening them to respond to shocks. These investments cannot be more timely for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Caribbean, where the compounded impacts of economic, climatic, and health-related shocks continue to pose significant threats.

Investing in preparedness and system strengthening will continue to be the cornerstone of our efforts. WFP, in close collaboration with our partners, is poised to continue this vital work, championing the role of social protection in achieving a more secure and prosperous Caribbean.

In the subsequent pages, we invite you to reflect on these insights and join us in fortifying the foundations laid down over these formative years. Together, we face the growing challenges in this region, embracing the complex yet hopeful future, armed with lessons that will define the next phase of social protection and disaster readiness in the Caribbean.

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WFP wishes to acknowledge the contributions and commitment of our partner governments and in particular the ministries responsible for social protection. We extend our gratitude to officials and stakeholders for their time, insights, and openness in working with WFP. This collective journey towards fostering inclusive, shock-responsive social protection systems stands as a shared accomplishment, reflecting the commitment of all involved.

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Introduction

Globally, the ways that international agencies support people impacted by crisis and disaster have shifted significantly in the last two decades. Cash transfers – providing money as an alternative or complement to in-kind assistance – emerged as first a new and then a mainstream form of assistance, a journey underpinned by much piloting, research and advocacy on the appropriateness and effectiveness of giving money to people. The large evidence base shows that cash can enable people to purchase goods and services that they need if markets are functioning, and risks can be managed. During the time that cash transfers were evolving as a mainstream response tool, many governments across the world either had social protection programmes providing cash transfers to vulnerable persons or began trialling such programmes. These developments opened the door for international agencies to partner more closely with certain governments and piggyback on existing social protection systems to provide cash transfers in emergencies (Slater et al., 2015).

Using international funding streams to provide assistance through existing social protection systems is especially relevant for Small Island Development States (SIDS) in the Caribbean for several reasons. Governments use cash transfers as part of routine social assistance programmes; there are experiences dating back more than two decades of governments modifying and implementing tailored social protection programmes when shocks occur; and Caribbean SIDS are highly exposed to natural hazards and global price shocks while also having very limited fiscal space driven by high debt burdens (Barca et al., 2019; Beazley et al., 2020; WFP Caribbean, 2021).

This paper outlines insights on the nuts and bolts of putting the theory of shock-responsive social protection into practice, based on more than a dozen responses between 2017 and 2023 whereby the WFP Caribbean Multi-Country Office partnered with governments to provide cash transfers in response to

disasters, COVID-19 and high food prices. Insights are also included on responses that transferred food.

While lessons relate to cash transfer responses *after* shocks occur, the main focus of the WFP Caribbean Multi-Country Office is on strengthening systems *before* shocks occur and preparing them to adapt and respond, for example through digitalization, management information systems and testing rapid payment processes. The office, which covers 22 countries in the English and Dutch-speaking Caribbean, was established in 2018 with the objective of bolstering regional and national emergency preparedness and resilience. Central to this initiative has been supporting governments to prepare social protection systems to scale up and respond as needed to support vulnerable persons.

This paper starts by providing an overview of WFP Caribbean's journey supporting shock-responsive social protection from evidence and advocacy to action, including its efforts to strengthen systems. Through a series of country-specific examples, it then outlines lessons learned on partnering with governments to implement cash transfer response measures through social protection. Overarching lessons are then highlighted. These initiatives show the importance of innovative solutions, digitalization and strategic collaborations with government and private sector partners, underscoring the importance of a dynamic approach to strengthening the role of social protection as part of disaster preparedness and response in the Caribbean.

Building Regional Evidence

WFP opened the multi-country office in the Caribbean following its significant operational role in the humanitarian response to the back-to-back Category 5

Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, which caused devastation across several countries. As discussed in next section, WFP supported a large-scale cash transfer response through social protection in Dominica. The experience in Dominica highlighted the importance of strengthening the preparedness of social protection systems to respond to disasters and shocks (ACAPS, 2018; Beazley, 2018).

Since its inception, WFP Caribbean established itself as a leader in the region on shock-responsive social protection through a comprehensive advocacy, evidence and learning agenda. Building on a regional Latin America and the Caribbean Oxford Policy Management (OPM) and WFP study on shock-responsive social protection, WFP coordinated with its key partner the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) to launch a Caribbean-focused research initiative.¹ Between 2018 and 2021, WFP and OPM conducted case studies on shock-responsive social protection in Dominica, Guyana, Belize, Saint Lucia, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba and Sint Maarten. WFP and CDEMA also convened learning events and a high-level forum on shock-responsive social protection to exchange lessons and build relationships, momentum, and a shared commitment to act quickly to respond and invest in people after disasters and shocks.

The process of evidence generation has been just as important as the outcomes because it (1) convened both social protection and disaster risk management actors around how these systems relate to one another; (2) built relationships with government stakeholders, particularly social protection ministries, that have been important for subsequent response efforts; (3) developed baseline analysis and priorities to guide WFP and other agencies' country-level priorities on making social protection systems more responsive to shocks; (4) laid the basis for collaboration and coordination opportunities with other agencies, such as joint programmes, learning

events and trainings with UNICEF and International Labour Organization, as well as the International Organization for Migration specifically referencing the WFP shock-responsive social protection and migration study in developing its strategy for the Caribbean.

Shock-responsive social protection workshops to develop roadmaps were conducted in Belize and Saint Lucia in 2019 and early 2020 that brought together a wide range of government stakeholders and others (e.g., the Red Cross) to exchange recommendations to strengthen linkages between disaster risk management and social protection and steps to enact them. These workshops were done just before COVID-19, which rapidly shifted WFP into a more operational relationship with several governments who responded to WFP's offer for technical and financial support for cash transfers through social protection.

From Evidence to Action

The COVID-19 pandemic saw all of the Caribbean countries covered by the Multi-Country Office turn to social protection as a key measure to support people affected by the outbreak. This accelerated WFP's operational engagement on shock-responsive social protection, with WFP working with six governments on cash transfer programmes through social protection and subsequently two governments in response to disasters, notably the 2021 La Soufriere eruption in St. Vincent and the Grenadines that displaced about 20% of the country's population.

WFP's technical and financial support to governments to reach vulnerable people with cash transfers through social protection built on its research and knowledge base in several ways. First, WFP recognized that social assistance programmes providing cash transfers only reach a small portion of the population (from one percent to eight percent depending on the country).

¹ Study reports and case studies can be found at www.wfp.org/publications/research-programme-shock-responsive-social-protection-caribbean

Thus, responses included registration processes to reach people outside of existing programmes, with targeting criteria tailored to the shock. Second, existing social assistance values are below what people need to meet essential needs when shocks occur because routine values are not regularly increased/are subject to resource constraints and because shocks lead to greater needs. Therefore, the responses had higher transfer values.² Third, because social protection systems did not have measures in place for rapidly scaling up, bottlenecks (including the use of paper forms for beneficiary registration and lengthy, manual reconciliation of payments) needed to be addressed. WFP therefore provided support to governments ranging from digitalizing registration to co-developing Frequently Asked Questions and communications materials. The case studies also enabled WFP to have detailed insights on the social protection and disaster risk management systems in each of the countries supported.

Innovating while responding

A key aspect of WFP's support to governments has been strengthening and innovating processes during the responses themselves. In Dominica and Guyana, WFP supported the government to use QR codes in the payment distribution process, which enabled a real-time overview of who had collected payments. WFP provided technical support to several governments on digitalizing the collection of household data, which was used for targeting. Also in Dominica, where routine registration processes for social assistance have been paper-based, this experience subsequently informed technical assistance on information management. In Jamaica, where cheques are used for many social assistance payments, digital payments were piloted for

² An exception, covered below, was the expansion of the Public Assistance Programme in Saint Lucia, where multi-dimensional poverty targeting was used and people reached by the temporary scale-up then continued on the programme after WFP's financial support concluded, thus receiving greater financial support over time.

the WFP-supported cash transfers in response to COVID-19, leading the government to use the same payment mechanism for their subsequent grant. Similarly, in Belize, a new mobile wallet was used that enabled rapid, secure and traceable disbursement of funds, which has been recognized widely in the government as a rapid and transparent means of delivering assistance.

WFP's experience of working with these governments led to practical lessons on scaling up social protection systems in response to shocks, including the role that development partners like WFP can play. It also reinforced the approach that WFP has embedded in its research and regional strategy on supporting the preparedness of social protection systems so that they are better placed to respond. As shown in Figure 1, WFP supports governments with the preparedness of social protection systems across six functions:³

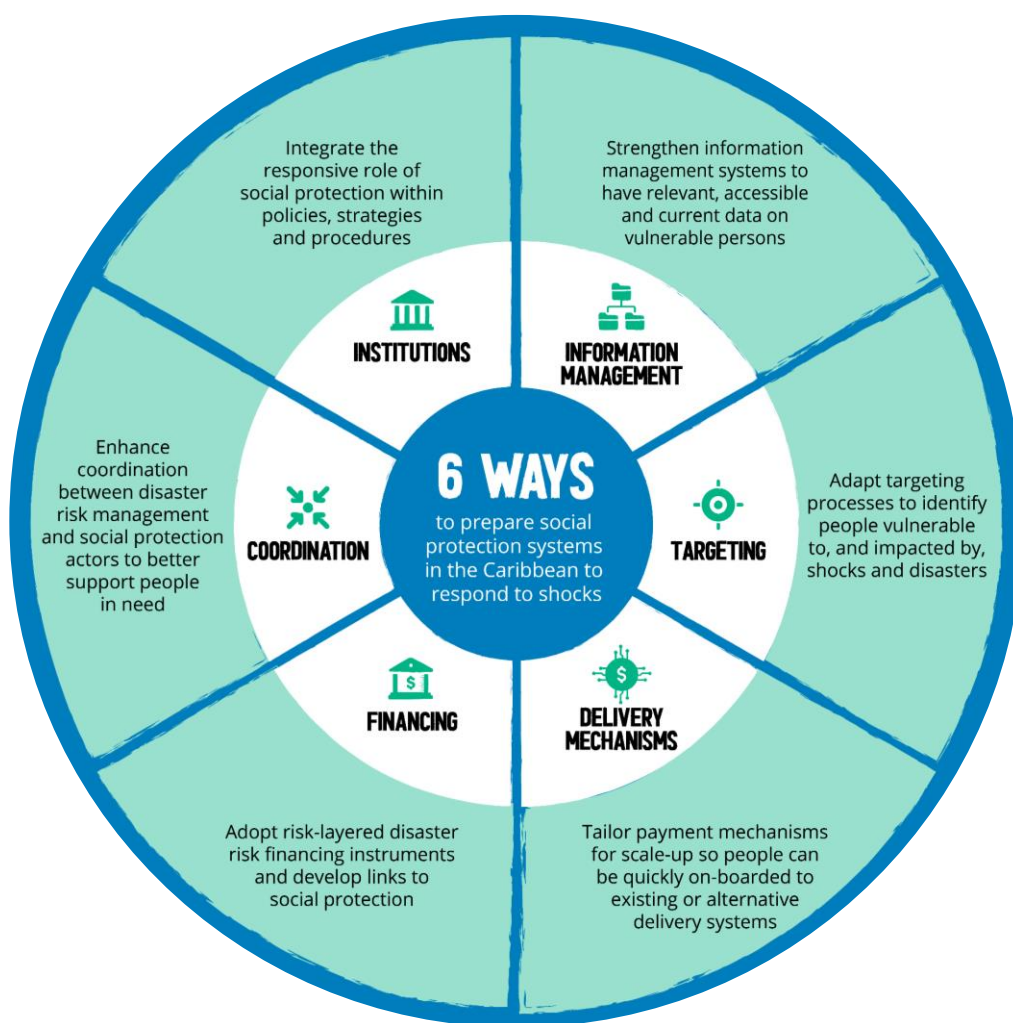
1. *Institutional arrangements*: policies, strategies and procures on social protection and disaster risk management and the extent these integrated a responsive role for social protection
2. *Coordination*: the role of social protection within disaster risk management coordination
3. *Information management*: the collection, management and use of data for social protection and disaster risk management (particularly data on vulnerable persons and households)
4. *Targeting*: processes for identifying and selecting persons eligible for assistance
5. *Delivery mechanisms*: mechanisms for distributing cash or in-kind assistance to social protection beneficiaries and/or people affected by shocks
6. *Financing*: how responses to shocks are funded

³ This follows the framework of the OPM/WFP case studies, which was adapted from Beazley et al. (2016). It is widely used by other aid agencies and also some IFIs when discussing adaptive or shock-responsive social protection, even if the language and categories vary slightly.

Technical assistance has varied from one government to the other based on their priorities, entry points and varying levels of maturity of systems and policy frameworks. Measures include the development of standard operating procedures for shock-responsive social protection; testing new and faster payment processes; developing a vulnerability index to identify households facing poverty and higher exposure to hazards; and support for digitalization of registration and the development of information management systems. The cash transfer responses have allowed governments and WFP to identify gaps within the social protection programme lifecycle both for scaling up and for routine social protection programming. The lessons learned will inform future responses and measures to make systems more adaptable.

As fiscal space is a notable constraint in the region, and WFP is piloting innovative disaster risk financing and anticipatory action approaches linked to social protection to ensure that vulnerable people are at the heart of creative solutions to close financing gaps. With Caribbean states on the front line of climate change, creative approaches to preparedness are needed now more than ever. Finally, WFP’s support on shock-responsive social protection to governments goes hand in hand with strengthening regional emergency preparedness measures with CDEMA and its Participating States on end-to-end supply chain management, enabling a holistic approach to preparedness so that vulnerable populations receive the support they need when hazards strike.

FIGURE 1: SIX WAYS TO PREPARE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS TO RESPOND



Experiences and lessons: cash transfer responses through social protection

The multi-country coverage of the WFP office in the English and Dutch-speaking Caribbean has enabled a wide range of lessons emerging from responses in nine different countries and territories. In all but one response (Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas), WFP's cash-based assistance to vulnerable persons was done in partnership with government ministries responsible for social protection and used existing social protection systems to varying degrees. In every response, beneficiary surveys and lessons-learned exercises were conducted to identify challenges and opportunities. Focus group discussions and onsite monitoring also informed lessons. This section provides an overview of each response and the practical "takeaways".

Dominica: Joint Emergency Cash Transfer (2017-2018)

WFP launched the Joint Emergency Cash Transfer (JECT) reaching nearly 25,000 people affected by Category 5 Hurricane Maria in September 2017, with UNICEF financing a top-up for children. Over USD \$3 million in cash was distributed using cash in envelopes through the government's social protection systems via Village Clerks. In line with existing government processes, the data collection for registration was paper-based, with forms then entered digitally. For a small island state, this was a huge scale-up – the number of people reached was more than four times greater than the main social assistance programme and represented more than a third of the island's population.

Key Takeaways

Piggybacking on existing delivery mechanisms through the utilization of Village Councils proved to be practical and appropriate because the government and beneficiaries were familiar with the process of issuing and retrieving payments. This allowed for fast disbursement of cash and made it easier to manage the increased caseload compared to introducing a new payment process. It also enabled wide access to impacted people compared to using credit unions, banks or ATM cards.

Subsequent cash transfer responses supported by WFP have incorporated the use of Village Councils for payments within the design, particularly the COVID-19 response below. The paper-based household data collection of the JECT was very time-consuming and required substantial effort on data entry, hence digital options were pursued in subsequent responses.

Dominica: COVID-19 Social Cash Transfer (2020-2021)

Building on the positive experience and lessons learned from the Hurricane Maria response, WFP partnered with the Ministry of Youth in Dominica to reach people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent reduction or loss of income. This included a top-up to the Public Assistance Programme (PAP) and reaching new persons not in the PAP. In 2020-21, US\$1.9m was provided to 9,700 people to help them meet food and other basic needs. As with the 2017 Hurricane Maria response, payments were made in cash by Village Council clerks, who retrieved the funds from credit

unions. Two innovations were introduced. The first was that WFP supported the government to use digital data collection for the registration process, by helping with the design of digital forms, providing training on digital data collection, and procuring tablets for each Village Council. WFP also introduced digital reconciliation of payments using QR codes affixed to the envelopes containing cash, whereby Village Council clerks across the country could scan the codes to record the payment to beneficiaries, which were reconciled in real-time.

Beneficiaries were provided the choice to receive payments directly into their credit union accounts, which only 10% of beneficiaries chose, despite the majority of beneficiaries having accounts. The Credit Union payments took longer than Village Council payments owing to issues with the manual approval of payments. These delays, combined with a preference for cash transactions and a familiarity with Village Council processes, collectively contributed to a general reluctance from beneficiaries to have the cash deposited in their credit union accounts.

Key Takeaways

Technical assistance to transition to digital data collection and the introduction of digital reconciliation of payments sped up processes greatly and made data on recipients, payments, etc. more transparent and accessible. The digital data collection served as a launching point for broader efforts by WFP and the government to digitalize routine social assistance data collection and develop information management systems.

Another key lesson, as with the 2017 Maria response, is that manual payments are scalable. In this instance, delays also occurred in the processing of payments through credit unions owing to manual steps to process those payments, which the government is seeking to automate. That challenge highlights the importance of understanding the flow of funds, how payments are approved, and to resolve bottlenecks to rapid disbursement of funds.

WFP subsequently worked with technical focal points in the governments to document processes of scaling up in response to shocks, complementing earlier efforts by UNICEF to develop a PAP manual. However, a government reshuffle in 2022 stalled the approval of these documents by Cabinet.

Dominica: East Coast Trough Response (2022-2023)

A trough system affected Dominica in early November 2022, bringing heavy rainfall, landslides and significant damage to some communities. The government requested support for the provision of financial assistance to impacted households. Elections occurred shortly thereafter, causing some delays to the cash transfers while restructuring took place that shifted social welfare activities from one ministry to another and changes in senior government technical focal points. The government and WFP subsequently provided cash transfers to 1,400 persons, again using the Village Council structure for the payments.

Key Takeaways

Major government changes like elections can impact and delay responses through government social protection systems especially if there is a reshuffling of ministries, as responsibilities and counterparts can change. WFP works closely with civil servants and technical persons at different levels, which can mitigate risk related to government restructures given that some positions are more stable. Engagement at the more technical, implementation level is particularly critical as these positions have the institutional knowledge amid transitions. Institutionalization of shock-response processes through documentation and SOPs is important so that knowledge stays even if personnel in government change. Trainings and workshops can also help familiarize new staff with processes and previous lessons.

Village Councils in Dominica play important roles in identifying and reaching persons affected by disaster and are critical touch points in the delivery of social assistance. The East Coast Trough experience demonstrated the importance of having strong communication with the Village Councils, as they were able to identify some persons in need of support who had been identified in the immediate aftermath of the trough.

Bahamas: Hurricane Dorian (2019)

Category 5 Hurricane Dorian devastated the island of Abaco in the Bahamas in 2019. Haitians living on the island were particularly badly impacted. WFP established a value voucher programme for Haitian migrants in partnership with a local supermarket chain, implemented in partnership with Samaritan's Purse. The programme reached 1,207 vulnerable people with two and a half months of support for food and essential needs. WFP analysed options for working through social protection systems and determined that it was more appropriate to deliver assistance directly to beneficiaries with an NGO partner.

Key Takeaways

Even where governments have social protection systems in place, it may not be the most appropriate channel to support those most impacted. In the case of Abaco, it was not practical to look to social protection systems that were not yet back functioning and that were not well suited to reach the most impacted group. Supporting undocumented migrants was politically sensitive and a challenge facing humanitarian agencies irrespective of the type of support they provided. This experience reiterates the need for agencies to consider the diverse needs of all affected populations (including undocumented migrants) and maintain flexibility in delivery methods to adapt to different contexts and populations, ensuring that assistance reaches those in need.

Barbados: COVID-19 Response Programme (2020-21)

In 2022, the Ministry of People Empowerment and Elder Affairs (MPEA) provided US\$50,000 to 593 people facing financial difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those targeted to receive the cash were single-parent families and other vulnerable families who had not benefited from government COVID-19 support, such as migrants who had been identified by the MPEA as needing support. Social workers and WFP used registration forms and processes developed for other COVID-19 assistance programmes. Cheques were selected as the most appropriate payment mechanism, which was an established process for government payments and did not require beneficiaries to have bank accounts. Monitoring was conducted with structured questionnaires and tablets when beneficiaries retrieved their checks, which enabled WFP and the MPEA to verify beneficiaries had clarity on the programme and payments.

Key Takeaways

In the case of the COVID-19 cash transfers, these were able to fill a gap to reach some persons, including migrants, who either did not qualify for or were unable to benefit from the COVID-19 measures that the government had put in place. A lesson is that even if government programmes do not specifically include migrants, aid agencies can work with governments to reach these persons using the administrative systems underpinning routine programmes if they are appropriate for those groups (e.g. forms for registration, checks for payments). In this scenario, digital payment solutions were initially explored but products were limited as was their adoption by people and merchants. Further research is being conducted by the MPEA and WFP to explore the potential of using digital payments or other non-cash solutions for social protection and emergency response.

Barbados: Response to Food Price Crisis (2022-23)

Much attention globally and in the Caribbean on responses through social protection has focused on cash transfers. Food hampers are also a common form of support through social assistance programmes in the Caribbean and in the aftermath of disasters. In late 2022/early 2023, WFP and the MPEA partnered to provide food kits to 22,000 vulnerable persons. Food had been procured by WFP ahead of the hurricane season as a regional contingency. The remaining commodities after the hurricane season enabled WFP and the MPEA to direct the stock as support to households impacted by high food prices. The MPEA added more food items to the basket, which increased the diversity of food provided. WFP established a hotline for queries and introduced a digital system that enabled the tracking of food kits from a temporary warehouse and confirmation of receipt by beneficiaries.

Key Takeaways

Although the assistance was provided in kind rather than in cash, the intervention drew on existing government cash transfer programmes to identify households in need. The government drew on the beneficiary databases of its existing social assistance programmes to identify, verify and register recipient households. A rapid household assessment that had been conducted by the MPEA in response to COVID-19 also provided data for the identification of food parcel recipients.

WFP drew on its logistics capacities to support the ministry in many aspects of the distribution, working closely with the, the Barbados Defence Force, the Barbados Association of Professional Social Workers and District Emergency Organisation volunteers. This multi-stakeholder partnership was

critical in ensuring adequate human capacity to reach beneficiaries and distribute relief items in their communities, enabling the MPEA and WFP to reach people with mobility challenges, including the elderly and people with disabilities.

The distribution of the food parcels enabled the WFP and MPEA to use and test digital tools for tracking the distribution and receipt of relief supplies. The WFP had the opportunity to test the CDEMA Logistics System (CLS) for the dispatch of food from the interim storage facility on site. The CLS is a digital platform for registering and tracking relief supplies in the Caribbean. In addition, the open software KoboCollect was used by social workers and volunteers to register the receipt of food parcels by beneficiaries at the community level. This experience can support the Ministry's broader digitalisation efforts and capacity building related to its wider social assistance programmes.

British Virgin Islands: COVID-19 Income Support Programme (2021-2022)

WFP and the Ministry of Health and Social Development developed a close relationship following Hurricane Irma and Maria in 2017, with WFP afterwards exploring with the Ministry the potential development of information management systems for social assistance. In 2020, the Social Development Department (SDD) requested WFP's technical support in designing a government-funded income support programme in response to COVID-19. Support was provided in identifying targeting criteria, developing registration forms, and determining transfer values. Subsequently, WFP received funding through the UN Multi-Donor Trust fund, enabling financing support for one-off payments to 223 people from vulnerable households between October 2021 and February 2022. During this process, lessons were learned on

targeting, digitalizing data collection and other processes that proved very valuable for subsequent efforts to strengthen social assistance systems.

Following this experience, WFP assisted the SDD in developing information management processes to recertify and include 300 new households into the Public Assistance Programme (PAP). In parallel, WFP worked with the SDD to conduct a thorough review of the end-to-end process for the PAP, with recommendations on the application process, benefits/services package, eligibility criteria and qualifying conditions and the transfer level, frequency and duration. Enhanced Standard Operating Procedures were developed for the registration, targeting and delivery of the PAP, using digital solutions instead of the existing paper-based processes, building on the lessons learnt from the response and technical assistance.

Key Takeaways

The partnership of the government and WFP to design the COVID-19 programme and the subsequent support to transition a new set of beneficiaries into the PAP revealed the importance of underlying social protection processes and design features, particularly on registration. In this case, because the existing systems had underlying weaknesses, new digital systems were developed to enable efficient and transparent implementation and for reaching the targeted population. An interim information management system was developed with WFP's support, which strengthens the efficiency of the procedures, as well as the transparency and harmonization of targeting for routine social protection. WFP is now supporting the government to fully develop the information management system and accompanying processes,

including making it shock responsive to more easily onboard people quickly in the future.

Great collaboration with UNICEF enabled the operational improvements to help inform and drive policy reform efforts that were also taking place. The government's practical experience working closely with aid agencies on cash transfers to respond to Hurricane Irma (2017) and COVID-19 influenced their prioritisation of shock-responsiveness.⁴

Guyana: MHSSS WIIN Livelihoods support (2021-2022 and 2022-2023)

WFP partnered with the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security (MHSSS) to provide cash assistance in 2021/2022 to poor and vulnerable people impacted by the pandemic and in 2022/2023 to those impacted by the food price crisis. There was a strong gender and livelihoods focus, working through the Women's Innovation and Investment Network (WIIN) Programme, which focuses on women's empowerment by building and enhancing knowledge and skills for improved economic participation. In 2021/2022, grants were provided to women participating in training programmes in order to support their livelihoods and basic needs. The subsequent effort targeted women who owned small businesses, aimed at cushioning the economic pacts of the food price crisis. Both used cash in envelopes, with training provided to government staff on QR code generation, so that QR codes could be affixed to envelopes containing

⁴ Lessons from the experience of WFP and the SDD in strengthening social protection information management systems and programme design are explored in depth in WFP Caribbean (2024) *The*

Journey Towards a Strengthened and Shock-Responsive Social Protection System, World Food Programme.

cash. In total, more than 18,000 beneficiaries were reached.

Key Takeaways

The experience demonstrates how more livelihood-oriented programmes can be used as an entry point for responding to shocks. The existence of a social protection programme that was already designed to reach women and support their livelihoods made for an excellent vehicle for incorporating a gender-responsive approach. Focusing on livelihoods for the WFP-supported COVID-19 transfers was also facilitated by the fact that the government had larger-scale COVID-19 cash transfers as part of its national recovery efforts. This enabled a more niche entry point that considered the livelihood impacts and opportunities facing women, given that basic needs were being supported through other programmes.

The generation of QR codes during the cash distribution enabled fast payment reconciliation and reduced time spent by beneficiaries at distribution sites, as their data was quickly retrieved and then data on who had redeemed was instantly available.

Jamaica: COVID-19 Digital Cash Grant (2021-2022)

WFP and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MLSS) launched a cash transfer programme in 2021 to help mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cash transfers totalling USD 940,000 reached over 26,000 persons who were not part of routine programmes. The registration and targeting process involved community leaders and the National Council for Senior Citizens given the specific vulnerabilities faced by older persons. The two payments were transferred in partnership with WiPay, the financial

service provider identified by the government with technical support from WFP. WiPay was in the process of developing its cash-out and agent network. This was the first time that the government had used a digital wallet for a social protection grant or as part of a response, which the MLSS was keen to pursue owing to the time required to issue cheques.

This response built on a food assistance response through social protection that WFP implemented with the MLSS in the first half of 2021, reaching more than 40,000 vulnerable and mainly elderly persons with food kits, who were facing socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. The data collected for this response was utilized/verified to inform the targeting of the cash transfers later in 2021, with some new persons also added based on vulnerability.

Key Takeaways

The introduction of digital cash transfers was a key innovation. The payments were issued rapidly, bypassing the more time-consuming process of issuing cheques. Digital payments were new to the MLSS and beneficiaries (especially the elderly who were often not familiar with text messaging and QR codes). Initial challenges included ensuring sufficient cash-out points, liquidity of agents and following up with beneficiaries who had not redeemed their funds to encourage them to do so and assist if needed. Strong collaboration among WiPay, the MLSS and WFP was key. WiPay tailored their dashboard to enable the government to track redemptions, which could then be used by social workers to follow up with people who hadn't cashed out. WiPay significantly scaled up its agents, from 25 locations when the programme started in December 2021 to over one hundred locations in January 2022. The MLSS coordinated with WiPay to deploy a mobile cash-out unit to areas where people had issues accessing agents.

The experience highlighted the importance of data quality when using digital payments. Using different

spellings in registration processes (or shortening names, e.g. from Samuel to Sam) creates issues if beneficiaries' identity documents are not perfectly aligned with data provided to the payment service provider. The fact that the provision of digital cash transfers through social protection built on the food response earlier in 2021 shows how data can be used across different social protection response measures, even when they provide different forms of support.

A final lesson was that efforts of business and governments to expand digital payments need to consider the specific needs and experiences of vulnerable groups. Building on this experience, WFP supported the MLSS with research and analysis on digital payments and financial inclusion, including focus group discussion with beneficiaries and surveys with businesses.⁵

Saint Lucia: COVID-19 PAP Expansion (2020-2021)

WFP supported the Ministry of Equity in Saint Lucia to expand and provide unconditional cash assistance to beneficiaries enrolled in the largest social protection programme, the Public Assistance Programme (PAP), in response to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. An additional 800 households (about 3,000 people) were enrolled in the programme, expanding the programme by 38%. The government used its own resources to enrol 200 more and reach the planned target of 1000 households. This expansion of the PAP was key in enabling the government to meet disbursement-linked indicators for the World Bank-supported Human Capital Resilience Project and access funding for a permanent expansion. The people reached in the temporary COVID-19 scale-up

⁵ See WFP Caribbean (2023) *Digital Financial Inclusion in Jamaica: Insights and Opportunities*, World Food Programme.

continued to receive support as PAP beneficiaries after WFP's financial support concluded.

Key Takeaways

The experience shows that temporary response measures can inform and leverage broader social protection reform efforts and achieve more sustainable results especially if beneficiaries are integrated into programmes in the longer term. However, this may impact the speed of responses as governments usually have more involved targeting processes for routine programmes compared to temporary scale-ups. In this instance, the Human Capital Resilience project required that all beneficiaries be recertified in a verification process. Undertaking this process ahead of the COVID-19 expansion required significant time. Therefore, trade-offs may need to be considered for the speed of response efforts and sustainability of support beyond the response.

Saint Lucia: Hurricane Elsa SRSP Pilot (2021-2022)

In 2021-2022, WFP supported the Ministry of Equity to develop standard operating procedures for shock-responsive social protection and designed a pilot to inform the SOPs and test shock responsiveness of the social protection system. When Hurricane Elsa struck in 2021, this became the focus of the pilot.

WFP supported the Ministry in drafting operating procedures through a consultative process and the development of a household vulnerability index, which used indicators to capture the vulnerability, exposure and resilience of households. This was applied in conjunction with an existing multi-

dimensional poverty tool (the SL-NET 3.0) for verifying and prioritizing households affected by Hurricane Elsa. A total of 269 households were targeted using the composite scoring. Beneficiaries were given the option to be paid using the Ministry's normal delivery channels (credit unions, banks, sub-collectors) or a new e-wallet, Penny Pinch. The registration process included a question asking about interest in using a digital payment tool. Those who responded positively were invited to a sensitization session by Penny Pinch, where they could then decide which distribution mechanism they preferred. Following the disbursement of funds, surveys were implemented with a representative sample of beneficiaries and focus group discussions were conducted to understand their experience with cash transfers generally and payment processes more specifically.

Key Takeaways

Testing response processes combined with strong monitoring and evaluation enabled practical lessons for the future. The experience showed that digital wallets were not in high demand. The small number who opted to use the digital wallet found it convenient, particularly for persons with mobility issues who might otherwise face challenges to stand in long lines at financial institutions for withdrawals. Digital payments were new to most beneficiaries. At the time of testing, Penny Pinch was a nascent product with limited options for purchasing and cashing out (funds could be redeemed at some stores, used for utility payments, and transferred to recipients' bank accounts). While digital payments provided a rapid option, additional sensitisation and further merchant penetration are needed in Saint Lucia in order to scale up the use of this modality and enable people a wider variety of options for making purchases. WFP has since engaged in further dialogue with the government, Penny Pinch and other providers and conducted

more in-depth analysis on the payments landscape and the user experience of beneficiaries.⁶

The government also worked with Credit Unions to help open accounts for some of the pilot beneficiaries, reducing certain requirements to facilitate the opening. As Credit Unions offer a wide variety of financial services, the facilitation of accounts could support financial inclusion in the long run, if the services are relevant to beneficiaries and they keep the accounts open.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines: Soufriere Volcano Response (2021)

WFP arrived in St. Vincent and the Grenadines two days after the La Soufriere volcano eruption in April 2021. Despite having no previous in-country presence, within 24 hours WFP began supporting the government with the digitization of assessments and subsequently worked closely with government on assessments, logistics and the design of a cash transfer programme.

WFP co-designed with the Ministry of National Mobilisation the Soufrière Relief Grant, which provided cash assistance to vulnerable, impacted persons. Given the government's reduced capacity and bandwidth during the emergency response, WFP and the Ministry jointly determined that WFP would provide the payments through its corporate solution Western Union, instead of through the existing social assistance payment mechanism. WFP also provided technical support for targeting and registration, which was done digitally. Transfer values were based on minimum expenditure baskets calculated by the government. The

⁶ See WFP Caribbean (2023) *Digital Financial Inclusion in Saint Lucia: Insights and Opportunities*, World Food Programme.

assistance reached nearly 20,000 people with cash-based transfers totalling over US\$3m. Following the response, WFP has continued to provide technical assistance to strengthen data processes and enhance how social protection can support people's resilience and be prepared to respond to shocks.

Key Takeaways

Much was learned in this response on data collection and payments. Digital processes proved an important entry point for more efficient data collection and targeting in two ways (1) digital forms created by WFP greatly sped up the government's data entry of initial paper forms already deployed (2) using tablets to directly undertake digital data collection for more detailed assessments enabled real-time data for targeting for the Soufrière Relief Grant. WFP introduced processes to ensure data quality and manage duplicate entries, including creating a cross-ministry data working group to de-duplicate.

On payments, following the eruption, Western Union reduced the identification requirements to retrieve funds from two IDs to one. This was helpful since not all beneficiaries had two IDs. WFP successfully worked with the government and Western Union to continue this reduced requirement longer than originally planned. This demonstrates that know-your-customer (KYC) requirements can potentially be modified in emergencies within limits acceptable to government and financial service providers.

Echoing lessons from Jamaica, the correct spelling of names to match IDs is critical when using any payment method that requires an exact match by the financial institution of the beneficiary name and the name on the ID. Minor deviations such as shortening names and misspellings resulted in persons not being able to retrieve their transfer and WFP working with Western Union to re-issue new codes with the correct spelling of names. WFP had a hotline in place that enabled the quick identification

and resolution of these issues, but it was still an inconvenience for beneficiaries.

Partnering with the Ministry of National Mobilisation, rather than WFP directly implementing outside of the government, laid important groundwork for future recovery support. The government subsequently used funding from the World Bank to transition the Soufrière Relief Grant into a recovery programme.

Finally, the response showed how providing cash transfer support through social protection systems doesn't have to be "all or nothing" when it comes to using administrative and delivery systems in place. In this instance WFP managed the payments rather than using the government's delivery system, which would have taken longer to onboard persons, not to mention that government staff were working 24/7 on the immediate relief efforts. The arrangement with Western Union proved to be a rapid and valuable alternative. When the government later continued to provide cash transfers through World Bank-funded support, beneficiaries were reached using payment cards that the Ministry had been in the process of putting in place before the volcanic eruption.

Belize: Hurricane Lisa Assistance Programme (HLAP) (2022-2023)

WFP and the Ministry of Human Development, Families and Indigenous People's Affairs in Belize implemented a digital cash transfer programme to support 8,403 people in parts of Belize affected by Hurricane Lisa in November 2022. This programme was the Government of Belize's first experience distributing emergency cash assistance following a hurricane and also the first use of a mobile wallet. The government contracted a local mobile service provider, DigiWallet, to distribute USD 273,000 in

cash transfers through DigiWallet accounts to expeditiously and securely transfer funds to beneficiaries.

The funds could be cashed out or spent directly at DigiWallet partner merchants. WFP also extended technical support for verification, communication with beneficiaries, programme monitoring, and the partnership with DigiWallet. DigiWallet organized beneficiary orientation sessions to provide detailed information on how to open accounts, redeem assistance, and use digital wallets for other purposes like paying utilities. DigiWallet also provided a dedicated phone line to troubleshoot issues.

Key Takeaways

The programme was the government's first experience of using digital transfers through a mobile wallet and with cash transfers in response to a disaster, providing great scope for learning. It showcased the ability of financial/mobile service providers to play an important role in sensitisation, feedback, and grievance redress, troubleshooting, and providing granular data on monitoring and redemption progress.

Digiwallet data showed that 92% of the funds were cashed out, highlighting how even with the possibility of transacting digitally, people value having physical cash to make purchases. The rest of the funds were beneficiaries using DigiWallet to directly make payments on utility bills (2.3% of funds), payments at merchants (2.7%), transfers to other persons (1.4%) and purchase phone credit (1.6%). While many beneficiaries were new to the digital wallet, post-distribution monitoring found that only 2% of beneficiaries reported challenges with the service provision, mainly related to distance to cash-out merchants. This is likely due to the strong sensitisation and customer support from DigiWallet.

DigiWallet has since been used by other partners for similar projects and subsequently by another

ministry as described below. The experience stimulated the payment service provider to explore ways to innovate and create solutions for the government and partners – including considerations for offline software services for non-smartphone users. WFP is engaged with the government to explore the perceptions on the use of digital payments by beneficiaries and opportunities to use them more broadly across government services and in the rapid disbursement of funds during emergencies.

Belize: Hurricane Lisa Recovery Assistance Programme (2023)

After the success of the HLAP, WFP again partnered with the Belize government, this time with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Enterprise (MAFSE) to assist farmers affected by Hurricane Lisa. Through the Hurricane Lisa Recovery Assistance Programme (HLRAP), US\$500 was delivered to farmers via DigiWallet in the form of a cash/voucher wallet combination that DigiWallet tailored specifically for this programme. Of the total funds, up to US\$150 could be cashed out with DigiWallet and US\$350 was a voucher component redeemable at agricultural supply stores for the purchase of farming supplies and equipment. As with the HLAP, DigiWallet offered detailed sensitisation sessions for beneficiaries and a dedicated phone line to troubleshoot cash-out or redemption issues.

Key Takeaways

HLRAP built on the success and lessons of HLAP. The DigiWallet payment solution was modified to include a voucher component that was accessible through the same mobile application. The experience with MAFSE demonstrated how innovations like the use of DigiWallet can be used across different parts of government and tweaked to serve their individual needs. As with HLAP, the

experience again demonstrated how strong and practical collaboration between the government and mobile/financial service providers is highly beneficial to make sure people get their assistance

and troubleshoot any issues. Finally, both HLAP and HLRAP demonstrated the appetite of the Government and beneficiaries for transparent, secure and fast means of delivering support.

Overarching lessons

The rapid provision of cash transfers through social protection in response to shocks is largely influenced by the scalability of existing payment systems and their accompanying government processes.

The existence of payment options and solutions that can be scaled up during times of emergency and do not require cumbersome onboarding of new beneficiaries is crucial to determining the speed of the response. Manual payment processes in Dominica administered through Village Councils were rapidly scaled up, and once a contract was in place in Belize, mobile payments could be made quickly and at scale. Whether putting a new contract in place with a new provider delays the response is dependent on how fast those processes move compared to other preparatory measures (e.g. registration, targeting). Importantly, the speed of support is also influenced by internal government payment authorization processes and fund flows which can take time. In addition, KYC requirements need to be understood to provide alternative channels for people unable to meet them. If the payment process requires the beneficiary to present an ID to collect the funds, it is critical to register the person with the name as it is presented on their ID, particularly for providers that require an exact match.

Emergency responses pave the way for longer-term collaboration on preparing systems to respond in the future.

The Saint Vincent volcanic eruption response and the Hurricane Maria response in Dominica both laid the groundwork for transitioning WFP's support to measures to strengthen and prepare social protection and disaster risk management systems to respond in shocks, through subsequent efforts to improve data and information management,

among other areas. In Jamaica, close partnership for the distribution of food and then cash transfers in response COVID-19 provided the basis for subsequent exploration of digital data collection and digital payments. In the case of the British Virgin Islands, where WFP's first experience working closely with the government focused more on sharing and building on their experience in responding to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, this laid the foundation for the subsequent COVID-19 response and the development of an information management system. In Belize and Guyana, the COVID-19 response revitalized the initial partnership that had been established through the shock-responsive social protection research. In Saint Lucia, it deepened the on-going engagement and helped identify new areas for collaboration on strengthening social protection systems.

A common thread was that WFP had already established a strong understanding of most of the government's social protection and disaster risk management systems through its collaborative research and regional learning events on shock-responsive social protection, and the responses enabled WFP to demonstrate its technical capacities and "offer" on data collection, analysis, assessments, targeting, payments, digitalization, monitoring and other areas.

Close collaboration with governments on emergency responses through social protection reveals their scale-up bottlenecks, such as quickly identifying and registering impacted people outside of systems.

Every response that WFP supported governments with involved identifying people outside of existing social protection programmes and systems. An area that quickly became apparent as an obstacle was the rapid/accurate data collection to enable registration

and targeting, which was a main area of technical support from WFP during responses. While digital processes can speed up data collection, this goes beyond simply having tablets or digital forms. Processes need to be in place to manage data (cleaning, quality and duplicates). With the government of the British Virgin Islands, WFP supported the government with the testing, refinement and deployment of digital registration processes, which were accompanied by SOPs that were developed to outline registration and verification steps.

The financial flow of social protection payments within governments is another a key area where WFP has gained a deeper understanding, leading to improvements in financial flows between the government and financial institutions in Dominica for example. Similar bottlenecks were identified in Saint Lucia, where intermediary banks were involved in the process before forwarding the funds to the beneficiary bank or credit union accounts. The internal fund flow is particularly important in the context of WFP exploring anticipatory payments with governments ahead of shocks occurring, given the speed at which payments need to take place.

While governments have payment and data systems in place that facilitate scale-up, they often move at a slower pace than humanitarian agencies.

In some instances, such as the government of Belize quickly procuring the services of Digi and rapidly moving to distributions, governments can move quickly. However, governments also have internal processes for how they receive and process funds; some have approval layers for overall response measures such as beneficiary lists and transmitting lists for payment. The time required by governments to review legal agreements to receive funds can vary considerably (WFP having done cash transfers with eight governments would likely speed this up in the future with those governments). The development of shock-responsive SOPs and

disbursement plans take time as it is a participatory effort and typically involves multiple government partners, but once established, should speed up future responses.

Building relationships at different institutional levels and with different ministries is key.

WFP has developed close working relationships at technical and strategic levels in ministries responsible for social protection and disaster risk management and more recently, ministries of finance because responses through social protection often involve all three. In Dominica, for example, technical relationships were particularly valuable when there was a change in government in late 2022, which resulted in delays when ministries were restructured.

Limited bandwidth of government counterparts, particularly during response times, means that operational support from WFP has been extremely valuable for most governments.

WFP's added value lies within its ability to provide operational support at the technical level as well as the strategic level, from supporting the design of programmes to their implementation, training and data collection. These efforts are highly regarded by government counterparts who in many instances are stretched, particularly during times of emergency when new assessments and identifying impacted people for support is a high priority that WFP has often supported. This enables WFP to understand bottlenecks to scale up social protection that WFP can continue to support following an emergency to address these issues.

Small building blocks such as process digitisation of social protection programmes can yield widescale improvements in overall programme delivery.

Digitisation of various elements of social protection programmes such as registration, targeting through

scorecards, or even reconciliation of funds disbursed can result in significant improvements that help improve both the beneficiary experience and reduce the burden on government staff. For example, the QR codes piloted in the Dominica COVID-19 Social Cash Transfer allowed for instant reconciliation through a digital process on WFP-donated tablets. There is strong appetite by governments to transform processes digitally once they experience them in an emergency response. Digital data collection laid the basis for further digitalization of processes in Dominica, British Virgin Islands, Jamaica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Such improvements will lead to long-lasting benefits to overall social protection and emergency response systems.

Appropriate communication systems are critical for each component of the beneficiary journey.

Strong communication with beneficiaries is vital because people need to be aware of their entitlements and the processes to receive support, which may be different from routine programmes. This can be achieved through multiple communication channels (for example the use of social media in Guyana during the WFP-MHSSS WINN project), prioritisation of feedback mechanisms in programme design (such as the establishment of hotlines in St Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica) and the use of bulk text messaging to provide updates and feedback channels. In Belize, the financial service provider contracted to deliver assistance via mobile wallets sensitized participants during in-person sessions and also sent mass messages to beneficiaries on the details of the programme. Some participants did not always access text messages and/or trust them, hence the importance of multiple communication channels.

Strong partnerships between government and financial service providers and tailored reports and processes can enhance programme delivery.

Often times governments and financial service providers encounter new dynamics related to the

response especially if it is a new scenario compared to how they are used to operating. The most successful experiences were because of a strong and open line of communication with the financial services provider. Live digital updates during the 2021 COVID-19 cash grant in Jamaica expedited upgrades to the programme, and the tailoring of the payments dashboard by WiPay enabled government staff to follow up with people who had not redeemed. DigiWallet in Belize following Hurricane Lisa provided the government with regular and detailed monitoring of redemption rates and an overview of challenges reported. In the case of WFP's use of Western Union, new payment codes were issued promptly and other issues quickly addressed when required.

Understand governments' inner workings in order to achieve accountable and effective support to beneficiaries.

Maintaining close operational relationships with government counterparts enables a better understanding of their inner workings. This in turn provides insight into the rationale behind existing processes and requirements, such as accountability and assurance mechanisms. It is essential to tailor interventions to meet governments "where they are" to effectively support individuals who are outside these systems.

To strengthen accountability, it is imperative to establish mechanisms like beneficiary feedback mechanisms. Such measures ensure that support systems are not only receptive to the needs of the beneficiaries but also remain flexible to adapt based on that feedback, thereby preventing the perpetuation of unaccountable systems. Furthermore, aid agencies should consider implementing their own monitoring systems—as the World Food Programme does with each response—to independently verify the impact and efficiency of their interventions. Openly discussing these monitoring practices with government partners is critical; it aligns with commitments to uphold the accountability standards expected by our donors and ensures that interventions are both responsible and transparent.

Conclusion

WFP's journey partnering with governments across the English and Dutch-speaking Caribbean has shown the power of evidence to inform responses and of responses to catalyse the strengthening of social protection systems during or after a shock. The range of experiences reveals that the essence of effective response through social protection lies not just in the mechanics of aid delivery but in the fluidity and scalability of existing systems, and flexibility of government processes to address gaps and overcoming challenges. The experiences in Dominica and Belize, with their rapid scale-up of manual and mobile payments, stand as prime examples of agility in action.

At the heart of this narrative is the enduring value of collaboration. Partnerships between WFP, governments, and other stakeholders have not only supported vulnerable people during emergencies but have also sown the seeds for stronger, more resilient social protection and disaster risk management systems. These alliances and the lessons emerging from the experiences enable practical entry points to address complex pieces of emergency responses, particularly in identifying and swiftly enrolling vulnerable people and reaching them with support.

The experiences have also underscored the need for aid agencies and development partners to understand and navigate the intricacies of government operations to enable effective and accountable support to beneficiaries, especially in times of shocks. The transformative power of digitization in social protection processes has emerged as a clear game-changer, streamlining operations from registration to payments, and significantly enhancing both the experience of beneficiaries and the efficiency of program delivery.

In essence, the key learnings from WFP in the Caribbean weave a story of resilience, adaptability,

and innovation. They highlight how cash transfers through social protection systems can be a powerful tool in crisis response, and maximizing their effectiveness hinges on collaboration, digital innovation, effective communication, and a deep understanding of government processes.

It is worth highlighting that there was a response where providing support through government systems was not the most appropriate way to reach vulnerable, impacted persons. It is nearly inevitable that this will occur again, if government systems are not functioning or if there are significant trade-offs for a speedy response reaching the right people compared to WFP implementing directly or with an NGO partner. The key point is the importance of being willing and able to work in partnership with governments and through existing systems to the extent that this best serves people impacted, and understanding those systems and augmenting them during responses as needed.

With SIDS in the Caribbean on the front line of the impacts of climate change, preparing social protection systems to support people when shocks and disasters strike is more important than ever. Development partners need to deepen their support to governments both in strengthening and preparing social protection systems and to scale up cash transfers when disasters and shocks occur. The research and learning agenda on shock-responsive social protection that WFP began in 2018 laid the foundations for what is now a strong regional agenda on adaptive and shock-responsive social protection. The lessons in this paper add pragmatic insights on scaling up cash transfers through government systems. Together these paint a rich and powerful picture on the building blocks and blue prints for effective responses and stronger more adaptable systems to support the resilience and needs of vulnerable people when crises unfold.

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Acronyms

CDEMA	Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency
HLAP	Hurricane Lisa Assistance Programme
HRLAP	Hurricane Lisa Recovery Assistance Programme
JECT	Joint Emergency Cash Transfer
MAFSE	Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Enterprise
MHSSS	Ministry of Human Services and Social Security
MLSS	Ministry of Labour and Social Security
MPEA	Ministry of People Empowerment and Elder Affairs
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
PAP	Public Assistance Programme
SDD	Social Development Department
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
WIIN	Women's Innovation and. Investment Network
WFP	World Food Programme

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