Public Disclosure Authorized

Influence of Social Protection on Social Cohesion in the Sahel

A qualitative study in Mauritania and Chad

Conducted by Policy Research Solutions (PRESTO) for the
JOINT UNICEF – WBG – WFP RESEARCH PROJECT
Exploring the impacts of social protection on social cohesion in the Sahel

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01 Why this study

In the Sahel, vulnerability, poverty, competition over natural resources and a lack of economic opportunity have distended social bonds and fuelled conflict.

Governments and development partners seek to understand how social protection can reduce tensions and promote social cohesion, resilience, and local community development.

> **DEFINITION**
>
> *"Social cohesion refers to both the vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society and the state, as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good."*
>
> Leininger et al., 2021

02 Research questions

Design and delivery features
Which features affect social cohesion outcomes, and which lead to stronger positive or negative impacts?

Role of the state
How do funding sources and implementation arrangements affect vertical cohesion?

03 Methods

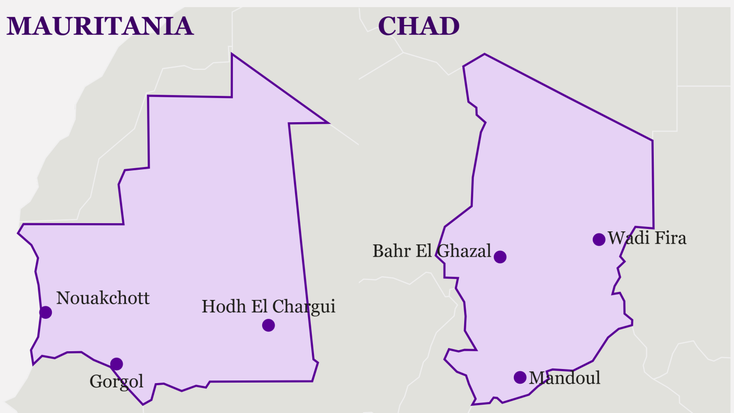
20 National Key Informant Interviews

48 Sub-national Key Informant Interviews

56 Focus Group Discussions

48 In-Depth Interviews

Beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, refugees, host and non-host communities, women and men.



Mauritania Gorgol · Nouakchott · Hodh El Chargui — *Tekavoul National Social Transfer Programme* (Programme National Tekavoul des Transferts Sociaux)

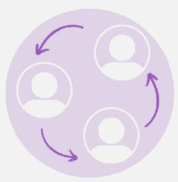
Chad Bahr El Ghazal — *National Productive Social Safety Net Programme* (Programme National de Filets Sociaux Productifs, PNFS); Mandoul and Wadi Fira — *Refugee and Host Community Support Project* (Projet d'Appui aux Réfugiés et aux Communautés d'Accueil, PARCA)

04 What we found

All three programmes had a **positive effects on social cohesion**, in contexts marked by widespread poverty, food insecurity and climate pressure on livelihoods.

- Programmes did not create solidarity: they **activated and reinforced pre-existing norms of mutual aid**.
- **Perception is the key driver** (of fairness, coverage, transfer amounts, and perceptions that non-beneficiaries will receive a turn): clear, repeated communication and delivery quality are decisive.

Bonding within-group — strongest effect

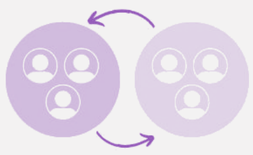


- **Sharing of transfers** with family, neighbours and friends was the most widely reported impact.
- **Inclusion, mutual support and solidarity** strengthened; most sharing voluntary, though some reported social pressure.
- Transfers enabled **re-engagement** in weddings, funerals and baptisms — events central to community life that require a financial contribution.
- **Poverty remained a constraint**: people still could not help each other as much as they wished.

> *"I have forged very good relationships with my community through this assistance by sharing what I receive with them, and this has greatly contributed to our cohesion."*
>
> — Male beneficiary, Mauritania

> *"PARCA has had a positive impact on our interaction with family and close friends. Some members of the community feel they can count on us because they can ask us for services when needed."*
>
> — Female beneficiary, Chad

Bridging between groups



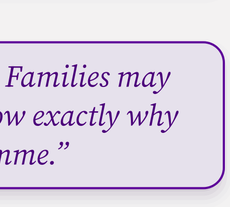
- **Driven by design** (social promotion sessions, savings groups in Chad, gathering at manual payment points) and indirectly by increased economic activity, trade and demand for labour.
- **Refugees reported greater inclusion** and comfort; host–refugee mutual support was described in both countries.
- **Wider cooperation for the common good**: firefighting, blood donation, tree planting, shared assets under PARCA infrastructure components.

> *"We have observed a considerable improvement in terms of living together and community resilience."*
>
> — Male beneficiary, Chad

> *"The programme has improved our relationships within the camp and with members of the village."*
>
> — Female beneficiary (refugee), Mauritania

> *"Money circulates when there are payments and interactions between communities."*
>
> — Programme implementer, Chad

Linking institutional trust



- Trust in government rose where the state was **seen to be improving lives** and implementing staff were seen as caring, honest and professional.
- **Mauritania:** social protection often seen as the **state's duty**, including as a Muslim nation — feeding a sense of belonging to the nation-state.
- **Chad:** mixed — many viewed transfers as a **gift or charity** rather than an entitlement; some were unaware PARCA was a state programme.
- **Trust eroded** by payment delays, low coverage, opaque targeting and poorly performing external payment providers.

> *"I feel like I am part of the government. I thank God, the government and the people of my village."*
>
> — Female beneficiary, Mauritania

> *"No, everyone considered it a gift; it is not our right, it is just help."*
>
> — Female beneficiary, Chad

> *"The main challenge is communication. Families may be frustrated or worried if they don't know exactly why they are being removed from the programme."*
>
> — Community leader, Mauritania

Key threats

- **Jealousy and division** among non-beneficiaries, most acute in refugee camps in Chad. Mitigated when eligibility rules were clear, benefits were shared visibly, and others expected their turn.
- **Low coverage** was highlighted as a key constraint across all respondent groups.
- **Grievance mechanisms** function but are **rarely used**: norms against complaining to authorities, and a sense of having no right to complain about "money for free".

> *"Yes, some feel jealous or frustrated when they see other families receiving assistance. This can create tensions, misunderstandings, or comparisons, and sometimes a sense of injustice, even though the selection is based on specific criteria."*
>
> — Female beneficiary, Mauritania

> *"You can't complain because you're there, you haven't asked for anything, they give you free money to feed your family, so even when there's a problem, you don't complain."*
>
> — Female beneficiary, Chad

05 Key recommendations

- **Expand coverage**; limited coverage is a critical constraint in high poverty contexts.
- Ensure selection criteria are **transparent** and clarify the distinction between the social registry survey and programme enrolment.
- Treat **communication as core programme infrastructure**: continuous throughout (including on expected delays, exit), extended to non-beneficiaries and to remote and nomadic populations, working closely with community leaders.
- **Sustain and scale complementary components**
- Strengthen grievance mechanisms and educate people on their **right to complain** — linked to whether participants view social protection as a right v. gift.