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LEARNING NOTE:

Shock-Responsive Safety Net (SRSN) Workstream

01
Introduction

Through its Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), Ethiopia operates one of the largest social protection systems in Africa, providing core transfers to 7.9 million people while scaling up food and cash assistance to an average of 3.8 million people annually. This Shock-Responsive Safety Net (SRSN) is delivered through two separate systems: the PSNP and humanitarian food assistance (HFA). The government's long-term vision is to combine them in a single humanitarian response system that is capable of expanding both horizontally and vertically, providing a timely response to shocks as part of the broader national disaster risk management (DRM) system.

The Building Resilience in Ethiopia – Technical Assistance Programme's (BRE-TA) SRSN workstream has supported the development of the SRSN component of the PSNP since October 2019 by working for the Food Security Coordination Office (FSCO) in the Ministry of Agriculture. Since the start of implementation, BRE-TA's aim was to help the FSCO and its stakeholders identify and understand the needs and requirements for building a unified SRSN and then strengthen their capacity to implement it.

SRSN workstream: Summary of overall lessons learnt

1 **Getting started was much slower than anticipated.** It took time for BRE-TA's approach, flexible and demand-led Technical Assistance, to be understood and a scope of work agreed by FSCO and donors to PSNP.

2 **The importance of establishing trust and credibility.** Crucial to getting started was building rapport with counterparts in FSCO who quickly saw the SRSN workstream as a trusted and useful partner.

3 **The importance of flexible and responsive support.** Government requirements necessarily change with the ebb and flow of national and international events and BRE-TA had the flexibility to respond with the right kind of support at the right time. BRE-TA therefore remained useful as a trusted partner during a long and complex ('stop-start') process of implementing a new reform (the SRSN).

4 **Significant value in working simultaneously at both federal and regional levels in preparing the new component of PSNP.** Different regional structures and capacities pose a major challenge to the consistent roll-out of a new (national) programme. Through its embedded advisors at both levels, the SRSN workstream was able to ensure that, as far as possible, policies and procedures developed and agreed at federal level were consistently implemented at regional and sub-regional levels – and that implementation challenges were fed back to the federal level and changes made.

5 **Pay attention to the political economy of reform.** Formal coordination mechanisms at federal and regional levels were needed to deliver on the workstream's objectives and setting up the SRSN Sub-Technical Committees and prior to this a Technical Working Group (TWG) under the FSCO helped.

6 **Ensure alignment with government plans and schedules.** Crucial to the workstream's success was regular participation in government TWGs and committees. This ensured workstream activities were formally incorporated in government and development partner joint workplans, providing a formal mandate for all BRE-TA activities and outputs.

02
Workstream approach

The SRSN workstream's theory of change (ToC) was developed around three building blocks to help achieve SRSN reform: **strengthening SRSN delivery systems and procedures; ensuring predictable and adequate resources for SRSN; and strengthening information systems so that timely information guides SRSN operations.**

Underpinning all these was an initial set of assessments and studies on SRSN policy and practice commissioned by the government, and undertaken by BRE-TA, in order to understand the context and landscape into which the new component (SRSN) of PSNP was entering. This stage was crucial in, first, building a shared understanding with the federal and regional governments of the challenges ahead in implementing the SRSN and the relative priorities for addressing them and, second, in informing subsequent activity plans.

The key studies for government comprised: An assessment of PSNP and HFA **systems and structures**; Assessment of PSNP and HFA **targeting practices and constraints;** Assessment of **the federal contingency budget** practices and constraints; Study to identify **commodity management** constraints and challenges; Study on strengthening social protection through better **knowledge management**; Study to understand and improve **the relationship between nutrition and scalable safety nets** in Ethiopia[1]; Study **to quantify annual government financial commitments** required for SRSN; and rapid **Gender and Social Development Assessment** of PSNP's Grievance Redress Mechanism.

The findings of some of these early assessments were brought together in a short policy brief for high-level decision makers. At the same time, a lengthy consultation process with government and donors to the PSNP sought to build understanding about the nature and design of the proposed SRSN. This work culminated in a federal-level workshop in August 2021 that was intended to familiarise stakeholders with the concepts and principles of the SRSN and gain agreement vis-à-vis the tasks and challenges ahead.

The SRSN workstream collaborated with the other BRE-TA workstreams on issues of common concern, together contributing to the programme's overall objective: **'the Government of Ethiopia to lead and deliver an effective, more self-financed and accountable response to climate and humanitarian shocks'.** Collaboration across the four BRE-TA workstreams was important as many SRSN service delivery functions are reliant on progress made by other government services. Because BRE-TA worked on many of these complementary areas at the same time, it is unlikely that the support to developing the new SRSN component of PSNP could have proceeded as far without this complementary support.

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1.   See www.opml.co.uk/files/Publications/a2422-building-resilience-ethiopia/nutrition-and-scalable-safety-nets-in-ethiopia-desk-review.pdf?noredirect=1 and www.opml.co.uk/files/Publications/a2422-building-resilience-ethiopia/nutrition-and-scalable-safety-nets-in-ethiopia.pdf?noredirect=1

Examples of cross-workstream collaboration included:

DRM:
pooling resources on the development of the SRSN dashboard and linking it to the improvements made to the early warning system managed by the Ethiopia Disaster Risk Management Commission (EDRMC).

Disaster Risk Finance:
ensuring that the Ministry of Agriculture's need for financing the SRSN (coalesced around the idea of a drought risk financing strategy) aligned with the broader Ministry of Finance-led Disaster Risk Financing Strategy, which together needed to accord with the new DRM Policy and Legal Framework developed by EDRMC.

Public Health Emergency Management:
collaborating on a nutrition scoping study and a nutrition and social protection assessment that provided recommendations for enhancing the PSNP's contribution to managing malnutrition.

The collaboration also extended to the regional level through the SRSN workstream's embedded technical advisors (Amhara, Oromia, Somali, SNNPR, and Tigray, although the latter had to be withdrawn in 2022). They played a leading role in enabling and facilitating coordination within and between the FSCO and other government and non-government agencies, for example by leading and participating in numerous technical committees, technical sub-committees, and TWGs, and engaging in monitoring processes and missions.

03
Lessons learned

1. The nature of BRE-TA's aid modality required extensive discussion and agreement with the government, which slowed implementation. BRE-TA did not come with a fixed offer and workplan but rather extended a flexible and demand-led package of support. The benefits of this were not immediately clear to either the federal or regional governments (particularly the Technical Assistance only approach). Prolonged discussion between the BRE-TA team and the government was required, illustrated by the fact that the SRSN workstream was not fully established until January 2020, nearly a year after the contract was awarded in March 2019.

2. The importance of establishing trust and credibility. Crucial to overcoming the above hurdle was the rapport built by the BRE-TA advisors with their counterparts, so that, quite quickly, the FSCO began to see the SRSN workstream as a trusted partner. Public sector reforms concern issues of national sovereignty, and BRE-TA's success was predicated on government ownership of each initiative. Building this trust and credibility took time, and crucial to it were the following three factors:

   SRSN workstream staff demonstrated their added value through high levels of technical

competence and professional integrity. These staff included the workstream lead, embedded federal and regional Technical Advisors, social protection advisors, and other national and international expertise drafted in for specific purposes.

All key positions in the workstream were held by Ethiopian nationals who shared cultural capital and experience with their government counterparts. This was a significant factor in establishing trust and maintaining a productive relationship.

The first year of implementation focused on providing applied policy research and practical insights into the challenges of implementing the SRSN and was a critical time in building consensus on what needed to be done.

3. The importance of flexible and responsive support. Government requirements necessarily change with the ebb and flow of national and international events. BRE-TA had the flexibility to respond with the right kind of support at the right time. It therefore maintained its position as a credible and trusted partner during a long and complex ('stop-start') process of implementing a new reform (the SRSN).

4. There was significant value in working simultaneously at both federal and regional levels. Different regional structures and capacities pose a major challenge to rolling out a new (national) programme in a consistent way. Through its embedded advisors at both levels, the

SRSN workstream was able to ensure that, as far as possible, policies and procedures developed and agreed at federal level were consistently implemented at regional and sub-regional levels. The regional advisors were able to share their detailed understanding of SRSN requirements and processes with their local government counterparts and also engage on their behalf with federal officials in feeding back up to them policy implementation challenges. This multi-tier structure of support enabled BRE-TA to coordinate actors, activities, and responses across levels, thereby ensuring consistency and inclusivity among stakeholders.

5. Pay attention to the political economy of collaboration and coordination. Formal coordination mechanisms at federal and regional levels were needed to deliver on the workstream's objectives. These ultimately took the form of SRSN Sub-Technical Committees, but prior to this BRE-TA helped set up a TWG under the FSCO that provided a quarterly forum for SRSN actors in government to discuss and agree BRE-TA support and incorporate this in the FSCO's annual workplan. In a crowded implementation context, this helped ensure the alignment of BRE-TA activities with other technical support and facilitated joint work planning.

Alongside the TWG, the workstream established an informal weekly meeting with its key donor counterparts (chiefly the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the World Bank, and the US Agency for International Development). This provided a forum where political and technical challenges – as well as institutional tensions or complementarities – could be freely debated and discussed. It helped ensure some level of agreement between

development partners before discussions moved to the formal coordination structures.

Institutional tensions are inevitable and can stem from the different but overlapping agendas of government, humanitarian actors, and development partners. In particular, in relation to the SRSN, they arose due to the differing operational cultures, strategic objectives, and principles underpinning emergency response and routine social protection. BRE-TA was often caught in the crosscurrents of these tensions and consequently had to take extra pains to remain neutral as far as possible while retaining the trust of all stakeholders and avoiding being seen as a 'power-broker'. To achieve this end, BRE-TA sought to bring independent evidence-based policy insights and solutions and avoid being caught between conflicting institutions. One key approach was helping establish formal and informal coordination mechanisms to review and advise on the applied policy research. Evidence was brought for review and implications for policy and practice communicated effectively, such that all relevant stakeholders could understand the constraints and options in front of them and thus reach agreement on how to move forward on key issues. Much of BRE-TA's efforts therefore revolved around facilitating this kind of consultation process across stakeholders, including in the form of bespoke workshops to present and collectively interrogate the evidence base for proposed actions.

6. Ensure alignment with government plans and schedules. Crucial to the workstream's success was the regular participation of embedded advisors in government TWGs and committees. This helped ensure that workstream activities were formally incorporated in government and development partner joint workplans, thus ensuring a formal mandate for all BRE-TA activities and outputs. An additional contributing factor was the deliberate alignment of BRE-TA activities with the fiscal year and implementation plans of government, which facilitated the integration of activities in the Ministry of Agriculture's annual workplan and their consequent visibility.

Challenges

External shocks

Several serious shocks affected Ethiopia and BRE-TA delivery during the life of the programme. These included COVID-19, conflict in the north, drought, a global cost-of-living crisis, and an aid diversion scandal. These crises caused significant economic hardship, exacerbated political tensions, and put huge strain on government capacity. The SRSN workstream had to navigate an already complex and multifaceted PSNP delivery agenda amidst these conditions, which produced an even more unstable operating environment for the fledgling SRSN. This evolving situation of 'building the plane while flying it' meant that some of the assumptions underpinning the ToC were not upheld, for example around the stalled consolidation of the HFA and SRSN and donor funding commitments.

Financing gap

The shocks and crises led to a major financing gap for the PSNP and SRSN – a 'double-whammy' of a heightened level of need set against reduced resources to meet that need. This affected the allocation of both government and development partner budgets to components vital to establishing the SRSN. The depth and coverage of the programme had to change, as did planned activities. For example, the PSNP capacity development budget was reduced, requiring BRE-TA to step in and fund the roll-out of training from federal to woreda levels.

When external finance for the SRSN did not materialise to the extent planned, it meant that the only resources available were from PSNP5's additional financing for shock response. Part of the SRSN budget also had to be moved to the core PSNP. Thus, it was not possible to implement all SRSN activities and continue building and refining the system to the extent envisaged.

Government restructuring

The FSCO underwent a restructuring process which saw it change from a directorate to an office and reporting directly to the minister. This increased its status and autonomy, but also complicated the vision of building a consolidated shock-response structure with HFA. In the event, the institutional consolidation did not materialise and the government agreed to a two-stage process of harmonisation and consolidation. There is still a risk that processes and structures may change further. Nevertheless, agreement on the two-stage process enabled BRE-TA to continue providing technical support to the first stage (standardising service delivery systems and processes and establishing necessary coordination structures), leaving the decision on political consolidation to a future date. Further technical support will likely be required if/when a decision regarding stage two of the institutional consolidation occurs.

The restructuring and expansion in the number of regions also affected the SRSN workstream, leading to changes in institutions, individuals, and their location.

Time is needed for staff to settle and become effective in the new structures. Until the structures have bedded down, the federal government will not be able to transfer resources to implement the SRSN.

The restructuring at federal and regional levels also eroded capacities that BRE-TA had built within counterpart organisations, which then required refresher training. The fact that the workstream has developed training materials and other guidance that are available to all regions means that future training and capacity-building efforts can start from a much higher base. Still, coordinated efforts are required to expand operations to the new regions and streamline response based on EDRMC policy.

Pace of reform.

The combination of the challenges above meant that the pace of implementing this new reform moved very slowly. There was a constant tension between wanting to proceed swiftly during rare windows of opportunity and not getting ahead of the government or donors. A related challenge was that, although the government assigned various focal points to oversee the progress of SRSN workstream activities, the various strains on government capacity meant they were not always available (and in some cases had not been assigned). This had a major impact on the pace of reform and on the sustainability of BRE-TA's efforts as, since there was not always effective shadowing of advisors by government staff, opportunities to transfer knowledge and skills were missed.

Other sustainability considerations.

Institutional and organisational reform is a long and dynamic process with many complexities. A number of areas remain where continued support to the SRSN agenda would be beneficial. They include continuing to strengthen harmonised systems and processes, securing further institutional consolidation, and completing the capacity-building exercises already started.

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