

**JOINT UNICEF/WB/WFP
RESEARCH PROJECT**

Concept Note



EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION ON SOCIAL COHESION IN THE SAHEL

September 2025

SUMMARY

Vulnerability, poverty, competition over natural resources and lack of economic opportunities have distended social bonds and fueled conflict in the Sahel. Climate change exacerbates existing social, political, and economic tensions and conflicts. Policies and programs seeking to address poverty and other drivers of vulnerability, such as social protection, have the potential to support social cohesion. Untangling the relationship between social protection and social cohesion is essential to maximize this positive impact and prevent unintended detrimental dynamics. Social protection can have several effects on social cohesion, but few studies have evaluated such effects systematically in the Sahel. In addition, little evidence exists on the impacts of different components or design features on multiple dimensions of social cohesion, and the importance of institutional and social contexts in contributing to these impacts.

Globally, evidence points to the potentially significant role social protection can play in improving social cohesion.¹ For instance, safety nets can help build institutional trust and strengthen the citizen-state contract. They can also strengthen trust within and across groups; as well as promote greater cooperation within groups. Finally, they can contribute to greater unity and peace. However, to be able to inform program design and enhance its positive impacts, more knowledge is needed on the pathways through which program design and implementation features, as well as contextual characteristics, operate on the different dimensions of social cohesion (potentially in circular fashion). In addition, the evidence base in the Sahel is marked by significant gaps, with most evidence focusing on social cohesion within-community or bonding relations. Further analysis should help fill gaps in evidence around cohesion or bridging relations (such as between host populations and displaced populations) and vertical cohesion or linking relations (between citizens and the state).

Better understanding the relationship between social protection and social cohesion is essential for policy and program design and implementation, as well as to support advocacy. UNICEF, the World Bank (WB) and the World Food Program (WFP), building on a strong partnership forged to support social protection systems in the Sahel, are jointly implementing a research project focusing on identifying the multiple linkages between social protection and social cohesion. The research project combines qualitative and quantitative methods to quantify the causal effects of social protection interventions on different dimensions of social cohesion while shedding light on the channels through which these impacts manifest. The quantitative study will analyze social cohesion-related indicators from impact evaluations of selected safety nets in the Sahel, while the qualitative field study will analyze both contextual features and program design and implementation at community level to gain more detailed understanding of their impacts on social cohesion.

¹ Carter et al. (2019), Burchi et al. (2022), and UNDP (2016), cited in Carter et al. (2019).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1. Motivation

1.1. Why social cohesion and social protection are important in the Sahel

Vulnerability, fragility, conflict, and shocks intertwine in the Sahel. Most countries in the Sahel are distinguishable by high levels of poverty, exacerbated by a range of risks, including drought, floods, conflict, and displacement. Many are disproportionately affected by climate change, which deepens underlying vulnerabilities and worsens the inextricable linkages between poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. As a threat multiplier, climate change exacerbates existing social, political, and economic tensions and conflicts. Vulnerability, poverty, competition over natural resources, challenges in governance and access to public services, and lack of economic opportunities have distended social bonds and fueled conflict in the region, including terrorism, violent extremism, and inter-community and socio-economic conflicts. Lack of trust in government (and among communities), marginalization and deep-rooted grievances are widespread.²

Social cohesion has emerged as an important topic in development policy and is particularly relevant in the context of the Sahel.³ Societies that are more cohesive may be more resilient to shocks, especially during natural disasters or public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Social cohesion can also improve local community development by enhancing the community's ability to agree on public goods to be created. Finally, social cohesion has been found to foster societal peace.

Social protection can play a role in improving social cohesion. There is growing commitment from governments to sustainably tackle poverty and vulnerability by developing their social protection systems. Social protection programs have improved a broad range of outcomes for beneficiaries such as consumption, food security, nutrition, productivity, resilience to climate change, as well as access to health and education services. They also yield positive effects on local economies, benefiting local communities beyond beneficiaries.⁴ In addition to these well-documented impacts, the evidence on social protection points to its potentially important role in improving social cohesion.⁵ For instance, safety nets can help build institutional trust and strengthen the citizen-state contract. They can also strengthen trust within communities and across groups; as well as promote greater cooperation within groups. Finally, they can contribute to greater unity and peace.

² Dieng (2021).

³ Sharma and Menke (2024); Burchi et al. (2022); Abrams et al. (2020); and Townshend et al. (2015).

⁴ [Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program \(2024\)](#).

⁵ Carter et al. (2019); Burchi et al. (2022); and UNDP (2016), cited in Carter et al. (2019).

1.2. The joint UNICEF/WB/WFP research project

In the context of their ongoing support for social protection in the Sahel, the World Bank, WFP, and UNICEF have designed a joint research project focusing on identifying the linkages between social protection and social cohesion. This research aims to fill evidence gaps on the impacts of social protection on social cohesion in the Sahel and provide recommendations on how to tailor social protection program design and delivery to maximize positive potential and avoid any negative impacts.

Findings will be useful to inform the design of social protection programs (e.g., eligibility criteria, transfer values, or complementary services) and the choice of implementation modalities (e.g., targeting mechanisms, communications, or feedback mechanisms). This is particularly relevant for policy makers and social protection practitioners in the Sahel, where social cohesion in many countries is being eroded through the combined impacts of conflict, climate change and displacement. Evidence of positive impacts can also bolster investment cases for social protection.

The project includes three complementary elements (see below for more details): A systematic review of existing evidence of the size and direction of impacts of social protection on social cohesion in the Sahel; qualitative analysis in selected countries to identify design and implementation features that can promote positive impacts of social protection programs on social cohesion; and the analysis of data from past and ongoing impact evaluations of safety net programs in the Sahel to quantify impacts on different dimensions of social cohesion.

2. Conceptual framework: linkages between social protection and social cohesion

2.1. What are the dimensions of social cohesion?

While there are multiple definitions, social cohesion is generally used to refer to relations among members of society and the state. Adopting the definition by Leininger et al (2021), this research project considers social cohesion as “both the vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society and the state as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good”, defined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Three attributes of social cohesion.



Trust refers to the ability to trust other people, both within and outside one’s social circles, as well as trust towards the state including its local and national institutions.

Inclusive identity refers to when individuals can identify with various group identities (e.g., gender, religion, village, ethnicity) but also feel a mutual belonging to larger, broader identities such as a national identity. Different identity groups tolerate and recognize each other, while the state protects the rights of the various identity groups

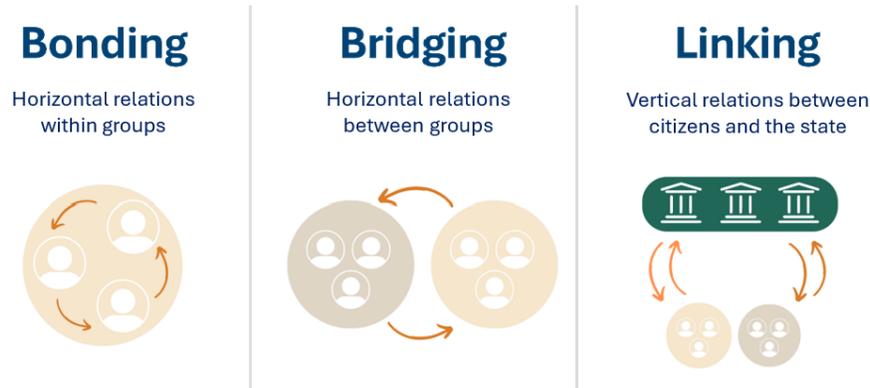
Cooperation for the common good is defined as the cooperation between people or groups for interests that go beyond those of the individual or the group.

Source: Based on Leininger et al (2021).

These attributes can be observed in relation to three different dimensions of social cohesion, captured by the “bonding, bridging, linking” framework (Figure 2).⁶ Bonding refers to relations connecting individuals within a given group. Bridging refers to relations between individuals across distinct groups. And linking refers to the connection between citizens and the state. While bonding and bridging constitute what is often referred to as horizontal social cohesion (between individuals and communities), linking refers to vertical social cohesion.

⁶ Chatterjee et al. (2023).

Figure 2. Three dimensions of social cohesion



For each of these dimensions, aspects of trust, inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good can be identified.⁷ For instance, trust refers to trusting others within one’s group for the bonding dimension, trusting individuals from other groups for the bridging dimension, and trusting public institutions for the linking dimension of social cohesion. Similarly, for the bonding and bridging dimensions, inclusive identity refers to the ability of individuals to have different identities and yet live together in a peaceful way, within or between groups. For the linking dimension, inclusive identity translates into the feeling of belonging to a broader unity, the nation, despite having different group identities. Finally, cooperation for the common good translates into joint efforts for goods that benefit others by people within a community (bonding dimension) or across communities (bridging dimension), or into cooperation with the state for the linking dimension (for instance through community participation in targeting processes in the context of social safety nets).

2.2. Pathways through which social protection programs may affect social cohesion

Overall, evidence on social protection programs reveals impact on a large spectrum of outcomes for beneficiaries and communities. Robust evidence from the Sahel demonstrates that social protection programs can boost consumption, productivity, and the resilience of beneficiary households, as well as promote human capital investments in the health and education of future generations and strengthen local economies (see Figure 3).

In addition to these dimensions, social protection programs can also have impacts on different dimensions of social cohesion⁸. Programs can strengthen the sense of belonging to a community, or to a broader set of communities, or even to a nation. Programs can bring individuals together around activities that benefit their communities or a broader group of communities. They can also involve local communities in the management of programs. Increases in income (and social status) associated with productive and economic inclusion impacts of social protection programs may result in higher engagement in society.

⁷ Chatterjee et al. (2023), Loewe et al. (2020), Loewe and Schuring (2021), and Leininger et al. (2021).

⁸ Building on UNDP (2016) cited in Carter et al. (2019). DFID (2011).

In fragile states, programs have the potential in supporting conflict prevention and peace processes required for creating a stable environment for growth and investment. Depending on their design and implementation, programs can also strengthen trust within a group, across groups, or with the authorities, by building institutional trust and strengthening the citizen-state contract.

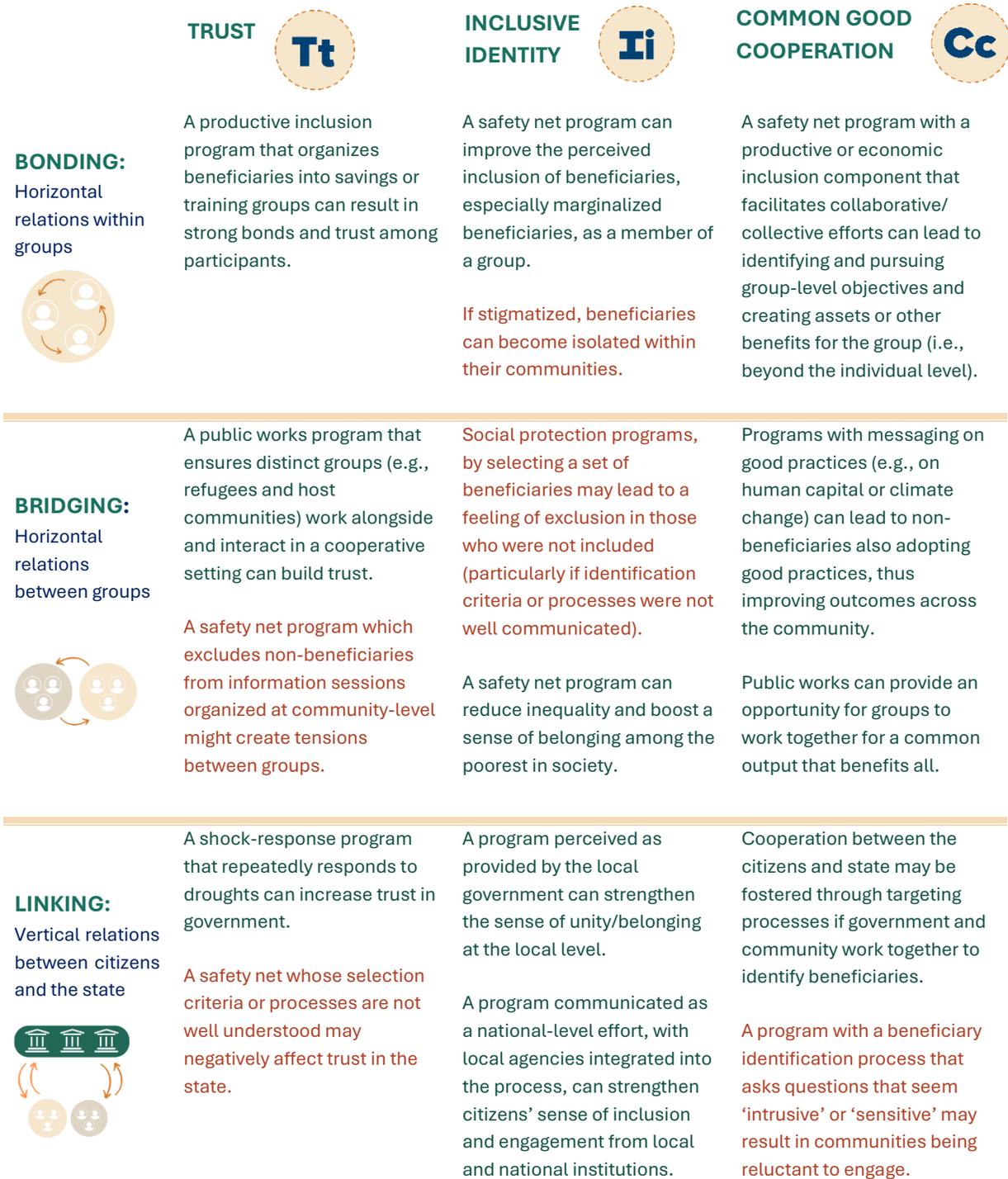
Figure 3: Impacts of SP in the Sahel.



Source: Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program (2024)

In theory, social protection programs can lead to both positive and negative impacts on different dimensions of social cohesion. Social protection programs can potentially have unintended negative impacts on social cohesion, which can emerge in relation to those who have not been included as beneficiaries. Impacts will often depend on the context and on how the program is designed, communicated, and implemented. Figure 4 illustrates some of the ways in which social protection may affect social cohesion either positively or negatively across different dimensions.

Figure 4: Illustrative pathways for social protection to contribute to social cohesion.



Source: Building on Sharma and Menke (2024).

Note: Text in green refers to positive effects, while text in red refers to negative effects.

2.3. Existing evidence of the impact of social protection on social cohesion in the Sahel

To identify the research gaps and conceptual framework to guide further research, the first step of the research project consisted in a review of the existing literature.⁹ This review mapped the causality between social protection and social cohesion in the Sahel. Using existing conceptual frameworks, the findings from this review were organized around the three components of social cohesion – trust, inclusive identity, and cooperation for common goods, as well as the three dimension of bonding (within groups), bridging (between groups) and linking (between citizens and the state) dimensions (see Fig. 2).

Overall, the review found that social protection can and has had several positive impacts on social cohesion. However, negative impacts and dynamics can also occur. Positive impacts require concerted design and implementation features, as well as considering pre-existing conditions of social cohesion. Overall, while some evidence is available on bonding relations, data is scarcer on the bridging and linking dimensions of social cohesion (Table 1).

Table 1: Key findings on the impact of social safety net on social cohesion in the Sahel

Evidence on bonding (horizontal relationships within groups)

- In Mauritania, the national safety program improved trust and cooperation for the common good but do not have impacts on other attributes, such as inclusive identity.¹⁰
- In Niger and Burkina Faso, evidence indicates that economic inclusion interventions that are layered on top of social safety nets can increase trust, inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good among program beneficiaries.¹¹
- In Mali and Chad, quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that beneficiaries of social safety nets increase resource-sharing with non-beneficiaries, which may be a sign of cooperation for the common good and inclusive identity.¹²
- In Burkina Faso and Cameroon, qualitative evidence suggests that resource-sharing is higher and animosity lower between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries within refugee groups.¹³
- In Burkina Faso, social safety nets demonstrated their ability to improve beneficiaries’ subjective social standing.¹⁴

⁹ Sharma and Manke (2024).

¹⁰ Mauritania Tekavoul Program Impact Evaluation Draft Results (unpublished, 2023).

¹¹ Bossuroy et al, 2022 and Bossuroy et al, 2024.

¹² Midline Report of the RCT evaluation of the safety net program in Mali (unpublished, 2018), Della Guardia et al, 2022, and Schnitzer et al, 2022.

¹³ Della Guardia et al, 2024.

¹⁴ Akresh et al. 2016

- In Chad and Niger, social conflicts and tensions among community members (which can stem from a breakdown of horizontal trust, and/or a reduction in inclusive identity or trust) may increase or decrease after the introduction of safety nets, with pre-existing contextual factors potentially playing a significant role.¹⁵

Evidence on bridging (horizontal relationships between groups)

- The impacts of social protection on fostering ties between displaced groups and host communities have not been studied in the Sahel.
- However, evidence from other fragile contexts suggests some limited success in the relations between refugee and host communities.¹⁶

Evidence on linking (vertical relations between citizens and the state)

- The perception of the fairness of selection processes among those *not* selected varies significantly across programs and contexts – the share of those who perceived the selection process as fair ranged from 40 percent in Senegal up to 75 percent in Burkina Faso and Niger.¹⁷
- In Burkina Faso and Cameroon, qualitative evidence suggests that the linking dimension of social cohesion varies based on the actors to whom people attribute the program: Vertical trust and inclusive identity (of being a citizen, receiving benefits from the state) are strengthened when the government’s role is perceived as being strong (Cameroon) but do not increase when the government’s role is less clear to beneficiaries (Burkina Faso).¹⁸

Source: Sharman and Manke (2024).

The evidence on how social protection impacts social cohesion in the Sahel has gaps which need to be filled to gain a holistic understanding of effects. First, large-scale evaluations of social protection programs in the region have measured these effects only for program participants. The experiences and perspectives of community members who were not selected for the program are often missing from such evaluations. Additionally, most evidence pertains to within-group social cohesion, and gaps remain in the evidence base on how social protection impacts social cohesion between groups (in particular, between displaced persons and host communities) and between individuals and the state.

¹⁵ Della Guardia et al, 2022

¹⁶ Zintl and Loewe. 2022. and Ferguson et al. 2022

¹⁷ Schnitzer et al. 2022 and Premand and Schnitzer, 2021.

¹⁸ Della Guardia et al, 2024.

3. Objectives and key dimensions of the research project

3.1. Key objectives and research questions

This research aims to fill evidence gaps on the impacts of social protection on social cohesion in the Sahel and provide recommendations on how to tailor social protection program design and delivery to maximize positive potential and avoid potential negative impacts. To do so, the research project proposes focusing on the following key questions:

- **Direction and size of impacts:** What are the directions and size of impacts of social protection interventions in terms of different forms of social cohesion (within groups, across-groups, and citizen-state) and different attributes of social cohesion (cooperation, trust, inclusive identity)?
- **Design and delivery features:** In what ways do program design and delivery features and practices affect social cohesion outcomes? Which features are likely to lead to stronger positive or negative impacts?
- **Perceptions of participants:** What pathways are perceived by program participants and other stakeholders as playing a role in the impact of social protection programs on social cohesion?
- **Role of the state:** Does it matter if a social protection program is perceived as being led and implemented by the government alone or with other actors intervening at funding or implementation stages? How important is the reliability and institutional durability of the programs?
- **Conditions under which effects materialize:** Which contextual factors are likely to affect the impacts of social protection programs on social cohesion and in what way?

3.2 Proposed research methods

The research project seeks to leverage the complementarity of three qualitative and quantitative research methods, and findings from these different elements will be combined into a comprehensive report:

- (1) A systematic review of existing evidence of the size and direction of impacts of social protection on social cohesion in the Sahel. This literature review was concluded (Sharman and Menke. 2024) and served to shape the conceptual framework of the research project and informed the development of research questions for the qualitative analysis.
- (2) A qualitative analysis that involves primary and secondary data collection in selected countries to identify design and implementation features that can promote positive impacts of social protection programs on social cohesion, as well as the role played by contextual factors.
- (3) A quantitative analysis of data from past and ongoing impact evaluations of safety net programs in the Sahel, using larger samples to quantify impacts on different dimensions of social cohesion and fill some of the existing gaps in evidence.

The qualitative analysis is underpinned with a field study that will seek to identify the impacts and interconnections of contextual and social protection program design and implementation features on social cohesion. It will include a documentary review of information on program features and contextual factors in relation to the study sites; key informant interviews with national and local authorities, community representatives, and program implementers; and focus group discussions and individual interviews with program beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. The field research will be conducted in at least two sites in Chad and Mauritania to capture contextual differences in terms of regions, livelihoods, socio-cultural groupings, and conflict dynamics (Table 2). The research focuses on programs that have some degree of national ownership (to explore vertical dimensions) and a certain degree of maturity and longevity (on the assumption that social cohesion effects take time to manifest).

Table 2: Overview of countries, programs, and research sites for qualitative component

| Country | Programs | Potential research sites | Potential focus within research framework |
|------------|--|--|--|
| Chad | Refugee and Host Community Support Program (PARCA) | Regions of Kanem and Bahr El Gazal (West, Lake Chad), and region of Quaddai (East) to capture different cultural contexts of communities that host refugees | Program effects on social cohesion between refugees and host communities. |
| Mauritania | National Safety Net Program (Tekavoul) and National Lean Season Response Program (El Maouna) | Two localities: the Gorgol region in the South which experiences high poverty and food insecurity and the Hodh Charqui region in the East, where refugees are included in the safety net | The locality in the south offers a point of comparison with the quantitative analysis, while refugee inclusion in the east offers a point of comparison with the Chad study. |
| | MASEF disability grant (supported through the UNICEF/WFP Joint program) | Nouakchott | The urban setting adds different dimensions of analysis, potential focus on the degree to which program support fosters a sense of wider social cohesion (horizontal linking dimensions within neighborhoods, shared national identity, and trust in the state among people with disabilities) |

The quantitative analysis will seek to expand the evidence that quantifies the causal effects of social protection on different dimensions of social cohesion in the Sahel. The analysis will focus on programs which have been the object of robust impact evaluations, which can provide a basis for the measurement of social cohesion impacts that can be attributed to specific programs. The process will start with the identification of potential options among an inventory of 26 social protection programs implemented in Sahelian countries in recent years, filtering programs based on the existence of robust impact evaluations, and the identification of variables in the existing evaluation datasets that can be used to estimate some dimensions of social cohesion. Once programs are identified, the research team will seek access to the datasets and analyze them to assess relevant impacts of adaptive social protection on social cohesion.

The research project will produce a series of outputs, aimed at informing the design and delivery features of future social protection programs. Building on these three elements, the research project outputs will include (1) the review of evidence (already published), (2) case studies for the sites studied, (3) technical notes on quantitative evidence, as well as (4) an overall synthesis paper with recommendations on how to select design and delivery features to enhance the positive impact of social protection on social cohesion in the Sahel, and the types of adjustments needed for different contexts.

4. Conceptual framework for the research project

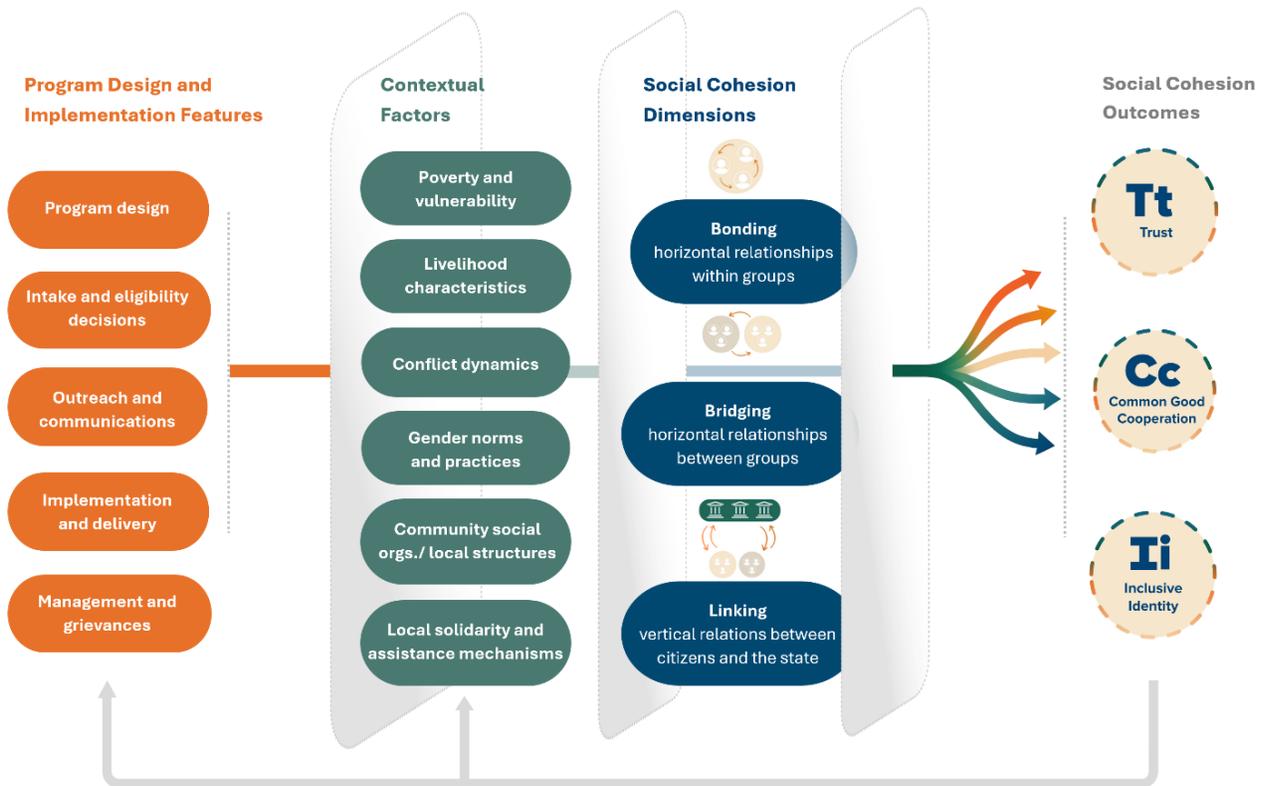
Three broad findings from global and regional evidence reviews have guided our choice of conceptual framework for this joint research project.¹⁹

- (1) **Evidence points to the importance of program design and implementation features.** These include, among others, program objectives, coverage, inclusion, targeting effectiveness, reliability, adequacy of benefits, funding source, communication, transparency, and effectiveness of grievance mechanisms. In addition, transformative impact on social cohesion depends on program scale.
- (2) **Evidence shows that social protection programs' impacts on social cohesion are context specific.** Evidence on impacts points to the importance of enablers in the environment, including local institutional settings and the nature of the relationship among social groups. For example, socially cohesive contexts provide greater opportunity for government officials to perform and are less likely to lead to resentment against social protection programs. Overall, existing levels of trust, cooperation for the common good, and feelings of inclusive identity as well as the strength of bonding, linking, and bridging relations serve as the substratum upon which programs are delivered.
- (3) **Evidence points to a circular relationship between social protection and social cohesion.** Some program design and implementation features may modify – either positively or negatively – social cohesion outcomes. In turn, resulting changes in social cohesion will affect the ability of future programs to improve social cohesion outcomes as well as the design and implementation features of these programs.

Based on the definition of social cohesion and the global and regional evidence of impacts, we adopt the conceptual framework presented in Figure 5 for the research project. The conceptual framework presents selected elements of context and programs that may have particular importance for social cohesion outcomes. The framework suggests that features of both the context and the programs may exert direct influence on social cohesion and may also interact in circular fashion to shape outcomes when programs are implemented. The first arrow reflects the fact that program features, including design elements and processes of implementation, may contribute – either positively or negatively – to different dimensions of social cohesion. Second, the mechanisms through which social protection affects social cohesion themselves interact with contextual factors, which influence the transmission of impacts. Finally, there is feedback between social cohesion and contextual factors, with changes in social cohesion shifting the context within which programs will operate. Indeed, levels of trust, cooperation for the common good and feelings of inclusive identity as well as the strength of bonding, linking, and bridging relations at local level will serve as the substratum upon which future social protection programs will be delivered.

¹⁹ See Adato (2000); Andrews and Kryeziu (2013); Attanasio et al. (2009); Attanasia et al. (2015); Babajanian et al., (2014); Beierl and Dodlova (2022); Burchi et al. (2022); Burchi and Roscioli (2022); Camacho (2014); FAO (2014); Lehmann and Masterson (2014); Köhler (2021); Loewe et al. (2020); Molyneux et al. (2016); Pavanello et al. (2016); ORIMA Research (2020); Roelen (2017); Roxin et al. (2020); Sumarto (2020); UNHCR (2019); Valli et al. (2019); and Zintl and Loewe (2022).

Figure 5. Conceptual framework for the research project



4.1. Key program design and implementation features

Multiple design and implementation features can shape the impact of social protection programs on social cohesion. As discussed earlier, these features can either build or erode relations of trust, inclusive identity, and cooperation in the three dimensions of social cohesion – bonding within groups, bridging across groups, and linking with the state. Features can contribute to different elements of social cohesion and may interact with each other to produce multiple effects. For this research project, we have grouped these features into five categories. This section provides a discussion of the design and implementation features specific to each category, reviewing some of the mechanisms through which they could have a positive or negative impact on different dimensions of social cohesion.

(1) Program design: objectives, components, activities, and benefits

What is it? A critical element of design for social protection programs is the choice of objectives, components, and activities. Design parameters also include amounts of transfers, frequency, duration, accompanying measures, criteria of exit, and the provision of additional services. These design features are informed by overall social protection policy and by the objectives of the program. They are anchored

in an understanding of the conditions and needs of potential beneficiaries, as well as the constraints they face to reach the objective adopted by the program.

Why it matters for social cohesion? Program design is critical for impact on social cohesion, independently of whether the program is intentionally focusing on this outcome. For example, to positively impact on social cohesion, benefits can be designed to ensure they equally accrue to distinct groups, strengthening bridging relations. Eligibility criteria can potentially affect all dimensions of social cohesion. Also, ensuring program activities are in line with local needs and priorities (and/or informed by local level participation) can enhance trust in local and national government. Benefits can also indirectly strengthen links, for instance when transfers or economic inclusion activities enhance resilience and the ability of households to activate local solidarity mechanisms. Finally, benefits can be designed to help strengthen relationships or collaboration within groups or across groups. This includes building or maintenance of community assets; the delivery of accompanying measures that encourage bonding or bridging relations, intra or inter-community trust or cooperative work; and cooperative work for the common good that involves beneficiaries and other members of the community.

(2) Outreach and communications about the program during implementation

What is it? Outreach and communications are central throughout program implementation, starting with the initial phase during which programs communicate on their objectives and design during the outreach phase, and continuing with communication and community engagement throughout implementation. Design and implementation features include for instance the communication plan, with a particular focus on communication at the community level, the actors involved in communicating and their ability to convey key messages to the communities, the various communication tools deployed and their adequacy to local literacy rates.

Why it matters for social cohesion? The way outreach and communication activities are designed and implemented has strong potential to contribute to social cohesion, either positively or negatively. It is critical to build buy-in for the program and its features (its objectives, its design and parameters, and its implementation mechanisms) among the population groups which will benefit from the program, as well as those who might not benefit. This could include, for instance, an explanation for the rationale for including or not include refugees in a program, for selecting groups as recipients (e.g., women), or for focusing on specific types of activities. Such communication serves to build support and prevent potential backlash. When delivered consistently, communication may also contribute positively to maintaining and/or building trust amongst and between community members as well as between the community and government and/or implementing agencies. It may also help promote a sense of inclusive identity and willingness to collaborate for the common good, thus promoting both horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion in bonding, bridging, and linking relations. Failure to ensure that such processes are in place leaves open the possibility of an erosion of trust at all levels.

(3) Intake, assessment of needs and eligibility decisions

What is it? One of the first phase in the implementation of programs is the identification of its beneficiaries. This will typically include a series of steps – from the definition of the population that the program aims at supporting, to the definition of the criteria which will be used to identify them, and the adoption of the process of selection, including the potential role communities and local leaders play in the process. In many countries, a first step is the development of social registries which calls for both the identification of households to be included in the registry and the application of data collection to document their socio-economic conditions. A further step is the application of a series of criteria for programs to identify its beneficiaries – often combining geographic targeting, categorical criteria, the application of a measure of welfare (using a formula to proxy income, consumption, or vulnerability), as well as a community-based validation process.

Why it matters for social cohesion? The identification of beneficiaries is of central relevance to issues of social cohesion, since the degree to which it is perceived to be transparent and fair is likely to have a direct impact on feelings of inclusion/exclusion, which in turn can enhance or erode social cohesion (inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good). A fair and transparent process can enhance feelings of inclusive identity and trust among beneficiaries, who feel that their specific needs are being considered, thus enhancing both bonding and linking relations. On the other hand, these processes might be divisive if not fully understood or accepted, or if seen to be discriminatory, leading to an erosion of trust and bridging relations between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries as well as an erosion of trust and linking relations with the state. Overall, these decisions can result in greater integration of beneficiaries into the community, improved status/social networks, or conflicts or tensions between groups, among others.

(4) Delivery of benefits and services

What is it? This refers to how all program activities are organized – outreach, registration, selection, creation of groups, organization of information sessions, organization of payment, and organization of public work, among others. It also encompasses the choice of the entity or actors responsible for the implementation and the supervision of the various activities – often a combination of central and local government, communities and their representatives, NGOs, financial intermediaries, firms, and CSOs. In addition to the design of activities, choice of actors, and delivery modalities, the actual delivery of benefits and services and the behaviors of the actors involved in that delivery are critical to the realization of programs' impacts.

Why it matters for social cohesion? Some modalities can encourage bonding or bridging relations, intra or inter-group trust or cooperative work. For instance, organizing beneficiaries by group for behavioral change communication can encourage bonding, while opening them to non-beneficiaries as well can promote greater bridging relations. Programs can do so deliberately, as one of their objectives, when program delivery features are designed directly to enhance social cohesion. They can also have positive or negative impacts on social cohesion without explicitly aiming to do so, as collateral impact beyond the intended ones.

At times, communities themselves participate in the delivery (in the process of pre-identifying households to be registered in social registries, validation of key objectives by community leaders, validation of list of eligible households, and the mobilization of beneficiaries for sessions, among others). The perceived role and behavior of implementing actors can build elements of vertical trust and linking relations and in promoting a positive sense of inclusive identity and willingness to participate in collaborative activities. If implementation processes lack transparency, are perceived to deviate from what was foreseen, or fail to deliver the promised benefits, vertical dimensions of trust, inclusive identity and bridging relations could be undercut.

(5) Management and grievances

What is it? Throughout their implementation, programs manage the journey of beneficiaries, which can include decisions to re-assess or re-certify beneficiaries, to help them graduate from a program, or to access their benefits. Programs also put in place grievance redress mechanisms to address questions from beneficiaries or other households – from request for information, to feedback on activities, to grievances about any aspect of the program (inclusion or exclusion from the program, delays in implementation, report of abuse, harassment or exploitation by program actors, misappropriation of benefits, etc.).

Why it matters for social cohesion? Strong and fair grievance redress mechanisms can play a significant role in reducing conflict and enhancing trust (they can sometimes even address tensions that go beyond program-related matters). Implementation processes that are perceived as unfair, discriminatory, or unjust could result in potential loss of trust, inclusive identity or willingness to collaborate for the common good. These may be mitigated by access by beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries to mechanisms to air grievances and the timely delivery of appropriate responses to complaints. Such mechanisms can help bolster or repair bonding, bridging, and linking relations that may have been weakened due to perceived wrongs. Building on local community conflict resolution mechanisms, which are trusted by communities, might enhance their mitigation power (e.g., composition of grievance redress committee and how members selected).

4.2. Key contextual features that can shape the impacts of social protection on social cohesion

As reflected in the conceptual framework, the contextual features of the community within which social protection programs are delivered have critical implications for the outcomes of social protection programs, including social cohesion. For this analysis, we have organized contextual factors into 6 categories. Table 3 highlights how each of these categories may have implications for social protection delivery and outcomes, for social cohesion, and for the way social protection impacts social cohesion.

Table 3. Implications of local context and community characteristics for social protection and social cohesion

| | Implications for social protection delivery and outcomes | Implications for social cohesion | Implications for the impacts of social protection on social cohesion |
|---|---|--|--|
| Community social organization and local power structures | Can influence beneficiary selection, redistribution of benefits, functioning of grievance redress mechanisms, and overall programme implementation | Can foster cohesion between groups or cohesiveness in the same group, but can also trigger divisions among groups, exclusions of certain groups or subgroups, or even conflict | Can affect program acceptability and implementation, enhancing or diminishing different dimensions of social cohesion |
| Livelihood characteristics | Contributes to poverty profiles/resilience potentials, labor mobility, and production systems, important for program design (including economic inclusion measures) | Can shape local solidarity and mutual assistance mechanisms within livelihood groups, as well as forms of exchange and cooperation or conflict within or between groups | Can contribute to social cohesion if equal benefits accrue to different groups, joint activities enhance cooperation and trust, and programs enhance resilience or solidarity mechanisms |
| Poverty and vulnerability dimensions and dynamics | Important for targeting criteria and processes, program coverage, and program design (including shock-responsive features) | Inequalities can undermine social cohesion dimensions; exposure to shocks can disrupt the social fabric; wealth and power differentials may result in patron-client relations within communities | Programs effectiveness in addressing poverty and vulnerability can enhance or undermine trust in local and national government and feelings of common identity |
| Local social solidarity and mutual assistance norms and mechanisms | Can influence implementation and outcomes (for instance, redistribution practices will influence the impact | The strength and diversity of norms and mechanisms can enhance social cohesion, particularly within groups | Programs that draw on and support these mechanisms can contribute to long-lasting social cohesion, particularly if they help to |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| | of a transfer within a household) | | expand solidarities between groups |
| Gender norms and practices | Important to inform gender-sensitive design (including accompanying measures and economic inclusion measures) | Gendered differences in access to, use of, and control over resources and decision-making can impinge on all dimensions of social cohesion | The degree of gender responsiveness in program design and implementation can contribute to social cohesion |
| Conflict dynamics and post-conflict environment | Can disrupt programme implementation and outcomes, and contribute to tensions within communities or conflicts around program benefits | Common grievances can lead to stronger bonds within certain groups (while also fueling conflict between groups). Inter and intra-group conflict-management practices are also important for social cohesion | Conflict-sensitive program design and implementation is important for programs to contribute to social cohesion and avoid additional fractions and conflict |

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