BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

Research Briefing

Issue 03 | August 2024

Promising evidence of coordination across the humanitarian–development nexus

Little is known about how conflict interacts with social assistance to affect poverty and livelihoods outcomes. Even less is understood about how conflicts disrupt government and donor-provided social assistance, and whether humanitarian emergency assistance can fill provision gaps in situations of acute crisis. Drawing on our work on the conflict which began in Tigray, Ethiopia in late 2020, and spread to neighbouring regions in 2021, this research briefing summarises new evidence that shows how social assistance and humanitarian aid can work together to protect households from the impact of conflict. This demonstrates a promising picture of what coordination across historically fragmented sectors can achieve.

Rachel Sabates-Wheeler
Institute of Development Studies

Camelia Vasilov
Laterite

Mats Hoppen-brouwers
Laterite

Jeremy Lind
Institute of Development Studies

Key messages

The key insights from our research relate to the shifting relative role of different forms of assistance in the context of active conflict.

- As state provision of social assistance through the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) rolls back and conflict scales up, it is clear that humanitarian assistance becomes vital for those who are no longer accessing the PSNP.
- It is encouraging to see that non-state provision substitutes for and complements state provision in the event of a surge in need: this is precisely what we would hope for.
- Households receiving higher levels of assistance are less affected by the negative consequences of conflict. This demonstrates a buffering or protective effect from the combination of assistance programmes against the adverse impacts of conflict on household outcomes.

The need to coordinate across the nexus

Working across the humanitarian–development divide has always been notoriously difficult. A number of logistical reasons are given for this: funding for the different sectors comes from different sources, through distinct channels and with different time frames. Other challenges pertain to the political siloing of the sectors and the historically different mandates – with humanitarian provision directed to emergencies and the fallout from acute shocks, and development interventions more attuned to longer-term chronic needs. Humanitarian aid can also be a substitute for state provision, especially when the state is unable to deliver or is a party to a conflict.

Yet, over the last two decades humanitarian provision has increasingly been responding to chronic problems of entrenched poverty, food insecurity, and vulnerability – essentially, carrying the caseload that social protection is designed for. This leaves both humanitarian and development providers having to wrestle with how best to coordinate and work within the humanitarian-development nexus. Attention to this challenge has mushroomed in recent years, particularly within the social protection–humanitarian space. Policies, programmes, cash working groups, and donor committees are all thinking about mechanisms through which the design, targeting, and delivery of cash transfers can be better coordinated across sectors and providers. This has led to an expansion of work: for example, on interoperability of data and information systems; how to target better to ensure efficient use of resources; and accountability mechanisms for equity.

Evidence of progress on coordination across the humanitarian and development sectors is limited but expanding. However, research on whether these efforts have positive impacts for the lives and livelihoods of those who are poor and vulnerable is almost non-existent.

New evidence from Ethiopia

The Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) constitutes the primary state-provided social assistance in Ethiopia, reaching approximately 8 million chronically food-insecure people across much of the East African country.

The PSNP was designed to respond to food insecurity from drought and, more recently, to climate-related shocks, but not as a response to conflict. However, conflict has been the primary driver of need in recent years. Humanitarian assistance (HA) in the country is relied on to meet shorter-term, acute needs as a result of both climate and conflict shocks.

Using a bespoke survey that allowed us to distinguish between PSNP assistance and HA, a team of researchers from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Laterite, a research firm based in Ethiopia, collected evidence from more than 1,000 PSNP beneficiary households living in the Amhara region bordering Tigray. These families had lived through the violence and insecurity that spilled over from the conflict which began in Tigray in November 2020. In Amhara, the conflict started in summer 2021. Data were collected from each household before the conflict reached the region and after it had subsided.

Using the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) data set, we calculated a measure of the conflict intensity for each household using the count of fatalities from conflict within a 50km radius over the 18 months since hostilities first spread in the region.

Dynamics of PSNP and HA complementarity during conflict

Navigating the dynamics of aid distribution during the conflict is complex, especially because during the period between surveys a planned retargeting of the PSNP resulted in nearly half the households in Amhara being dropped from it. Considering this dropout, we calculate PSNP reliance as the number of months that each household received PSNP benefits (primarily food-for-work) over the 18 months of the study. HA is measured by the count of instances when a household received food aid from non-PSNP sources.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal a stark shift in the dynamics of HA distribution in response to conflict and PSNP support. In the year when the conflict began in Amhara (2021), most households did not report receiving any HA. However, over the following year, 2022, HA provision clearly increased, with higher instances of aid being delivered specifically to areas experiencing greater conflict intensity.

Figure 1: Relation between conflict and humanitarian aid receipt

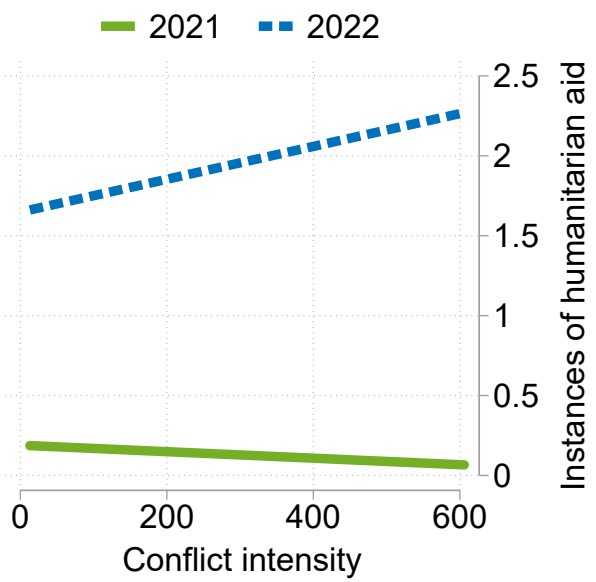
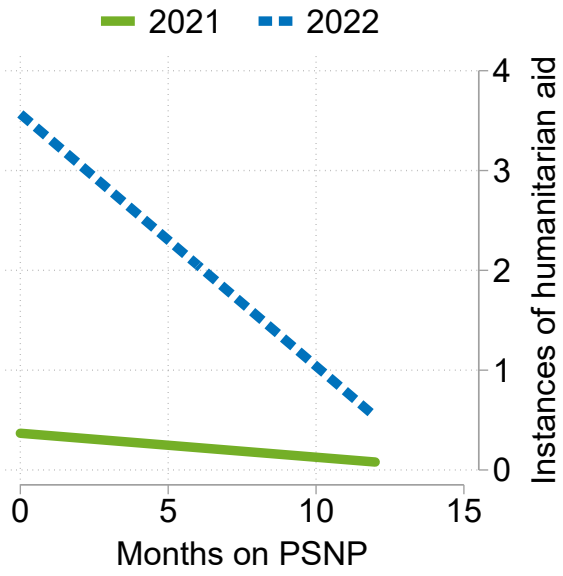


Figure 2: Relation between PSNP and humanitarian aid receipt



Source: Authors' own. Created using data from ACLED and project surveys.

As HA provision increased in 2022, a steep negative relationship emerged between PSNP receipt and HA. Households receiving less support from PSNP (fewer months on PSNP) were more likely to receive higher support from HA sources. This demonstrates a complementarity in assistance, where HA fills the gaps left by reduced PSNP support during the conflict period.

This complementarity is driven both by the retargeting, and thus reduction in number of households receiving PSNP, and by the temporary disruptions to the PSNP caused by the conflict. More than 42 per cent of households reported a temporary stop or delay in PSNP participation. These households report going more frequently for food donations or food-for-work from HA sources compared to the households who did not report any suspension or delay of PSNP benefits.

Overall, the graphs suggest that during the conflict, HA was provided to meet at least some of the needs of households affected by both conflict intensity and delayed or terminated PSNP support. This highlights the complementarity and adaptability of aid distribution in response to the evolving crisis.

The protective effect of the PSNP and HA mix in the conflict context

From the same data on PSNP and HA receipt, we created categories that show the mix of assistance received by each household over the 12-month period preceding the final survey:

- **No/low support:** little to no PSNP or HA;
- **High HA:** high levels of HA but no PSNP;
- **High PSNP:** high levels of PSNP support but no HA;
- **High HA and PSNP:** high levels of both PSNP and HA.

We then examined the effect of this mix of assistance on household outcomes.

Figures 3–5 illustrate these dynamics by plotting households' aggregate consumption expenditure, daily adult calorie intake, and food insecurity against conflict intensity for each type of assistance received. These predicted values result from regressions run over two time points (pre- and post-conflict), factoring in the interaction between conflict intensity and the assistance mix categories; rainfall in the previous year's agricultural season; and household-level controls (size, dependency ratio, land ownership, and the gender, age, and education of the household head). Thus, we account for key sources of variability between households.

Figure 3: Predicted food insecurity by social assistance

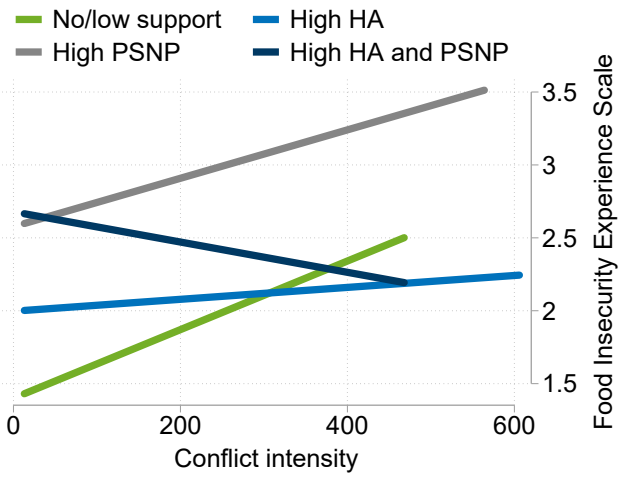
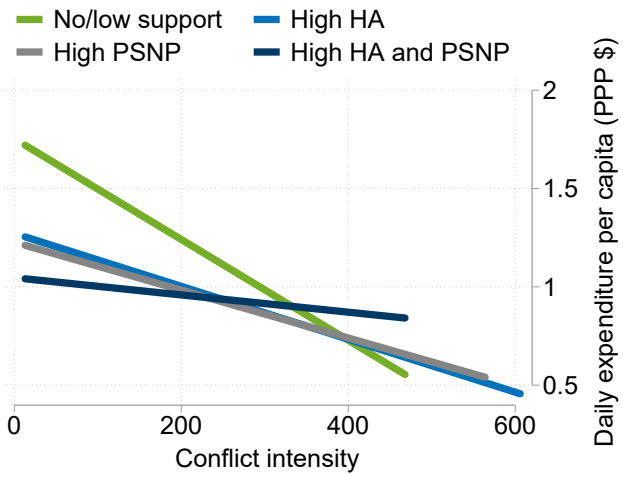


Figure 4: Predicted consumption by social assistance



Source: Authors' own. Created using data from ACLED and project surveys.

As expected – and demonstrated in the figures – conflict generally has harmful effects: in areas with more fatalities, households report lower consumption expenditure, lower calorie intake, and higher food insecurity. However, the picture also reveals that the impact of conflict varies based on the type and mix of assistance received. Households having accessed high levels of both HA and PSNP (not necessarily at the same time) over the periods fare better in areas of high conflict intensity compared to those with little or no support.

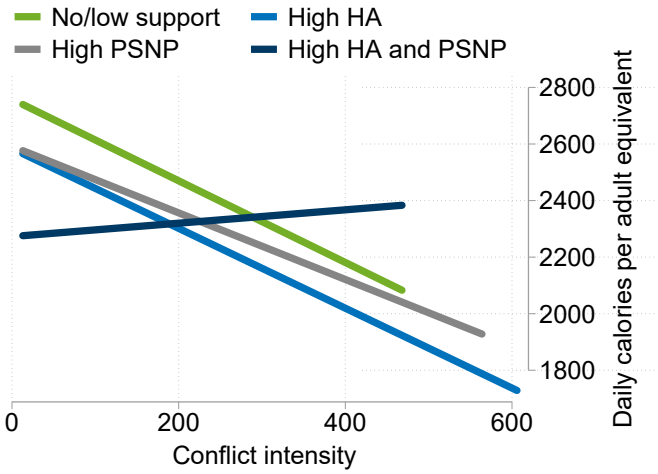
For example, in the predicted food insecurity graph (Figure 3) the upward-sloping lines indicate that food insecurity increases as conflict intensifies. Notably, the green line representing households with low or no support has a steeper slope, indicating worsening conditions compared to households with different types of assistance. Remarkably, the only downward-sloping line belongs to households benefiting from both PSNP and HA at various points over the past 12 months, showing improved food security as conflict intensifies relative to the other categories. Households in areas with the highest conflict fatalities improved their food security and reduced poverty over the two-year period between surveys **only** if they received both PSNP and HA. For aggregate consumption expenditure (Figure 4), while all households experienced a decline in consumption as conflict intensified, those with both HA and PSNP support saw a less severe decline, whereas those without assistance experienced the sharpest decline, underscoring the protective role of social assistance.

Keep building bridges and evidence!

While provision for basic needs in the wake of unanticipated shocks traditionally sits with humanitarian response and often constitutes short-term support, social protection, by contrast, is provided as a regular transfer to help manage more predictable livelihood risks. Ideally, a continuum of support and response would be offered to help households manage uncertainty in multiple contexts. Earlier work (Sabates *et al.* 2022) showed that in a relatively stable governance setting, the investment in national and decentralised infrastructure for social assistance in Ethiopia reaped benefits in terms of a continuum of response. The findings presented here show that even under conditions of conflict and the ensuing disruption to PSNP implementation in the affected areas, some coordination was achievable and had positive results.

The data show graphically how humanitarian provision was able to move in to help households that were moving off state-provided support (PSNP), albeit to an insufficient extent (see Lind *et al.* 2024). This attests to a functioning donor–NGO–government response during that period. No doubt lessons can be learned from a political economy evaluation of how coordination actually occurred, and how the different players were able to respond, but it is heartening to observe that despite the constraints of working within the humanitarian–development nexus, many households in

Figure 5: Predicted calories by social assistance



Source: Authors' own. Created using data from ACLED and project surveys.

Amhara were protected during the period of conflict. Our findings highlight the importance of coordinating different forms of support through different channels in the context of acute crises, and especially those where the state is restricted from delivering.

There are obvious implications of this work for how to better evaluate and understand the impacts of assistance on vulnerable households during crises. An analysis considering only the impacts of the PSNP would conclude that it had not protected beneficiary households during the conflict. Yet, when evaluated alongside other forms of support, in a dynamic way, we see that households experiencing higher conflict were served by a sequencing and combination of both PSNP and HA over the period in question. Our evaluations of programmes and interventions during periods of rapid flux and crisis must aim to collect longitudinal (ideally, panel) data and to ensure that information on different forms of provision and providers are collected. This concerns not just donor- and government-provided support, but other sources of non-state provision, such as NGOs, community-based organisations and remittance flows; all will interact to determine the extent to which people are protected.

Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton, BN1 9RE, United Kingdom +44 (0)1273 606261 ids.ac.uk

IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England. Charity Registration Number 306371. Charitable Company Number 877338.

Further reading

Abay, K.A.; Tafere, K.; Berhane, G.; Chamberlin, J. and Abay, M.H. (2023) 'Near-Real-Time Welfare and Livelihood Impacts of an Active War: Evidence from Ethiopia', *Food Policy* 119 : 102526, DOI: 10.1016/j.foodpol.2023.102526

Lind, J.; Sabates-Wheeler, R.; Carter, B. and Tefera Taye, M. (2024) *Conflict Disruptions to Social Assistance in a Multi-Hazard Context: Assessing Responses to the Northern Ethiopia Crisis (2020–22)*, BASIC Research Working Paper 28, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2024.010

Sabates-Wheeler, R.; Hirvonen, K.; Lind, J. and Hoddinott, J. (2022) 'Expanding Social Protection Coverage with Humanitarian Aid: Lessons on Targeting and Transfer Values from Ethiopia', *Journal of Development Studies* 58.10: 1981–2000, DOI: 10.1080/00220388.2022.2096443

This Research Briefing was written by **Rachel Sabates-Wheeler**, **Camelia Vasilov**, **Mats Hoppenbrouwers** and **Jeremy Lind**. It was developed by the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme in collaboration with Laterite, a data, research and analytics firm specialising in research for social impact across East and West Africa and in Latin America.

BASIC is implemented by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and funded by UK International Development from the UK government. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

© Institute of Development Studies 2024.

This is an Open Access briefing distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use or distribution in any medium, provided the original authors and sources are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2024.013