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**Annual Report
Government of Germany**

***Responding to COVID-19 through
Social Protection Systems in the Sahel***

**UNICEF and WFP
1 August 2020 – 31 July 2021**

Project Summary

Countries	Mali, Mauritania, Niger
Project Title	Responding to COVID-19 through Social Protection Systems in the Sahel
Total Grant Amount (EUR)	€54 million (€27m UNICEF / €27m WFP)
Grant duration	18 months: 1 August 2020 - 31 January 2022
Type of report	Annual progress report
Reporting period	August 2020 – July 2021

Executive Summary

This jointly implemented project supports the Governments of Mali, Mauritania and Niger to provide critical social assistance to populations affected by the impact of COVID-19 in the short and medium term, while strengthening national social protection systems in the medium to long term. In these countries, social protection systems are embryonic and stretched. Through the project, 'Responding to COVID-19 through Social Protection Systems in the Sahel', UNICEF and WFP are providing immediate support for countries to respond to needs generated by the pandemic, as well as helping to strengthen overall national capacities to adapt and build more shock-responsive, nutrition- and child-sensitive social protection systems moving forward.

The first year of implementation (from August 2020 to July 2021) took place against a backdrop of multiple shocks in the three project countries. The COVID-19's socio-economic impacts combined with other shocks linked to conflict, insecurity or climate, such as floods and droughts, exacerbate the region's already widespread vulnerability. This has impacted project implementation and reinforced the need for social protection support measures as well as robust shock-responsive social protection systems and programmes.

Under Outcome 1, this project will deliver essential cash transfers to 1.8 million vulnerable people affected by the socio-economic fallout of COVID-19. Our focus on cash transfers reflects the urgent need to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 among new and existing vulnerable groups. Access to cash supplements incomes, which have been affected by reduced productive and economic opportunities as a result of COVID-19 and pre-existing vulnerabilities. In this project, cash transfers facilitate the purchase of food items and help ensure diet diversity, including for children. At the same time, they also help to overcome financial barriers to use essential services including health treatment when necessary.

The joint project delivers cash transfers through a twin-track approach. As far as possible, the project works through government social protection

This project has a duration of 18 months (1 August 2020 – 31 January 2022) and is structured around three key outcomes:

1. **Delivery.** Affected populations receive cash transfers and access complementary services to absorb the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, as part of national COVID-19 response plans.
2. **System Strengthening.** National social protection systems are strengthened to become more shock-responsive, nutrition-sensitive and child-sensitive.
3. **Knowledge, evidence and learning.** Knowledge and evidence are generated from the project to inform social protection engagement that is shock-responsive and sensitive to nutrition and child protection concerns in the implementing countries, and fragile contexts more generally.

programmes to deliver essential support (track 1). Where national capacities are saturated, cash transfers are delivered directly, in alignment with national social protection response plans (track 2).

Cash distributions supported by the joint project reached a total of 161,310 vulnerable households by 31 July 2021 (out of 268,844 targeted households), through a combination of track 1 and track 2 approaches, helping to alleviate COVID-19's socio-economic impact. This direct cash delivery, reaching almost 1.2 million people, generated significant learning on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges for government-led responses to shocks. This learning informs more focused support to the systems strengthening component of the joint project. Across tracks 1 and 2 the jointly implemented project faced challenges that relate to political and institutional uncertainty, insecurity, as well as to social protection systems such as with the use, expansion, and updates of social registries. In the three project countries, it was necessary to conduct significant additional data collection to update the social registries prior to disbursing cash. Both agencies continue to take stock and document lessons learned for discussion with government partners. This will inform subsequent phases of cash distribution.

As of 31 July, 37,531 households had been reached with track 1 transfers across the project countries. The track 1 approach, delivering cash through national systems, maximises the opportunities for systems strengthening and enables capacity building of government counterparts alongside large scale cash transfers. However, working through national systems makes track 1 transfers more vulnerable to certain risks. During the first six months of the project, elections, political transition, and insecurity affected track 1 cash transfers in Mali and Niger as government capacities were stretched while dealing with multiple crises, and slow administrative procedures compounded this effect. In addition, delivery via track 1 requires prior updating of social registries to enable targeting of the households in greatest need, necessitating significant additional data collection prior to disbursing cash through national social protection systems. To adapt to these challenges, the timelines for track 1 transfers were adjusted to strengthen national systems whilst ensuring the cash transfers reach those in greatest need. By early 2021, preparatory activities for track 1 distributions were completed in the three countries, and the majority of track 1 cash transfers took place in line with the revised timeline laid out in the semi-annual report.

Under track 2, WFP has delivered cash transfers to 123,779 households by 31 July 2021. The track 2 approach has supported cash transfers in alignment with governments' social protection response plans in areas where government capacities are constrained. According to the results from a post-distribution monitoring (PDM) exercise amongst 503 households, 91 per cent of surveyed beneficiaries acknowledged that the cash transfers had positive effects in responding to their immediate shocks in Niger, while food consumption has significantly improved among beneficiaries between 2020 and 2021 in Mauritania. Meanwhile, several innovative precautionary measures, such as modification of the frequency of distribution cycles, were undertaken to minimise beneficiaries' exposure to COVID-19 during distribution. Generally, track 2 transfers have been delivered in line with the project timeframe whilst ensuring that the joint project works closely with governments and other relevant actors to avoid duplication, ensure harmonised targeting procedures and transfer values, and support expansion of social registries, as much possible.

Complementary services have been provided alongside cash transfers, to maximise their impact on nutrition, ensure child protection and promote economic recovery. Services include nutrition sensitisation, awareness-raising on key family practices, gender-sensitive life skills activities and psychosocial support. These complementary services aim to ensure that cash transfers have a sustained impact on the vulnerable groups

reached, and to strengthen cross-sectoral linkages as part of national social protection systems. Preparations for these services included identification of implementing partners, elaboration of social behaviour change communication activities, and revision of national guidelines and manuals for nutrition and social protection interventions. During the reporting period, preparations were also made to support income generating activities for project beneficiaries during the next phase of project implementation. In addition, COVID-19 prevention communication tools and guidelines were developed and applied during cash distributions to ensure compliance with COVID-19 preventative measures.

At the same time as providing immediate assistance, the joint project, under Outcome 2, is supporting national systems to become more shock-responsive, nutrition- and child-sensitive. The expansion of cash transfers, as part of the COVID-19 response, has provided a unique opportunity to strengthen the building blocks of national shock-responsive social protection systems: early warning, emergency preparedness and planning, targeting and registration, coordination, delivery mechanisms, financing, linkages and referrals to complementary services, and the evidence base to inform programming. The systems approach is also helping to strengthen linkages and referral pathways between social protection and the fields of nutrition and child protection.

In each of the project countries, both agencies' efforts during the COVID-19 response have served to enhance collaboration between the governments and all major actors involved in social protection. During the reporting period, both agencies have provided technical assistance to support expansion of the social registry, strengthen national capacities, develop harmonized standards and operationalize government roles and capacities to coordinate social protection interventions related to food security, nutrition and child protection. For instance, lessons learned workshops were held with government partners and other actors after cash distributions in order to share feedback on experiences and revise relevant modalities that improve the shock responsiveness of the social protection systems. The technical assistance is improving the enabling environment to scale-up the national social protection systems to assist additional beneficiaries affected by COVID-19 and will also help to establish sustained coverage expansion and enhanced ability to address recurrent shocks in the medium- to long-run.

Cash transfer and systems strengthening activities are providing opportunities for learning and documenting lessons, under Outcome 3. Evidence generating activities undertaken at national and regional levels have become the subject of technical discussions and learning dissemination activities, as planned. During the reporting period, the joint project's mid-term review was carried out to evaluate the project's progress, effectiveness and results to date. Learnings from the review have helped to shape the systems strengthening activities for the remainder of the project and enabled modification and addition of activities based on changes in context and emerging needs. Moreover, working sessions were held at regional level with project teams and other countries in order to facilitate sharing and replication of best practices when building social protection systems across the Sahel and beyond.