BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

Policy Briefing

Issue 09 | September 2025

Social Assistance and Poverty Reduction Amidst Multiple Crises

BASIC Research in Borno, Nigeria, demonstrates that the provision of social assistance can help build the capacity to escape poverty, even in crises. Studies show that social assistance improves poor people's consumption levels, human capital formation and economic growth from below. Nigeria has the foundational pieces of social assistance in place (draft policy, programme, social registry) and could expand social assistance coverage rapidly to poor and vulnerable populations affected by polycrises. However, there is a lack of trust in social assistance and in government. Commitment to carrying out regular impact evaluations would improve this evidence base.

Andrew Shepherd
Institute of Development Studies

Vidya Diwakar
Institute of Development Studies

Judith-Ann Walker
development Research and Projects Center

Kareem Abdulrasaq
development Research and Projects Center

Michael Turnwait
development Research and Projects Center

Key messages

- Improving social assistance coordination and targeting through the 2021 Revised Draft National Social Protection Policy and National Social Registry are important first steps.
- Predictable finance and budget tracking is required with bigger transfers and a recovery element where people have lost assets due to multiple crises.
- A systematic evaluation of scaled-up social assistance programmes can build trust, guide decision-making, and secure stakeholder support.
- Social protection measures should incorporate climate adaptation, prioritise women's economic empowerment, and link cash transfers with savings and entrepreneurship to foster resilience.
- A communication plan on the benefits of social transfers and the validity of the social registry as a basis for targeting is urgently needed.

Polycrises prolong poverty and contribute to sustained impoverishment

Nigeria has grappled with a complex web of interconnected crises. The country experienced a persistent spread of conflict and insecurity, particularly in the northeastern states and the Middle Belt region, where climate change has exacerbated tensions between farmers and herders over dwindling resources. Simultaneously, Nigeria has faced severe climate-related disasters, including floods that affected millions of people and submerged vast areas of farmland, leading to significant agricultural losses. The Covid-19 pandemic further strained the economy, followed by the economic fallout from the Ukraine war in 2022, which triggered food and fertilizer price inflation. In 2023, the Nigerian government implemented the removal of fuel subsidies and the devaluation of the Naira. These measures, while aimed at economic reform, were implemented without adequate mitigating strategies in place, resulting in a sharp increase in the cost of living, soaring inflation rates, and a significant rise in food insecurity across the country.

The experience of an interviewee from rural Borno illustrates how these crises contribute to and sustain impoverishment (see Figure 1).

Social assistance as a tool for poverty reduction amidst polycrises in Nigeria

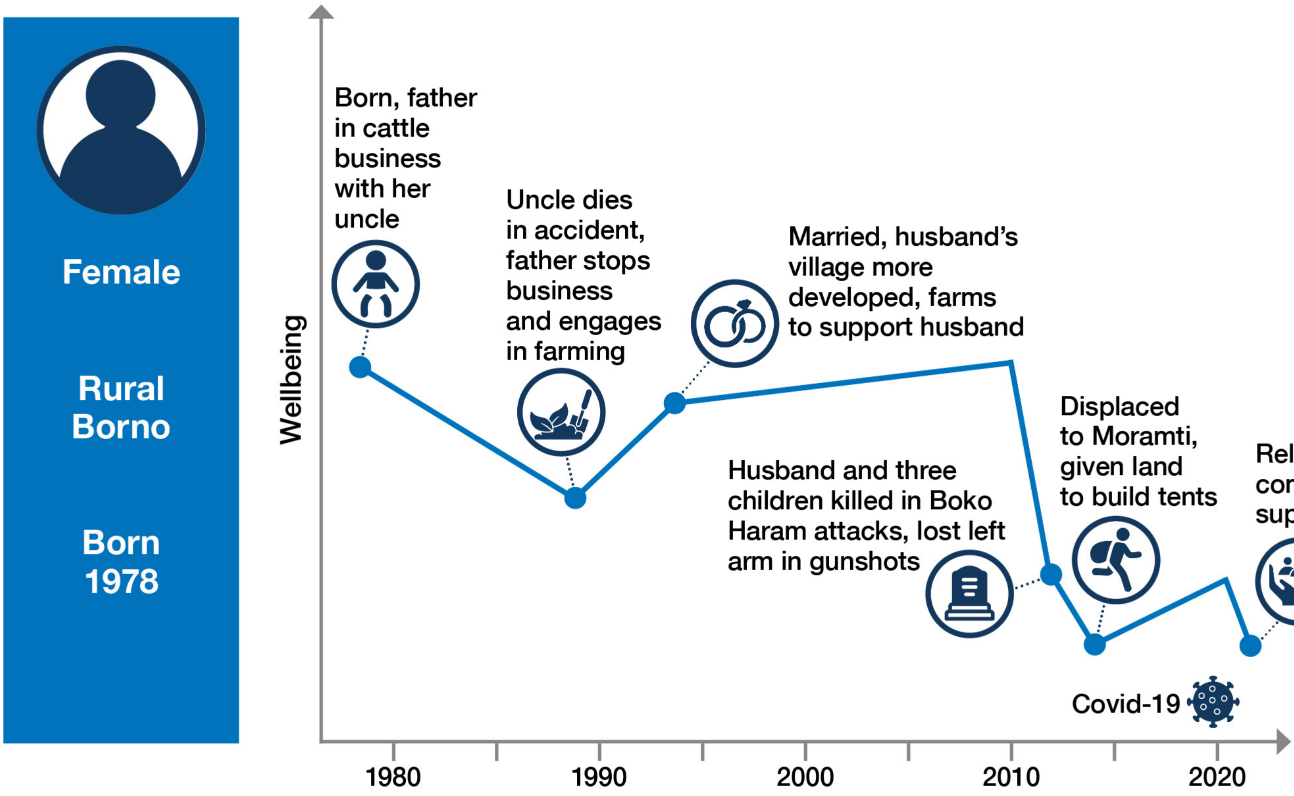
In Nigeria, social assistance interventions at both the federal and state levels of government are guided by key policy documents. At the federal level, the revised but still draft 2021 National Social Protection Policy serves as the primary framework, while some states have developed their own social protection policies. These policies address a wide range of social welfare concerns, including provisions for sickness and disability support, old age pensions, survivor benefits, family and child welfare programmes, unemployment assistance, housing support, and measures to combat social exclusion.

In line with international evidence on social assistance, the Nigerian government's investments in education and health have been pivotal to enhancing human capital, leading to increased productivity and economic growth, household consumption, and welfare, including in the aftermath of economic shocks like the Covid-19 pandemic. Social protection measures such as crop insurance programmes can also serve as key adaptation tools for poor, rural, and agricultural households, helping them build resilience against climate shocks. However, the effectiveness of such programmes in Nigeria faces challenges, including public mistrust of insurance schemes and the need for context-specific adaptations to local norms and practices.

The provision of social assistance in conflict-affected areas has also proved problematic and requires a radical rethink. Survey data from Borno in 2023 – an epicentre for violence – points to just one in 10 households receiving social assistance in the year preceding, despite high poverty levels and 43 per cent of households reporting disruptions due to conflict (in agriculture, asset destruction, or income loss). Despite weak coverage, households that received social assistance demonstrated a higher likelihood of engaging in cash crop cultivation, increasing their livestock holdings, making investments, and participating more frequently in food-sharing practices.

As qualitative interviews confirmed, social assistance programmes serve as a vital support mechanism for households, enabling them to pursue livelihood strategies amidst conflict and climate-related disasters. In Anambra and Benue, female-headed households (FHHs) receiving cash transfers use the money to ensure their children attend school and receive adequate training, while others direct the funds towards covering essential healthcare expenses for their children. In Akwa Ibom, Borno, Ekiti and Jigawa, FHHs invested the funds into small businesses, enabling them to expand their enterprises and achieve greater financial stability. Financial support also empowered women to navigate the socioeconomic and cultural challenges unique to their localities, fostering resilience and enhancing their ability to contribute positively to their communities.

Figure 1: Shocks and stressors emerging from and operating alongside intersecting crises



Ill health: *'While I was at the hospital for the amputation of my arm, there was no humanitarian or social assistance. Thanks God my husband was still alive. We hustle for the money to pay for my medication and bills.'*

Economic policy: *'I used to sell charcoal, but during the cashless policy people bought it on credit and have refused to pay.'*

Drought: *'My children also have no means to help me now because of the cessation of the rain this year. There are no farms to work on and even their own farm there is anticipation of low productivity.'*

Ill health: *'I am incapacitated. I survive on people's mercy. Last year, I was able to farm a little portion where I grew groundnut but this year (2023), I did not get land to farm on.'*

Social assistance: *'Sometimes I get palliatives from Save the Children which last me one month; foodstuffs like maize, eggs etc.'*

Source: Diwaker *et al.* (2025)

"Challenges to programme effectiveness include public mistrust of insurance schemes and the need for context-specific adaptations to local norms and practices."

Challenges in the current social assistance framework

The lack of a unified database for social assistance provision prevents effective targeting and distribution of aid. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government faced difficulties in identifying vulnerable populations, with some receiving multiple benefits and others none. The existing National Social Registry (NSR) does provide a viable foundation for expanding coverage, but the National Social Safety Nets Coordinating Office (NASSCO) needs to continue to improve, update and communicate its validity to achieve greater coverage.

Additionally, the lack of data integration hinders the government's ability to respond effectively to economic shocks and emerging challenges. When fuel subsidies were removed in 2023, the government struggled to implement targeted relief measures due to insufficient data on household energy consumption and income distribution. This data gap made it difficult to design and implement data-driven policies, compensatory measures like cash transfers, and adequate monitoring and evaluation systems, leaving many low-income Nigerians to face skyrocketing fuel prices and inflation with little or no support to address multiple shocks.

Moreover, though the federal government interacts with state governments that implement both the social registry and cash transfer programmes, there is still wide variation in perceived effectiveness with variations in the allocation of social assistance resources compared to the incidence of poverty across states. Evidence suggests that states with higher poverty rates do not always receive proportional allocations of resources.

States with formalised and well-defined social protection policies like Jigawa tend to exhibit deliberate and structured allocations, with programmes tailored to meet identified needs. However, in many states there is not a coherent social protection framework to ensure resources address targeted social needs such as poverty alleviation and support for vulnerable populations. For example, Akwa Ibom does not have a social protection policy, but it allocates expenditure as 'social protection'. Other state-level budgets include lines labelled broadly as 'social protection' without a detailed breakdown of the components or specific programmes included. This lack of transparency creates vulnerabilities, hinders coordination, and increases the risk of corruption at the state level.

There are also institutional challenges at the federal and state levels that inhibit leadership and coordination. In 2024, the government debated which federal ministry should have responsibility for social assistance and moved the coordination role to the Ministry of Finance, supported by a regular meeting of six other ministries. This followed the suspension of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation in 2023, which had previously been the lead ministry at the federal level. Where social assistance should sit continues to be debated among observers and stakeholders, although the Revised Draft National Social Protection Policy (2021) is clear that the responsibility should lie with the Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning. While the interim measures signal an effort to maintain functionality, they also raise questions about the long-term strategy for managing social assistance, and whether a new permanent lead ministry will emerge to take on this vital responsibility. Adding to the complexity of the situation, the National Assembly conducted a review of a Bill to transfer the management and implementation of the National Social Investment programmes (NSIPs) from the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation to the Presidency, which carries significant implications.

> **"Social assistance programmes serve as a vital support mechanism for households, enabling them to pursue livelihood strategies amidst conflict and climate-related disasters."**

Policy recommendations

In view of the current polycrisis and the limited defences of vulnerable people, there is an urgent need to scale up coverage of social assistance as rapidly as possible, as has been achieved in other countries such as Zambia or Pakistan. This should entail the following priority measures:

Short-term measures

- Government led by the Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning (MFBNP) to review the Revised Draft National Social Protection Policy to address the intensified challenges of the polycrisis era. Given the change in government, there is an opportunity to recalibrate the policy to align with current realities, leveraging advocacy from civil society organisations (CSO) and thinktanks to encourage the MFBNP to adopt and operationalise the policy.
- There is a need for coordination among the different schemes to ensure coverage, gap-filling, and efficiency. The appointment of the MFBNP to coordinate social assistance may help achieve stronger financial flows from the government. After a defined period of time, the performance of the current coordination mechanism can be reviewed, and corrections made if necessary.
- The requirement for beneficiaries to have a National Identity Number (NIN) and a Bank Verification Number (BVN) needs to be waived in areas/for individuals not covered by these identification services, though acquiring them could be a condition for continued receipt of transfers beyond a certain number. This will help expand access. This could be an output of agreeing a final social protection strategy.
- Social assistance in conflict areas needs a radical rethink. Traditional risk-focused approaches, which assume predictability and stability, are often inadequate in settings of persistent crisis and conflict. Instead, approaches need to be flexible and built on practices of moral economy, collective action, and mutual care, supported by professional and institutional capacities that generate reliability. Development partners and the government need to take such principles on board.
- To counter misinformation and enhance public understanding, strong communication about the social registry's purpose, functionality, and operations is essential. It is important that the MFBNP and other ministries promoting and co-ordinating social protection all project a consistent message to the media and public.

Medium-term measures

- Secure regular, predictable, multi-year financing, with federal and state resources progressively replacing donor funds. This may be easier to achieve with the MFBNP playing the lead coordinating role and managing the Humanitarian and Poverty Alleviation Trust Fund.
- For transparency and equity, government and development partners should support a social accountability and budget tracking mechanism, such as the National Social Protection Forum (NSPF). CSOs should play a vital role in monitoring and tracking budgets to ensure that allocated funds are effectively utilised to benefit vulnerable populations.
- The government could revisit social transfer design to include the size of the regular transfer during high levels of food insecurity. In the face of multiple crises, build recovery programming for poor people to enable asset recovery. This is vital in the resettlement of internally displaced persons, but also more generally where significant loss of assets has occurred.
- To build trust and justify spend, support independent impact evaluations of the various scaled-up social assistance schemes currently being provided.

Longer-term measures

- Expand the Cash-Plus model to enhance impact by linking cash transfers with complementary interventions such as life skills training, savings group mobilisation, and micro-business development to foster self-reliance and economic resilience among beneficiaries.

- Pilot and evaluate the effectiveness of Cash-Plus interventions under diverse conditions across Nigeria's states. Impact evaluations should focus on both immediate and long-term outcomes to guide the scaling of successful models and ensure resources are invested in the most impactful strategies. Ministries and development partners can all contribute to this.
- Include in the Cash-Plus interventions programmes that specifically support women's access to credit, entrepreneurship training, and skills development. Empowering women economically can have cascading benefits for household wellbeing, community development, and overall poverty reduction. This would be for the Ministry of Women Affairs to co-ordinate with social assistance providers.
- Connect cash transfers with agricultural support initiatives like input subsidies, crop insurance, and access to markets to enhance rural livelihoods, address food insecurity, and create sustainable pathways out of poverty for farming communities. This would be for the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security and related agencies, which should explore linking up with the providers of social assistance.

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

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

Further reading

Diwakar, V. *et al.* (2025) *Poverty Dynamics and Social Assistance Amidst Intersecting Crises in Nigeria*, BASIC Research Working Paper 35, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2025.004

Diwakar, V. *et al.* (2024) *Social Assistance and Coping with Crises in Borno, Nigeria*, BASIC Research Working Paper 31, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2024.019

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2021) *Revised Draft National Social Protection Policy*, Abuja: Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget, and National Planning

Abdulrasaq, K.; Walker, J.A.; Upaki, S. and Diwakar, V. (forthcoming) 'Social Assistance for Households Negatively Affected by Economic Shocks', *BASIC Research Research Briefing*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

This Policy Briefing was written by **Andrew Shepherd**, **Vidya Diwakar**, **Judith-Ann Walker**, **Kareem Abdulrasaq** and **Michael Turnwait**. It is based on research conducted by the authors listed above, as well as research group discussions with the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). It was developed by the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme. BASIC is implemented by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and funded by UK International Development from the UK government. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2025.017

institute of development studies | Chronic Poverty Advisory Network | DRPC Facilitating Inclusive Development | deep DATA & EVIDENCE TO END EXTREME POVERTY | UK International Development Partnership | Progress | Prosperity