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The role of social assistance in African crises: a systematic literature review

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Abstract: This systematic review examines the effectiveness of social assistance programmes in protecting households in Africa—a region highly vulnerable to climate change, conflict, and other shocks—during periods of crisis. Despite the significant increase in the number of these programmes over the past two decades, the need for emergency aid remains. Our review focuses on quantitative studies using microdata to assess the impact of these programmes on household income, poverty, assets, and food security outcomes during crises. We find that large, predictable, and consistent transfers are effective in protecting households and building resilience, as they enable households to accumulate buffer stocks and better plan for future shocks. However, challenges with timely implementation often hinder their effectiveness. Cash-plus programmes, which integrate consumption support with livelihood interventions, show particular promise in fostering long-term resilience, though the evidence base remains too limited to draw broader conclusions.

Key words: social protection, cash transfers, Africa, systematic review, resilience

JEL classification: O15, H53

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1 Introduction

Although sub-Saharan Africa has contributed less than three per cent of total global CO[2] emissions, it is one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change (Hill et al. 2024; Zeufack et al. 2021). The region's dependence on rain-fed agriculture, widespread extreme poverty, and limited structural transformation makes it particularly susceptible to extreme weather events—such as droughts and floods—that are expected to intensify with global warming. However, African households face more than just weather shocks. Health epidemics, agricultural pests, and disruptions in global markets for food, fuel, and fertilizers have recently put significant pressure on their resilience (Headey and Hirvonen 2023; World Bank 2022). The period between 2020 and 2023 has been recognized as one of the most violent since the end of the Cold War. There are currently 59 active conflicts in 34 countries—28 of those conflicts are taking place in Africa (Rustad 2024).

Given these layered challenges, one of the most pressing priorities on Africa's policy agenda is strengthening preparedness and resilience against weather anomalies and other interlinked risks, including health crises, market volatility, wars and violence, and income fluctuations. Recognizing this, the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) of the African Union urges its member countries to 'address resilience beyond issues of climate change', recommending social assistance programmes, or social safety nets, as a key policy tool to address this (African Union 2024).

Fortunately, these policy tools are not new to the continent. Since the early 2000s, the number of social assistance programmes in Africa has tripled (Hickey et al. (2018), with further expansions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gentilini 2022). Designed to address chronic poverty and food insecurity through regular cash or food transfers, these programmes aim to help households manage risks and respond more effectively to crises. However, despite the increased investments in social assistance, they have not eliminated the need for emergency aid (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2022). In 2020, for instance, about 14 per cent of official development assistance was allocated to humanitarian aid, while only 2.5 per cent supported social protection programmes (Hirvonen 2023).

These challenges highlight a critical question: how effective are the existing social assistance and other transfer programmes in protecting African households during crises? To address this question, we conducted a systematic review of the quantitative academic literature to understand the degree to which social assistance programmes protect during crises. Our work focuses on quantitative studies that use microdata and employ a plausible empirical strategy to establish causality. We focus on Income level, poverty, assets, and food security outcomes in any African country.

Our review complements previous literature reviews and meta-analyses examining the impact of transfer programmes on household consumption, poverty, food security, livelihoods, and other household outcomes in Africa and beyond (Crosta et al. 2024; Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Gentilini 2022; Gentilini et al. 2021; Hidrobo et al. 2018; Kondylis and Loeser 2021; Leight et al. 2024b; Oliveira et al. 2023; Ralston et al. 2017). Our specific aim is to understand the extent to which transfer programmes build resilience against various types of shocks faced by African households. Earlier reviews have primarily explored resilience through the lens of risk management, improved coping strategies, and livelihood diversification (Ralston et al. 2017)—factors arguably linked to greater resilience during crises but not directly addressing the question at hand.

During crises, social assistance and other transfer programmes provide critical consumption support, offering timely and adequate relief in the immediate aftermath of shocks. Beyond this protective function, these programmes may also enhance resilience by enabling households to build assets or diversify income sources. For example, increasing household asset holdings can provide a safeguard during droughts (Hirvonen et al. 2023), while productive investments and income diversification—particularly into non-agricultural activities—can serve as effective risk management strategies, especially in the context of climate change (Macours et al. 2022). 'Cash-plus' programmes combine regular cash transfers with complementary livelihood interventions to help households strengthen existing livelihoods or diversify into new ones, aiming to break the cycle of chronic poverty. Designed to extend the impact of cash transfers beyond the period of direct support (FAO 2018), these programmes may also build resilience during crises. Common interventions include financial literacy or business training, the provision of productive assets like livestock, or lump-sum payments to kickstart income-generating activities (Leight et al. 2024b). Finally, existing social assistance programmes can serve as a platform to deliver humanitarian aid during crises, either expanding vertically (by increasing the benefit amount or the duration of eligibility for existing beneficiaries) or horizontally (by broadening the eligibility to include new beneficiaries) (Bowen et al. 2020).

In the next section, we describe our literature search methodology and the studies we include in the review. In Section 3, we summarize these studies, organizing them by type of shock: weather shocks, health epidemics, active conflict settings, and refugee or internally displaced people (IDP) settings. In Section 4, we synthesize the findings and conclude.

2 Methods

We conducted a literature search on the effect of social assistance programmes in country contexts that face crises within Africa, using the inclusion criteria listed in Table 1. We developed a scoping review protocol based on PRISMA-ScR guidelines, specifically following the framework established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005).

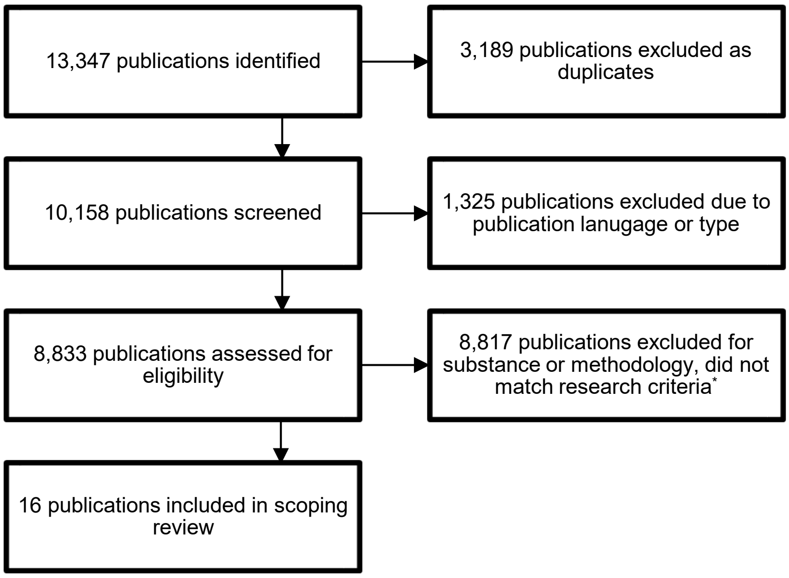
Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Domain	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Setting	Any African country context	All other country contexts
Time frame	2000–present	Before 2000
Programme typology	Social assistance, social insurance, social protection, payment transfer, cash transfers (conditional and unconditional), work-for-food programmes, and work-for-cash programmes	Social care, social services, labour market protections
Dimension of outcomes	Income level, poverty, assets, food security	Demographic
Crisis type	Natural disasters, wars or conflicts, and protracted financial (food and energy prices), humanitarian, macroeconomic (e.g., debt crisis), or epidemiological crises	
Methodology	Quantitative with a plausible empirical strategy to establish causality.	Qualitative only, or quantitative studies without a plausible empirical strategy to establish causality.

Source: authors' elaboration.

The search aimed to capture all relevant studies that quantitatively analysed the effects or outcomes of social assistance provided during crises in Africa. Following the search protocol, we conducted systematic searches across databases and scoping searches of relevant recent publications. Figure 1 presents a PRISMA diagram summarizing the search process. The initial search returned over 13,000 journal articles, books, book chapters, reports, working papers, and conference papers. After removing duplicates and articles in languages other than English, we assessed 8,800 publications for eligibility.

Figure 1: Prisma diagram detailing the systematic search



Note: * 83 empirical research papers were identified in this step. However, only 16 employed a credible causal empirical strategy.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Many eligible papers were excluded from this scoping review for the following reasons: a) they were outside the geographic scope of Africa; b) they did not employ quantitative methods; c) they did not analyse outcomes within a crisis context; d) they focused on the targeting, design, or implementation of the programme rather than its outcomes; or e) they merely referenced a social protection programme in a crisis context without analysing its outcomes.

From this comprehensive search protocol and process, we included a total of 16 studies in this review. Table 2 provides an overview of these studies along with their key characteristics. Of the 16 studies, seven assessed the protective impact of social assistance against weather shocks, while five focused on health epidemics such as the COVID-19 pandemic. One study examined the context of active conflict, and three were set in refugee or IDP contexts.

Geographically, the evidence is concentrated in a few countries: Ethiopia (5 studies), Kenya (3 studies), and Sierra Leone (2 studies). Most programmes analysed in these studies operated in rural areas, with only four studies conducted in urban settings. Eight studies evaluated government-implemented programmes, while the others examined programmes run by NGOs, UN organizations, or the researchers themselves. Nearly all programmes provided cash transfers, sometimes paired with food. Seven of the 16 studies evaluated a transfer programme that included complementary interventions, such as asset transfers, substantial vocational or other training components, aiming to improve livelihoods.

Our review focuses on consumption, food security, and livelihood outcomes. In terms of methodology, nine of the 16 studies relied on randomized controlled trials (RCTs), while the rest used quasi-experimental methods such as regression discontinuity designs, difference-in-differences, matching methods, or panel data methods.

All monetary values reported in the text have been converted to 2010 purchasing power parity dollars ($PPP) using PPP conversion factor for private. PPP dollars adjust for differences in price levels between countries, reflecting the amount of goods and services that a given amount of money can purchase in each country. This adjustment allows for a more accurate comparison of monetary values by accounting for variations in local purchasing power, making it particularly useful in cross-country comparisons.

Table 2: Studies included in this review

Study	Country	Rural/ urban	Study period	Type of crisis	Implementer	Transfer type	Cash+ livelihood?	Peer reviewed?	Outcomes	Causal inference methodology	Number of survey rounds
Weather shocks:											
Premand and Stoeffler (2022)	Niger	Rural	2012-2015	Drought	Government	Cash	No	Yes	1. Consumption 2. Food security 3. Livelihood outcomes	RCT with matching	2
Knippenberg and Hoddinott (2017)	Ethiopia	Rural	2006-2014	Drought	Government	Cash or food	No	No	1. Food security	IV	5
Abay et al. (2022)	Ethiopia	Rural	2006-2014	Drought	Government	Cash or food	Yes	Yes	1. Consumption	Panel data	5
Hirvonen et al. (2023)	Ethiopia	Rural	2018-2021	Drought	NGO	Cash	Yes	No	1. Consumption 2. Food Security 3. Livelihood outcomes	Cluster-RCT	3
Haile (2022)	Ethiopia	Rural	2013-2016	Drought	Government	Cash	No	Yes	1. Food security	Panel data	2
Dietrich and Schmerzeck (2019)	Kenya	Rural	2009-2011	Drought	Government	Cash	No	Yes	1. Consumption	Cluster-RCT	2
Asfaw et al. (2017)	Zambia	Rural	2010-2012	Drought	Government	Cash	No	Yes	1. Consumption	Cluster-RCT	2
Health epidemics:											
Banerjee et al. (2020)	Kenya	Rural	2018-2020	COVID-19 pandemic	NGO	Cash	No	No	1. Food security 2. Livelihood outcomes	Cluster RCT	2
Abay et al. (2021)	Ethiopia	Rural	2019-2020	COVID-19 pandemic	Government	Cash or food	No	Yes	1. Food security	DiD	2
Alloush et al. (2024)	South Africa	Both	2020-2021	COVID-19 pandemic	Government	Cash	No	Yes	1. Consumption 2. Food security 3. Livelihood outcomes	RDD	2
Rosas et al. (2022)	Sierra Leone	Urban	2013-2015	Ebola outbreak	NGO	Cash	Yes	Yes	1. Consumption 3. Livelihood outcomes	RCT	2
Richardson et al. (2017)	Sierra Leone	NR	NR	Ebola outbreak	Researchers	Cash or food	Yes	Yes	1. Food security	RCT	1

Study	Country	Rural/ urban	Study period	Type of crisis	Implementer	Transfer type	Cash+ livelihood?	Peer reviewed?	Outcomes	Causal inference methodology	Number of survey rounds
Active conflict settings:											
Tranchant et al. (2019)	Mali	Rural	2012-2017	Conflict	WFP	Food	No	Yes	1. Consumption	Matching	2
Refugee and IDP settings:											
MacPherson and Sterck (2021)	Kenya	Urban	2017	Refugee setting	WFP, NGO	Cash	Yes	Yes	1. Consumption 2. Food Security	RDD	1
Leight et al. (2024)	Somalia	Urban	2022-2023	IDP setting	NGO	Cash	Yes	No	1. Consumption 2. Food security 3. Livelihood outcomes	RCT	2
Gupta et al. (2024)	Uganda	Urban	2019-2022	Refugee setting	NGO	Cash	No	Yes	1. Consumption 2. Food security 3. Livelihood outcomes	RCT	2

Note: RCT = Randomized control trial; RDD = Regression design; DiD = Difference-in-differences; IV = instrumental variables, NGO = Non-governmental organization; WFP = World Food Programme, IDP = Internally displaced people.

Source: authors' elaboration.

3 Results

3.1 Weather shocks

More than 80 per cent of the poor people in Africa reside in rural areas (Castañeda et al. 2018), typically deriving their livelihood from rainfed agriculture. Consequently, droughts and other weather shocks lead to reduced harvests, often resulting in widespread income shocks in poor and vulnerable populations. A substantial body of literature examines the effects of weather shocks on various welfare outcomes, consistently finding that these shocks cause short-term harm with lasting, intergenerational impacts. However, a considerably smaller body of research has explored the role of social assistance in buffering these effects. Our review centres on studies that use longitudinal (panel) data and apply experimental or quasi-experimental methods to assess the impact of cash or other transfers. Ideally, weather shocks are measured using data from weather stations or satellite sources, as self-reported shocks tend to be less reliable (De Weerdt 2008).

The Sahel region is among the most vulnerable areas globally to climate change due to its heavy dependence on rainfed agriculture, widespread poverty, and rapid population growth. Frequent droughts and erratic rainfall patterns pose significant threats to food security and increase the likelihood of conflicts over scarce resources. Traditionally, humanitarian assistance—primarily through cash or food aid—has been the primary policy response to these shocks (O'Brien et al. 2018). However, policymakers in the region are increasingly considering more systematic approaches to addressing these risks (Bowen et al. 2020; O'Brien et al. 2018).

In this context, Premand and Stoeffler (2022) analyse a two-year cash transfer programme in Niger that provided 41 $PPP per month to poor rural households during the lean season (the period just before harvest when food stocks are low). In total, the programme reached approximately 1 million individuals with the aim to strengthen resilience and enable households to better protect themselves from shocks, offering an alternative to recurring humanitarian assistance during the lean season in Niger. Due to funding constraints, cash transfers were randomized across villages: 142 villages were selected to receive the transfers, while 73 villages served as a control group for the evaluation. The study assessed whether households in cash-transfer villages were better able to cope with a drought that occurred during the study period compared to those in control villages.

The pre-intervention survey was conducted between April and June 2012, with cash transfers starting in February 2013 and continuing until April 2015. The endline survey took place from January to April 2015, during which cash transfers were still being disbursed.

The findings show that cash transfers increased consumption levels by 10 per cent, though there were no statistically significant effects on households' self-reported food security. In control villages that did not receive cash transfers, droughts had severe negative effects, reducing average consumption levels by 20 per cent and decreasing the value of assets by over 40 per cent. In contrast, the negative effects of drought were mitigated in villages that received cash transfers, where neither average consumption levels nor asset values were significantly impacted.

Notably, cash transfers also increased the likelihood that households participated in informal savings groups, which may have further improved resilience against droughts, as has been observed in several other contexts (Beaman et al. 2014; Hirvonen et al. 2023; Karlan et al. 2017). Additional mechanisms through which the programme may have protected households during the drought include facilitating income diversification and reinforcing existing income-generating activities. Although a counterfactual is lacking, these protective mechanisms likely would not have been as effective had emergency transfers (the standard practice) been provided *after* the drought. One limitation is that the programme was still ongoing at the time of the endline survey, making it unclear whether these protective impacts persisted after the cessation of transfers.

Similar to the countries in the Sahel region, Ethiopia has a long history of devastating droughts (De Waal 2017; Pankhurst 1985). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ad hoc humanitarian appeals were the standard response to these recurring droughts. After narrowly averting famine in the early 2000s, policymakers in the country began to consider a more systematic and sustainable mechanism for addressing these droughts (Hoddinott et al. 2024; Wiseman et al. 2010). Established in 2005, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) was designed to replace the recurring humanitarian food aid that characterized much of the previous decades. The programme targets the country's drought-prone areas, providing participating households with cash or food transfers in exchange for labour-intensive public works that typically focus on environmental rehabilitation. In 2014, the average PSNP households received 549 birrs (67 $PPP) per year. Today, the PSNP is one of the largest and longest-running safety net programmes in Africa, reaching up to 8 million individuals. A series of quasi-experimental evaluations demonstrate that the programme has improved food security and protected asset levels (Hoddinott et al. 2024), while the public works projects have been shown to result in increased tree cover (Hirvonen et al. 2022). However, sustainable graduation from PSNP support has been limited (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2021).

Knippenberg and Hoddinott (2017) evaluate the extent to which the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) protects households from drought-related shocks. Using quasi-experimental methods and bi-annual programme evaluation data from 2006 to 2014, the authors employ an instrumental variable approach to address the non-random assignment of PSNP participation. They construct both a self-reported measure of drought shocks and an objective measure based on satellite data.

The authors analyse the correlation between these shocks and self-reported household food security, specifically measuring the number of months households were able to meet their food needs over the previous 12 months. In households not participating in the PSNP, experiencing a drought in the past year significantly negatively impacts food security, reducing it by an average of 4.5 months. In contrast, for PSNP households, the programme payments partially mitigate this initial shock, reducing the negative impact to an average of 2.8 months for programme participants. When examining recovery trajectories, the authors find that PSNP households return to their pre-drought levels of food security more quickly than non-PSNP households, demonstrating the programme's effectiveness in enhancing resilience against drought shocks.

Using the same data as Knippenberg and Hoddinott (2017), Abay et al. (2022) study the extent to which the PSNP enhanced household resilience during its first decade of operation. While their findings align with Knippenberg and Hoddinott's conclusion that the PSNP improves resilience, the study highlights some key nuances. After adjusting for inflation, transfer amounts fluctuate over time and across regions. Abay et al. demonstrate that only larger transfers combined with continuous participation improve resilience, suggesting that consistent and substantial support is crucial. They also find evidence that complementary programming (Household Asset Building Programme) aimed at enhancing livelihoods and building assets further boosts resilience.

Extending this line of research in the context of the PSNP, Hirvonen et al. (2023) study whether adding livelihood programming to PSNP enhances resilience among participating households by analysing the Strengthen PSNP4 Institutions and Resilience (SPIR) project. Implemented from 2016 to 2021 in 17 districts of the Amhara and Oromia regions of Ethiopia, SPIR provided support to nearly 500,000 PSNP households. Funded by the USAID and implemented by World Vision, CARE, and ORDA, in partnership with the Ethiopian government, the project aimed to reduce poverty, improve livelihoods and enhance resilience through bundled livelihood, nutrition, and gender interventions.

The study utilized a randomized control trial design with multiple study arms. The control arm consisted of PSNP households without additional programming while in the treatment arms, PSNP households were exposed to different combinations of the SPIR interventions and in some study arms, there was also a one-time livelihood transfer (417 $PPP value) targeting the poorest PSNP households. By linking survey data to satellite weather information, the authors compared drought impacts between households only benefiting from the PSNP and PSNP households exposed to the different variants of the SPIR programming. While the study period lacked severe droughts, even moderate droughts caused sizable negative effects on consumption, food security, and asset holdings in control districts. Moreover, droughts significantly increased the risk of intimate partner violence in this context. Remarkably, the corresponding drought impacts were either significantly reduced or entirely absent in households located in areas that received SPIR programming: the effects on household consumption also appear to be entirely mitigated in these treated households and droughts are not associated with an increased risk of intimate partner violence. Further analysis indicates that although the SPIR did not result in higher overall consumption or income, it helped create a buffer of savings that protected households during droughts. As above, these findings are consistent with existing literature on savings group initiatives, which show modest increases in savings (averaging less than $15) that provide protection against income shocks and seasonal fluctuations (Beaman et al. 2014; Karlan et al. 2017).

Haile (2022) examines the impact of a small-scale UNICEF cash transfer pilot programme, implemented between 2011 and 2016, in mitigating the effects of the 2015/16 El Niño-induced drought in Ethiopia. The study focuses on one rural district in the Tigray region. Using household survey data from November 2013 and November 2016, and applying panel data methods (household fixed effects), Haile finds that monthly cash transfers of 150 to 250 birr ($21 to $28 USD-PPP), depending on the household demographics, helped protect household food security and children's food consumption. However, this effect did not extend to areas most severely affected by the drought, indicating that larger transfers would have required to offset the negative income shocks in these areas. The study's limitations include a small sample size (less than 200 households), non-random assignment of the cash transfers, and the narrow geographic scope (one district), which constrained variation in drought exposure due to the high spatial correlation of such events.

Kenya's Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) provides unconditional cash transfers to the extremely poor households in drought-prone northern Kenya. Launched in 2008, the HSNP now supports over 100,000 households. By 2018, the transfers amounted to 47 $PPP per month, covering over 40 per cent of monthly food expenses and more than 30 per cent of total household (Merttens et al. 2018). A short-term study by Dietrich and Schmerzeck (2019) assessed the programme's performance during the 2011 drought, using experimental data from the pilot phase with surveys conducted in 2009/2010 and 2011. The findings show that the programme helped protect households' food consumption expenditures during the drought. A mixed-methods evaluation of the programme reveals that while it effectively provides sufficient support for households to meet their immediate consumption needs, its impact on building long-term resilience has been limited (Merttens et al. 2018). Beneficiary households struggle to accumulate savings, build asset buffers, or invest in income-generating activities that are less vulnerable to weather shocks (Merttens et al. 2018). Therefore, additional livelihood programming combined with larger one-off asset or cash transfers may be required to build long-term resilience against droughts.

In Zambia, Asfaw et al. (2017) conducted a short-term study to evaluate how effectively Zambia's Child Grant Programme (CGP) protected households from extreme weather events. Launched in 2003, the CGP provided unconditional monthly cash transfers of 60,000 Zambian kwacha (38 $PPP) to households with young or disabled children. By 2014, the programme had reached 20,000 ultra-poor households but was phased out in 2015 when Zambia reformed and harmonized its social assistance programmes under a unified eligibility criterion. Using data from a randomized control trial conducted during a programme expansion phase, Asfaw et al found that one standard deviation below the historical rainfall mean resulted in a 17 per cent reduction in household consumption expenditures for households that did not benefit from the CGP. In contrast, households receiving CGP support experienced only a 5 per cent reduction in consumption due to droughts. Further analysis, by Lawlor et al. (2019), using the same data, suggests that CGP beneficiary households affected by droughts were able to accumulate savings and draw on them during times of crisis.

3.2 Health epidemics

Health epidemics present a distinct type of shock compared to weather-related shocks. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic not only led to higher mortality and morbidity but also had severe impacts on income, disrupted food systems, and complicated the logistics of delivering support through social protection programmes. Moreover, infectious diseases, such as COVID-19 and Ebola, spread more easily in densely populated areas, leaving urban areas especially vulnerable—unlike droughts and some other weather shocks that primarily harm agricultural incomes in rural areas. Another key difference is that epidemics typically impact the entire population, either directly or indirectly, which complicates the identification of an unaffected control group. Consequently, the studies discussed below evaluate the performance of social assistance interventions during epidemics without attempting to identify a group completely unaffected by the crisis.

Banerjee et al. (2020) leverage a large-scale universal basic income (UBI) experiment involving over 300 poor villages in Kenya to assess how UBI schemes protected rural households during the COVID-19 pandemic. The cluster-randomized controlled trial included four arms: a control group that received no transfers; a long-term UBI group in which each adult received approximately $22.5 USD monthly for 12 years; a short-term UBI group with 39 $PPP monthly payments for 2 years; and a lump-sum group where each adult received a one-time payment of about 700 $PPP. Transfers began in early 2018, so the UBI experiment had been underway for approximately two years when the pandemic began. During Kenya's major lockdown in May-June 2020, the authors conducted a phone survey and found that households in the long-term UBI group were 11 percentage points less likely to report experiencing hunger in the past 30 days compared to the control group. Even in the short-term group, where transfers had ended in January 2020, households were 5 percentage points less likely to report hunger. Remarkably, households that received the one-time transfer two years earlier were also 5 percentage points less likely to report hunger, underscoring the lasting impacts of large one-off cash transfers.

In Ethiopia, Abay et al. (2023) analysed household survey data from August 2019 and June 2020 to assess how well the PSNP shielded beneficiaries from the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings indicate that self-reported food insecurity rose significantly in rural areas during the pandemic's initial months, yet this increase was notably lower among PSNP-supported households. While prior evidence demonstrated PSNP's success in enhancing food security and resilience in rural Ethiopia (see above), these new findings suggest that the programme also offers protection against pandemic-induced shocks.

Alloush et al. (2024) study South Africa's Older Person's Grant, which provides ZAR 1,800 (222 $PPP) per month to low-income citizens aged 60 or older. These grants are substantial—2.4 times the median income in South Africa—and the income criteria for eligibility are relatively low, with 80 per cent of the age-appropriate population qualifying. The authors use a regression discontinuity design that leverages the age-eligibility threshold of the pension scheme to estimate the effect of the programme both before and during the pandemic. The estimation results indicate that the pension scheme leads to a 30 per cent increase in household per capita income before the pandemic and a 45 per cent increase during the pandemic. The larger effects observed during the pandemic could be due to the substantial fall in incomes among those not yet eligible to receive the pension grant, or due the substantial increase in the transfer amount during the pandemic (Köhler and Bhorat 2021). Analysis of food security indicates a similar pattern: pension-receiving households are significantly less likely to report hunger, both before and during the pandemic.

Rosas et al. (2022) conducted a randomized experiment to evaluate the impact of a 'cash-plus' intervention targeting young adults in urban Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis. The intervention, implemented between 2013 and 2015, provided cash transfers alongside six months of classroom-based training, starting in December 2013. Participants were assigned to one of four study arms: (1) technical skills training, which included trade-specific training and basic financial literacy; (2) business skills training, focused on entrepreneurship and business development; (3) a combined package of technical and business skills training; and (4) a control group that received no support. Each training group also received a daily stipend of Le 2,500 to cover food and accommodation expenses, which translates into Le 200,000 to 360,000 (90–162 $PPP), depending on whether the training took six or nine months.

The trial involved nearly 1,000 participants in each arm. Approximately one year after the intervention ended, those who received training were more likely to be employed and showed significant improvements in earnings, and asset ownership compared to the control group. The intervention increased consumption levels by 50 per cent, representing the largest effect documented in a recent meta-analysis by Leight et al. (2024b). Interestingly, differences in outcomes across the three training arms were generally minimal, suggesting that all training packages were equally effective in improving participants' economic outcomes in this context.

Richardson et al. (2017) conducted a randomized trial involving 200 Ebola survivors in Sierra Leone to assess the impact of different types of post-discharge support. One group received a single food ration or a monetary stipend; another received multiple food rations, educational support, or a job/stipend for less than three months; a third group received a combination of multiple food rations or educational support with a job/stipend for less than three months, or a job stipend for 3–6 months; and a fourth group received a job/stipend for more than six months.[1] Two years after the intervention, Ebola survivors who received the most extensive package, which included longer-term support, were significantly more likely to report being food secure than those in other treatment groups. However, the estimated odds ratio of 6.1 appears implausibly high, potentially reflecting overestimation or methodological limitations. Qualitative evidence indicates that many recipients of monetary support invested in small-scale businesses, suggesting the potential for more sustainable, long-term impacts of such interventions.

[1] Unfortunately, the study does not report the monetary values of these rations, stipends or other support packages.

3.3 Active conflict settings

Social assistance programmes in fragile and conflict-affected settings can have a complex, multifaceted impact. First, these programmes can potentially reduce conflict risk and intensity by addressing root causes like poverty and inequality or by raising the opportunity cost of joining armed groups (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fetzer 2020; Hirvonen et al. 2024; Rohner and Thoenig 2021). However, they may also intensify tensions if armed groups perceive anti-poverty efforts as threats to their authority, which can lead to violent reactions (Khanna and Zimmermann 2017; Premand and Rohner 2023).

Second, social assistance can support households in coping with the challenges of conflict, such as income loss, and hunger risk. In the theme of this review, we focus on studies focusing on this impact pathway. Physically delivering cash or other transfers during an active conflict is extremely difficult and often dangerous. The same is true for conducting in-person surveys in conflict areas. These considerations may explain the paucity of evidence around the impact of social assistance in active conflict settings. Our literature search identified only one that relied on quantitative data.[2]

Tranchant et al. (2019) leverage a longitudinal survey conducted in Northern Mali in which the first survey was conducted in January 2012, just before a major conflict erupted between the Tuareg rebels and the Malian government. The team returned to the survey sites in five years later in January 2017 when the conflict was still ongoing, but calmed down, at least in some parts of Northern Mali. During the conflict, the WFP ran two interventions providing assistance to drought-affected populations as well as to refugees and IDPs in Mali. The authors apply matched difference in differences strategy to explore the impact of WFP food aid delivered during the conflict. The magnitudes of the impact estimates suggest that food aid in this conflict context resulted in sizable impacts on household total and food expenditures (more than 14 per cent increase relative to the sample means reported at the baseline), although many of the estimates are not statistically different from zero. The authors also explore how the impacts vary between villages that were directly exposed to conflict and villages that were only indirectly affected. The magnitudes of the effects suggest that the household consumption impacts of food aid were considerably larger in areas that were directly affected, although as before, the estimates are often not statistically significant, possibly reflecting inadequate statistical power due to the small number of households in these disaggregated analyses.

3.4 Refugee and IDP settings

The typical mode of aid in many refugee settings is regular transfers of cash, food or vouchers to support household consumption. Several studies evaluate the comparative performance of these different transfer modalities in alleviating poverty and food insecurity in refugee and other fragile settings (Aker 2017; Gilligan et al. 2014; Hidrobo et al. 2014). When measured against a pure control group receiving no transfers, the typical finding is that all types of modalities improve food security and food consumption indicating that consumption support helps. However, it remains uncertain whether small but consistent transfers are sufficient for helping households improve their current livelihoods or establish new ones for longer-term, sustainable impacts. This question is particularly relevant in light of the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (United Nations 2016), which encourages a shift from temporary relief towards fostering long-

[2] There is more research on the effect of cash transfers in post-conflict settings, see for example Blattman et al. (2014), Calderone (2017), and Blattman et al. (2020) focusing on Uganda and Marguerie and Premand (2023) focusing on Côte d'Ivoire.

term resilience and integration, recognizing that the majority of refugees find themselves in protracted situations rather than temporary ones.

The study by MacPherson and Sterck (2021) formally evaluates this new 'development model' that emphasizes self-reliance and integration in North-West Kenya, comparing it to the traditional 'humanitarian model' that focuses on providing temporary relief to refugees through consumption support. In May 2026, the UNHCR opened a new refugee settlement based on the development model, located less than 5 km from the old settlement that adhered to the humanitarian approach. The authors employ an innovative regression discontinuity design to assess the short-term effects of the development model in the new settlement. Households arriving before 13 May 2016, were assigned to the old camp, while those arriving after 14 May 2016, were directed to the new camp. Using representative household survey data collected from refugees in both settlements approximately 3-4 months after the cutoff, the authors compare average outcomes for refugees who arrived just before and after this date. The results of the regression discontinuity analysis indicate that refugees arriving shortly after the cutoff have better dietary diversity, calorie intake, and food security compared to those arriving just before. However, no significant effects were found regarding assets or non-food spending levels. Although refugees in Kalobeyei are more likely to engage in agricultural activities, the study found no impact on other income-generating activities.

Leight et al. (2024a) presents midline findings from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluating the *Building Pathways Out of Poverty for Ultra-poor IDPs and Vulnerable Host Communities in Baidoa* project—an ultra-poor graduation (UPG) intervention implemented by World Vision. The intervention began with unconditional cash transfers (roughly 100 $PPP per month) disbursed over six months to stabilize food security for ultra-poor households. Concurrently, savings groups were created or strengthened to promote saving habits and provide a foundation for skills transfer. The programme also supports income generation by providing vocational and financial training, along with start-up kits. Throughout, participants received coaching in social capital mobilization, financial literacy, and business development.

The study integrates multiple quantitative and qualitative surveys. The initial quantitative survey was conducted in June 2022, just before the intervention began. One year after this baseline, Leight et al. report that the UPG intervention significantly improved food security, enhanced self-reliance, and increased consumption among participants. During the midline assessment, the poverty headcount based on the $2.05 poverty line was 68.4 per cent for control households and 63.5 per cent for treated households, with the difference being highly statistically significant. The endline survey was carried out in September–October 2024, and results from two years post-baseline are anticipated soon. These findings will offer insights into the sustainability of these positive effects, particularly following the conclusion of the cash transfers approximately 18 months prior. They will also shed light on the effects on livelihood-related activities, such as employment and income from businesses.

In their preregistered study, Gupta et al. (2024) evaluate the welfare impacts of a substantial one-time, unconditional $1,000 USD (2,446 $PPP) cash transfer provided by GiveDirectly to 10,000 refugee households in Uganda, primarily comprising South Sudanese refugees. Refugees in this setting receive monthly food aid from the WFP, and this one-time transfer was in addition to that aid. The study employed a randomized phase-in design with both quantitative and qualitative research methods, in which half of the eligible households received the transfer immediately, and the remaining half received it 18 months later, allowing a rigorous comparison between the two groups. Conducted between late 2019 and early 2022, the study's primary outcomes included household consumption, assets, and business revenue (including own-farm agriculture).

After 19 months, treated households reported an 11 per cent increase in monthly consumption (equivalent to $92 USD PPP), a 60 per cent rise in self-reported asset values (largely from house and land ownership), and a 66 per cent increase in monthly business revenues (approximately $40.5 USD PPP). However, the study found no statistically significant effects for secondary outcomes like food security, education, employment, or female empowerment. Moreover, qualitative findings revealed no systematic negative impacts on social cohesion, security, or interactions between refugees and the host population.

4 Discussion

The review highlights the effectiveness of social assistance in protecting households during crises, while also emphasizing important nuances. The available evidence suggests that sufficiently large, predictable, and consistent transfers are crucial for improving resilience, something sporadic humanitarian aid is unlikely to provide. Recurring and predictable transfers allow households to plan their finances and accumulate assets as a buffer against future shocks. However, as Beegle et al. (2018) note, the benefit amounts in many African social assistance programmes remain low relative to needs, particularly in the poorest and most vulnerable countries. Consequently, social assistance programmes have not eliminated the need for emergency aid on the continent.

The issue may not always lie in the design of the programmes, such as optimal payment levels or frequencies, but in their implementation. Many government-implemented safety net programmes face challenges with timely transfers, resulting in unpredictable and irregular payments that undermine their effectiveness. For instance, quantitative evidence from Almeida et al. (2024) shows that long delays in payments in Mozambique's *Programa de Subsídio Social Básico* (social pension programme) negatively affected the resilience of vulnerable households. Similarly, in Ethiopia's PSNP, payment delays are a persistent problem, with qualitative evidence suggesting that uncertainty around payments forces households to sell assets, borrow money or food, rely on friends and relatives, or, in the worst cases, adjust food consumption (Hoddinott et al. 2024).

In Zambia, the government used the existing list of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries to expand the social cash transfer as a recent drought response measure. However, lack of financial resources and coordination between donors and government agencies led to a 6-month delay between the drought announcement and the implementation of the programme (Banda et al. 2024). These implementation challenges become even more pronounced during armed conflicts. In Ethiopia, for instance, the PSNP could not operate in conflict-affected areas during the recent civil war in the northern part of the country, but humanitarian assistance from NGOs and other non-state actors stepped in to fill the gap (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2024). Such examples underscore the complementary role that social assistance and humanitarian aid can play during crises (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2022).

Many African countries face significant challenges in creating the fiscal space needed to invest in social protection systems (ILO 2021), a problem that intensifies during crises. Qualitative interviews in Zambia (Banda et al. 2024) and Tanzania (Lambin et al. 2024) underscore this issue, revealing how reliance on external support and limited domestic resources often delay assistance to affected households. These delays underscore the importance of early interventions and resilience-building efforts, which available but limited evidence suggests are far more cost-effective than humanitarian responses, often associated with significant lags (Venton et al. 2012).

What happens when social assistance ends? Do households revert to their pre-transfer state, or does long-term support help them achieve a more resilient equilibrium? While the evidence remains limited, with many studies documenting short-term effects or effects during the period when transfers are still ongoing, recent meta-analyses of cash transfer programmes suggest that complementary interventions are necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) to sustain benefits (Kondylis and Loeser 2021; Leight et al. 2024b).

Cash-plus programmes, including graduation programmes, aim to achieve these goals. These interventions may promote savings behaviour, strengthen existing livelihoods, or help households diversify into new income streams (Banerjee et al. 2015). Evidence reviewed here from Ethiopia highlights the significant impact of a light-touch graduation programme in improving resilience in a drought-prone context (Hirvonen et al. 2023). Similarly, preliminary results from an ongoing trial in Somalia examining a tailored graduation programme for IDPs show highly promising outcomes (Leight et al. 2024a).

We conclude with a common plea for more research. Most studies and evaluations we review were not explicitly designed to assess the performance of social assistance programmes during crises. Instead, many of the studies reviewed here pivoted to examine protective effects during unforeseen crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or relied on secondary analyses of data from programme impact evaluations. There is an urgent need to design rigorous and long-term, prospective evaluations of social assistance programmes in fragile settings to better inform policymaking in this area.

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