Introduction

Global interest around humanitarian and social protection issues is remarkable. These feature prominently in some of today’s most complex development challenges – whether supporting poor people in times of crises or providing them with a steady hand while pursuing opportunity. To some extent, there is a common thread of themes that underpin both humanitarian and social protection matters, and which, at its core, is about state formation and its strengthening.

In many developing countries, current policy debates seem to have historical roots. These may go back even to pre- and post-colonial institutions, how these interplayed with pre-existing and non-state support mechanisms, and how the ensuing trajectories by newly-formed states were molded by both country and global developments (Ravallion 2016; Fukuyama 2015; Davey et al. 2013). While an in-depth examination of those patterns goes beyond the scope of this note, it is important to underscore that current debates around humanitarian assistance – and those around the formalization of non-contributory transfers by the state – are the result of longstanding and organic historical processes.
Against this background, the increasing attention to humanitarian and social protection matters are accompanied in no small measure by an explosion of terms, definitions, and frameworks (figure 1). On one hand, this is a positive development as it signals the diverse nature of actors and themes at the interface of those two agendas; on the other hand, it can make the issues at hand somewhat elusive and fragmented.

The objective of this short note is to map out some key issues relevant to humanitarian and social protection work, that is, to basically explore their interface. In doing so, we will focus on international humanitarian aid (as distinct from national humanitarian assistance) and social safety net or social assistance programs (as opposed to the wider social protection system). Operationally, humanitarian and safety net programs provide non-contributory transfers in cash or in-kind to beneficiaries. As such, programs like cash transfers and public works are part of the toolbox in both spaces. Yet as this note argues in the next section, they tend to differ in some fundamental aspects. We then briefly review the rationale for public interventions, examine how the debate is panning out in different contexts, and identify a set of strategic and practical questions for further work in the area.

What’s different?

While programs may look similar in practice, humanitarian and safety net approaches differ in two core aspects. One key difference revolves around objectives. The overall environment in which humanitarian actors operate is often volatile,
chaotic, and posing immediate threats to the lives of affected populations. As such, programs tend to be designed with an emphasis on life-saving purposes, including delivering under short time horizons, in line with humanitarian principles, and putting a premium on safety and timeliness of assistance as key operational principles.

Conversely, social assistance programs tend to adopt a longer-term view and are geared to help address chronic poverty in its many dimensions. Safety nets are a component of broader social protection systems, with the latter not only encompassing social assistance (i.e., non-contributory transfers), but also including social insurance (i.e., contributory transfers) and various labor market interventions. Social assistance is often enshrined in legislation, integrated in sectoral policies, financed out of domestic budgets, and represents a cornerstone in government-citizens social contracts.

Perhaps the most relevant distinction, however, revolves around the role of national governments. In 2014, only 3 percent of total humanitarian funds was channeled through national governments (figure 2). Almost the entire volume of assistance was directed outside government structures, including an estimated 4,480 actors, organizations, and agencies. In part, this model of operating outside or with limited engagement of government systems can be dictated by several constraints, including conflict, swiftness of response, and legislation.

Yet such an approach represents a sharp departure from that of safety nets. This is typically provided through governments, including via blends of domestic resources, concessional financing, and medium/longer-term programmatic frameworks embedded in national budgets. Such contrast may create an important bifurcation in approach, including in terms of engagement, ownership and role of host governments (when they exist) in shaping, managing, and programming interventions.

Yet safety net approaches are not homogeneous. In a stylized way the agenda in some contexts includes a particular emphasis on ex-ante preparedness and household asset-strengthening, such as in the drylands of the Sahel belt (Del Ninno et al. 2016). This is also the case in the Horn of Africa where this is combined with investments in scalability of systems to deal with recurrent shocks. The flexibility of systems, and how these could beleveraged for humanitarian purposes, is a central feature of managing large-scale natural disasters in contexts like East Asia (Cabot-Venton et al. 2015). The effects of hostilities in Syria are likely to shape the debate in the Middle East for years to come, including the thorny issue of serving affected and non-affected people ‘living side-by-side’ in urban areas (UNHCR 2014). Finally, economic crises are likely to play a major role in Latin America, including how to provide support and ring-fencing safety nets during fiscal downturns.

**Crisis and (in)ability to manage them**

A simple taxonomy of crises may envisage three basic types, including economic shocks, natural disasters, and violence-related shocks. Within these broad types, shocks can be more or less predictable: for example, typhoons may be more predictable than earthquakes; employment and fiscal shocks from economic reforms can be more predictable that sudden, sharp rises (or collapse) in international commodity prices; and while conflicts are somewhat foreseeable, they can be difficult

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1 The sample includes countries for which data exists for safety nets coverage, government revenue capacity, and humanitarian assistance. As such, the graph should be read in tandem with figure 6.
to fully predict. Yet their consequences, like protracted displacement, are a predictable outcome of conflict.

In terms of natural and man-made crises, the world is set to face two major shifts: first, over the past decade the number of people affected by conflicts has doubled, reaching about 60 million people in 2014. Conversely, over the past 5 years the number of people affected by natural disaster has halved, although still affecting over 140 million people (figure 3). Man-made crises are protracted for long spells of time (on average 17 years in the case of displaced populations). In those contexts, safety nets can be hampered by low-capacities, wiped out by conflicts or, in the case of refugees, hindered by legal constraints in serving foreigners.

In terms of a second global shift, whether natural or man-made, crises are becoming more spatially-concentrated, including presenting an urban dimension. For example, compared to the 2000 level, the risk of major disasters will affect an additional 60-190 million urban people by 2050; at the same time, more displaced people reach cities (within or outside national borders) in an attempt to escape civil conflicts and sectarian wars, such as in Lebanon and DRC.

In all the above situations, it becomes key to understand whether countries have enough capacity to meet shock-generated needs. The key dilemma is that countries with lower institutional and administrative capacity are hard-hit by shocks and display lower coverage of national safety nets. For example, based on data from 38 countries, figure 4 shows a statistically significant correlation ($R^2=0.47$) between social assistance coverage and government’s domestic fiscal capacity. The latter is measured by the non-grant revenue per capita, which measures countries’ ability to raise revenues beyond external grant assistances.

So how are countries responding to growing needs? They are both increasingly investing in safety nets and calling for more immediate humanitarian assistance. In general, data from 120 developing countries show that they allocate an average of 1.6% of GDP on social assistance (World Bank 2015). This is a growing trend: for 32 low and middle income countries with panel data, spending on safety nets has grown by one percentage point between 2000 and 2010-11. In 2014, safety nets spending included a total volume of about US$329 billion, a level that dwarfs that of humanitarian aid flows; between 2008 and 2014, humanitarian funding requirements almost doubled, reaching US$19.5 billion. Yet only US$12 billion were actually met, which marked a record absolute volume received and the highest share of unmet requirements (38%).

In some situations, humanitarian action provides the core of support to beneficiaries, with social assistance representing a minor fraction of assistance compared to humanitarian volumes: for example, the latter is 7.5 times higher than the former in the case of Mali – and 14 times so in Sudan. In other contexts, the level of humanitarian and social assistance can be more levelled, like in Lebanon or Palestine, hence more clearly illustrating the emergence of two parallel systems in providing assistance (figure 5).

Taken together, the ability to cover the poor with safety nets and humanitarian assistance shows the emergence of some broad typology of contexts. Based on countries with data on both issues, figure 6 illustrates the emergence of three clusters: one includes countries with relatively well-performing safety net coverage and receiving comparatively little humanitarian aid. This encompasses contexts that are exposed to shocks, but that have a basic platform to address part of the generated needs. This may include the Pantawid program in the Philippines, the PDS in Iraq, and emerging systems in countries like Lesotho, Kenya, and Nepal. In those contexts, it may be possible that humanitarian assistance will play an important role, although growing investments in system-enhancements may reduce such need over time.

Another cluster includes countries with low social assistance coverage and relatively high volume of humanitarian aid. This encapsulates countries mired in protracted and multiple crises, such as Afghanistan, DRC, Haiti, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. A core challenge in such contexts may be to find ways for aligning incentives and plans between agendas in highly volatile contexts, including being able to operate and work with ‘fragile’ governments and deeply ingrained humanitarian approaches.

Finally, there are countries that are neither covered by safety nets nor are receiving substantial humanitarian support. These include various African countries, such as Congo, Senegal, Nigeria, Gambia, and Cameroon. In those cases, there might be benefits for building systems ‘from

### Figure 4. Safety nets coverage of the poor and fiscal capacity

![figure 4](image-url)

Source: data from World Bank ASPIRE database and Development Initiatives (2015)

[2] The figure includes countries with humanitarian assistance of at least $0.5 per capita and less than $40.
scratch’, especially among middle-income countries. Yet that is also presents a limitation in terms of bedrock of capacity: consider, for example, that Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Program was born by transforming pre-existing humanitarian assistance, which included a considerable level of experience that was harnessed to forging the safety net (Wiseman et al. 2010).

All these different scenarios suggest a variety of ways in which the humanitarian-safety net interactions may occur. For example, from a humanitarian standpoint, CaLP (2016) laid out several types of linkages during crises, like ‘piggybacking’ of humanitarian assistance by using national administrative platforms (e.g., Philippines), and ‘shadow alignment’, whereby a parallel humanitarian system tries to converge as much as possible with safety net programs (e.g., Kenya). Moreover, the new ways in which the spheres interact, like the Lebanese example of a humanitarian voucher program for Syrian refugees being extended to Lebanese citizens, speak to the dynamic nature of the humanitarian-safety net iterations. These, nonetheless, tend to occur between worlds that are still largely apart.

A crowded playing field

The coexistence between humanitarian assistance and safety nets emerges as a systematic feature across the vast majority of crises and contexts. In some respect, such interface is perhaps one of the few common narratives underpinning differing shocks and situations. But why is it relevant for the safety net world? It is so from a financing, strategic, and operational standpoint.

From a financing perspective, a growing pool of donors seem to promote the idea of ‘transferring’ humanitarian caseloads onto social protection systems. This implicitly conveys the message that some of the current humanitarian functions could be better served by safety nets, including doing so more effectively and efficiently. This is a highly plausible assumption which, as we’ll discuss in the final question, would need to be further strengthened with quantitative evidence.

From a strategic standpoint, the theme is likely to play a pivotal role in the shrinking pool of countries that, in just a few years, may constitute the core of the low-income country base. Standing ready to engage with ‘fragile’ partners would be an important element in such process. This, of course, is in addition to the increasing number of middle-income countries that are exposed to disaster and displacement risks.

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1 Note: Excluded Humanitarian Aid per capita less than $0.5 and greater than $40
Looking at the issue with an operational lens, it is clear that humanitarians may operate in similar communities and using same instruments (e.g., cash) as deployed under a social safety net. Those programs, however, may be served by different nuts and bolts mechanisms (e.g., targeting methods, institutional arrangements, MIS, M&E), which may fuel overall fragmentation. There are emerging practices from the Sahel (e.g., Senegal, Mauritania) and Middle East (e.g., Lebanon) showing that part of the architecture underlying safety net programs could be used – and indeed be strengthened by – the humanitarian community. Yet the challenge around using existing national systems remains a key constraint (World Bank 2016).

For instance, more and more actors are involved in the provision of humanitarian cash transfers as complements or alternatives to in-kind food. In 2014, they totaled a volume of US$1.2 billion and represent a growing line of work: as of 2012, cash reached 6.8 million beneficiaries (and 5.6 million in 2014), up from 2.4 in 2000. Over the same period, the quantity of global food aid halved, dropping from 10.9 to 4.7 million metric tons (figure 7).

Key actors in the humanitarian cash arena include both private charities like Give Directly, as well as more institutionalized actors and agencies. In Lebanon, for example, cash was provided by 30 agencies for 14 objectives (ODI 2015). Yet, only 6% of total humanitarian assistance is devoted to cash (UN 2016). Although in-kind assistance will continue to be a strategically important component of humanitarian assistance in the years to come, the fundamental long-term trends in concentration of people, economic activity, and technology are creating a landscape that is increasingly conducive for cash as an appropriate humanitarian response. This would entail a careful balancing between recalibrating the overall composition of humanitarian assistance and providing appropriate responses (Gentilini 2016).

It is in this context that a wider use of government-led safety nets, whether nascent or developed, emerges as a key issue, and sometimes a bottleneck, in the humanitarian discourse. In other words, reconciling humanitarian and safety net approaches would in large part hinge on incentivizing and strengthening national systems as the ‘default’ option.

**Figure 7. Trends in in-kind food aid and humanitarian cash transfers**

Source: CaLP-Cash Atlas and WFP-FAIS online databases (accessed January 2016)
Deepening the agenda

There has been tremendous progress around understanding when and how the humanitarian and safety nets worlds could be better bridged. Yet a number of key questions remain somewhat pending or partially addressed. A selection of these might include the following:

- Developing an operational definition of ‘humanitarian’ and ‘safety net’ programs;
- Map out the functions that are ‘purely’ humanitarian, and those that are currently performed by humanitarian actors, but could, potentially, be undertaken by safety nets;
- Where functions overlap, examine the comparative costs of humanitarian and safety net models for providing assistance to a comparable set of beneficiaries and interventions;
- Identify if and under what circumstances protracted humanitarian assistance may hinder national systems development;
- Examine the conditions under which humanitarian and safety net programs could better coexist and complement each other;
- Document cases of joint programming, including technical specifications and political economy dynamics, as they emerge from live case studies.

The deepening of such a critical agenda – one at the interface of two significant areas of work such as humanitarian assistance and safety nets – would greatly benefit from a more nuanced and operationally-oriented analysis which we hope some of the above question may help pursue.
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References


