



Social Protection System Strengthening

The Challenge: Conflict and displacement affected populations are excluded from social protection systems

Crisis and conflict-affected populations are often excluded from national social protection systems despite the lifeline they provide to the poorest and most vulnerable. Conflicts and insecurity constrain state resources and capacity to deliver services, especially to communities living in inaccessible, hard-to-reach areas, and displacement can negatively impact on social protection eligibility and accessibility. This exclusion not only widens existing inequalities but also undermines countries' ability to build and resource resilient, adaptable shock-responsive systems. Of the \$9.5 billion spent globally on social protection in 2022, only 25% went to protracted crisis contexts.

IRC objectives

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) aims to strengthen social protection systems in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) and improve access for marginalised communities. A crucial step for expanding coverage in the immediate and long-term is strengthening partnerships. Better leveraging humanitarian and civil society organisation (CSO) partners' comparative advantages in delivering humanitarian cash and reaching excluded communities with both delivery systems and social services can help extend the reach, continuity and shock responsiveness of social protection and support long-term national system strengthening.

IRC's approach

The IRC adopts a context-sensitive and exploratory approach to social protection, tailored to the maturity of national systems and grounded in operational realities. We focus not only on strengthening safety nets and transfer systems but on the broader ecosystem of social protection. This includes strengthening social services, care functions, and institutional capacities that underpin effective and inclusive social protection, enable households to access, navigate, and remain connected to support.

Our approaches include:

- **Complementing government-led systems** through top-up cash transfers or expanded coverage, prioritizing the people most at risk, enhancing shock responsiveness, linkages to anticipatory action, and ensuring timely and equitable support.
- **Advising on the design** of social protection schemes to ensure they are inclusive and adopt adequate transfer values that reflect the needs of marginalized groups, as well as strengthening data and information systems for social protection, and ensuring diversified cash delivery options that account for technology access and preferences, telecommunications coverage, digital penetration, and levels of digital and financial literacy.

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- **Implementing community case management** models that link households to entitlements, protection services, and grievance mechanisms.
- **Strengthening frontline social service workforce capacities** in displacement and conflict contexts, including integration with national or municipal systems where feasible and institutionalisation of community-based social work practices and functions where government reach or access is limited.
- **Reinforcing core social protection functions** such as grievance redress, outreach, case management, referral systems, disability inclusion, and civil documentation, which are essential for equitable access and continuity of support.
- **Advocating** with governments to make existing systems more inclusive of populations at risk of exclusion, including refugees.
- Identifying, supporting, and promoting **funding and delivery models** that ensure sustained coverage and equitable access, and keep social protection and social work systems crisis-relevant, including through partnerships with humanitarian actors and CSOs, pooled mechanisms, and blended-finance approaches.

How do system strengthening partnerships improve and increase access to social protection?

Humanitarian partners can enhance social protection systems through their extensive experience in delivering cash assistance, managing disaster risk, reaching displaced communities and applying a conflict-sensitive lens to social assistance. Humanitarian actors are also experienced in strengthening the social workforce, community linkages and case management systems that enable households in crisis settings to access and sustain support. Their expertise in adapting programs to evolving conditions helps ensure continuity, impact and innovation even amidst conflict and violence. They can also help ensure continuity of services when conflict surges, particularly in areas where state institutions face access or capacity constraints.

Enhancing inclusion, reach and continuity of safety nets in crisis

In FCAS, non-state actors - including humanitarian actors and CSOs - can expand the reach of social protection services with different levels of system maturity. Where government social protection systems are **nascent, or severely weakened due to conflict**, the IRC can operate cash and voucher assistance platforms at scale for crisis-affected groups and link with government programs. In these contexts, the IRC draws on decades of humanitarian cash assistance experience, alongside investments in social service and case management systems, and understanding of inclusive social welfare systems to assist governments in reaching displaced or other underserved communities while applying a conflict-sensitivity lens. Since 2020, the IRC has delivered USD 303 million in cash and voucher assistance in 38 countries.

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In **Somalia** the World Bank co-funds, alongside FCDO and others, the Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS) consortium, partnering with nine NGOs including the IRC, to provide cash assistance and early warning support across 34 Somali districts. BRCiS piloted a scalable social safety net with regular monthly cash transfers to vulnerable households, with emergency top-ups when needed, helping over 2000 households build resilience by recovering a minimum level of food security and avoiding having to resort to borrowing or selling assets. A recent independent evaluation of the Bank's approach found that collaborations with humanitarian partners should be increased to allow flexibility and continuity of support in fragile contexts. This reinforces lessons emerging across FCAS that blended models, combining the flexibility of humanitarian delivery with the investments of development actors, can improve both reach and resilience.

In FCAS with **more mature social protection systems**, there is potential to transition from direct cash delivery to strengthening national systems for enhanced resilience, inclusion and continuity. This can be achieved by fostering high-quality bilateral partnerships between line ministries and key non-state actors involved in social protection. This is particularly important in settings where government coverage is uneven, eligibility rules exclude displaced people, or administrative systems are under strain or exposed to conflict risks or access constraints. Humanitarian partners can provide advisory services and strengthen system functions across the social protection delivery chain to ensure service continuity when conflict surges, or expand reach to marginalised communities at risk of exclusion. For example, the IRC is supporting systems strengthening in **North East Nigeria** through its anticipatory cash activities, enhancing the technical capacity of relevant line ministries to align the disbursement of cash assistance to forecasted climate shocks, upon agreed triggers. This approach reduced the adoption of negative coping strategies and improved investments in productive assets. Our cost analysis indicates that pre-shock cash transfers are likely to be more cost-effective than post-shock transfers and that cost efficiency gains increase when anticipatory action responses are scaled over time and across more households. Governments can also draw on humanitarian agencies' technical and operational know-how in program delivery. Humanitarian actors can lend expertise in deploying payment solutions through their global financial service provider networks.

Expanding access to social protection through social work systems and CSO-government partnerships

Resilience in social protection requires investing in both delivery systems and the social service workforce: the former ensures resources reach households, the latter ensures households can stay in the system, access entitlements equitably, and make adaptive choices that reduce long-term risk due to displacement, gender-based violence, documentation barriers, or social marginalization. Effective social protection in crises relies on social services and social work systems that help households navigate eligibility, overcome exclusion barriers, and remain connected to support over time. These social service and case management functions are core components of the social protection delivery chain, not add-ons, and determine whether households can access, retain, and benefit from support.

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In crisis-affected settings, community-based social work and outreach mechanisms often operate as the primary interface between households and the social protection system, ensuring visibility and inclusion of groups otherwise missed by formal registries. In **North-East Nigeria**, the IRC works through community-based social workers and protection committees to provide continuous case management for survivors of violence to meet their needs and help them access essential services, honoring their choices and ensuring psychosocial recovery. This includes household follow-ups, information dissemination, and referrals to humanitarian cash assistance and government-supported safety nets. The IRC supported 761 displaced and conflict-affected people to obtain critical civil documentation that enabled access to school enrollment, bank accounts, and government safety nets. Community volunteers supported people with disabilities to register and access government disability schemes, mobility aids and inclusion programs. Close collaboration with relevant government agencies and training of personnel improved coordinated service delivery and allowed uptake of referrals. This approach strengthened connections between community structures and state social protection systems, expanded access for highly mobile or marginalized populations and reduced risks of exclusion. The model is now being integrated into anticipatory cash planning with state ministries, linking community-level risk monitoring to pre-trigger registration of households and cash preparedness.

In **Lebanon**, the IRC has worked for over a decade with national, municipal and local social service providers and national mandated bodies contributing to a more coherent and resilient protection ecosystem. IRC has strengthened frontline caseworkers' capacity to identify and refer vulnerable households to national and UN-supported assistance, training nearly 2,000 staff across government and civil society. This has enabled safe management of 110,000+ high-risk cases and improved access to psychosocial and protection services for refugee and host families. Investments in outreach volunteers expanded services to underserved areas through community-based models. Collaboration with institutions like the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Union for the Protection of Juveniles in Lebanon (UPEL), security forces, and bar associations embedded sustainable competencies, enhanced emergency response, and promoted child-friendly and survivor-centered practices. These efforts improved referral pathways, integrated legal and child protection services, and reduced fragmentation. Nationwide campaigns advanced public understanding of children's rights and justice processes. Overall, this model has strengthened social work functions and system connectivity, reaching 146,000+ individuals across Lebanon. This demonstrates how strengthened social work systems, institutional capacity, and community linkages are core pillars of social protection, not parallel services, and combined with strategic partnerships and advocacy they can expand social protection while reinforcing state systems.

Together, these efforts demonstrate that strengthening social work systems is a critical pathway through which social protection becomes more accessible, more inclusive, and more resilient in crisis contexts.