

Key COVID-19 Lessons and Recommendations for Working Towards Universal Social Protection

SPIAC-B Joint Statement, October 2021

COVID-19 reconfirmed the urgent need for universal social protection^{1,2}

The COVID-19 pandemic and its socioeconomic impact has rapidly eroded progress made over the past decades on the Millennium Development Goals and Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development: poverty and hunger are on the rise again and inequalities are worsening. In 2020, an equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost, equivalent to a loss four times greater than the loss incurred during the global financial crisis in 2009 (ILO 2021b). Approximately 120 million people were pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 alone (Lakner et al. 2020) and the number of children living in multidimensional poverty is projected to have soared to approximately 1.2 billion in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 (Save the Children and UNICEF 2020). Overall, the pandemic has magnified pre-existing inequalities, marginalisation, and structural challenges, both across and within countries, and concerning resource mobilization as well as resource allocation.

While almost all countries expanded their social protection programmes and systems to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in unprecedented ways, the pandemic has also put into sharp relief gaps in social protection and provided important pointers on how to move forward to achieve universal social protection. Between 20 March 2020 and 14 May 2021, 222 countries or territories had planned or implemented 3,333 social protection measures (Gentilini et al. 2021), rapidly extending social protection coverage in hitherto unseen dimensions and often innovative ways. Despite these impressive efforts, these temporary measures were still by far not enough to protect all affected populations in comprehensive and adequate ways and in a timely manner. In the context of the COVID-19 response, only 23% of social protection responses were gender-sensitive (UN WOMEN 2020).

Key points

1. Social protection systems are indispensable to overcoming the worst consequences of the global pandemic and to be prepared for future shocks.
2. Yet, the COVID pandemic has exposed significant gaps in access to and coverage provided by social protection systems
3. Effective extension of social protection to all requires attention to the special needs and the realities of previously excluded groups, especially those facing long-term and structural inequalities
4. Financing gaps to guarantee adequate social protection need to be closed through domestic resource mobilization and, where necessary, international support
5. Delivering social protection requires innovative approaches and the participation of all relevant stakeholders in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social protection systems.

Despite the crisis of care services that has become all the more visible, social protection COVID-19 response measures designed to support families for child-raising have been extremely limited, amounting to only around 2 per cent of high-income countries' expenditure in response to COVID-19. In addition, even before the crisis, only 27.8 per cent of persons with severe disabilities worldwide receive a disability benefit and only 9% of social protection measures announced in response to COVID19 specifically referred to persons with disabilities. The COVID-19 crisis has thereby demonstrated that the world is not sufficiently prepared to respond to major crises today or in the future, including conflicts in many parts of the world and the all-encompassing climate crisis. It is now time to take stock of the first emerging lessons and to use them to accelerate the progressive realization of universal social protection.

¹ Social Protection is defined as the set of policies and programs aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability, social exclusion throughout their lifecycles, placing a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups. Social protection can be provided in cash or in-kind; through non-contributory schemes, such as providing universal, categorical, or poverty-targeted benefits such as social assistance; contributory schemes (commonly social insurance), and by building human capital, productive assets, and access to jobs.

² A summary of experiences and lessons learnt from COVID-19 for the extension of social protection is available in the SPIAC-B COVID-19 working group paper on COVID-19 and social protection: Impacts, lessons learned and recommendations to build forward better towards universal social protection.

The crisis has elevated public and political awareness of the importance of social protection as an indispensable public health response as well as a measure for stabilizing household incomes and responding to crises. Social protection has been recognized as a critical part of a coordinated policy response to the pandemic and an effective tool to address the impacts of increasing social and economic inequalities. The crisis has shown the importance of ensuring that social protection and adequate health care are available and accessible to all in a reliable and predictable manner, in order to contend with extraordinary shocks as well as for navigating life-cycle challenges. In particular, social insurance, including sickness and unemployment schemes, as well as rights-based social assistance served as immediate automatic, or readily adaptable, crisis response measures. At the international level, the momentum of a broad political consensus which has formed around the need for extending social protection to all is reflected in the [United Nations \(UN\) framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19](#), and in the [UN Secretary General's Our Common Agenda](#) and proposed [Global Accelerator for Jobs and Social Protection](#) which now need to be taken forward to make sure that social protection remains a key priority to ensure a sustainable and inclusive recovery. A more equitable access to vaccines will be crucial for this. While some high-income countries, in light of their relatively high vaccination rates and declining infection rates, have already been cautiously planning their return to a "new normal", many countries have not been able to secure a significant provision of vaccines and do not yet see the light at the end of the tunnel. The international community thus risks failing dramatically on its promise to leave no one behind.

The crises reinforced the trend of strengthened interest in universal social protection. The shortcomings of reacting ex-post to crises and of resorting to limited safety nets that leave pronounced coverage gaps, especially as regards the "forgotten majority" of people not covered by either social assistance or social insurance, have been starkly revealed by the crisis. However, achieving universal social protection is challenging in the short term and countries face difficult decisions on how to proceed to progressively extend social protection, both in terms of groups covered, the comprehensiveness of protection, the adequacy of benefit levels, their periodicity, and duration. It is therefore important to put in place robust social protection systems that progressively extend comprehensive and adequate social protection to the entire population in a sustainable manner both to manage individual life

cycle risks and to be prepared for co-variate shocks.

Universal social protection addresses four dimensions: coverage of the entire population, protection against a comprehensive range of risks, adequate benefit levels and sustainable financing. (ILC2021) The crisis has stressed the urgency of reinforcing national social protection systems, including floors, to deliver on all three dimensions through appropriate legal frameworks, sustainable and equitable financing mechanisms, effective and inclusive administrative systems, and transparent and accountable governance. Such efforts will also be critical for countries in preparing for and responding to future crises. COVID-19 has demonstrated the necessity to ensure, at a minimum: effective access to affordable and quality healthcare and income security across the life cycle, including child benefits and family entitlements, unemployment and maternity protection, sickness benefits, income security and support services for people with disabilities and for people in old age.

Design and implementation lessons³

For social protection to fulfil its role as a powerful economic and social stabilizer and to enable countries to respond to future crises, it is imperative for governments to move from emergency stop-gap responses to sustainable social protection systems, in line with human rights and international labour standards. As successful and innovative as some social protection responses to COVID-19 were, they often fell short of fully meeting needs. Responses typically consisted in one-time payments or short-term support: the average period over which benefits were paid was 3 months. Also, the response was slow in many cases. On average, countries took 83 days to pay beneficiaries from the day the first set of "stay at home" restrictions were implemented (Beazley et al. 2021), when households likely had already started adopting negative coping strategies.

Countries with universal social protection systems in place are better equipped to face shocks and crises. The pandemic is another testimony to the fact that countries that have comprehensive social protection systems covering the entire population with adequate benefits and services are better placed to respond to crises. On the one hand, large proportions of their population are already 'protected', with the option of increasing benefit levels to cater to increased needs. On the other hand, these countries have a stronger 'toolbox' of social protection schemes to leverage and

³ A summary of experiences and lessons learnt from COVID-19 for the delivery of social protection is available in the SPIAC-B COVID-19 working group paper on Delivering social protection in times of COVID-19 – Considerations regarding outreach, registration, selection and payments.

adapt. During COVID-19, where systems were in place, emergency responses could be delivered to a larger number of people and at greater speed, emphasising the case for investing in systems ex ante rather than taking ad-hoc action at the onset of a shock or crisis.

Unless social protection systems are explicitly designed in line with the specific needs and realities of vulnerable and excluded groups, they will not reach those most in need and will re-produce existing patterns of exclusion and inequalities. Many groups had been facing structural disadvantages, discrimination and exclusion before the pandemic, and equally risked not being reached by the response measures or economic recovery effects, including women, children, people with disabilities, older persons, indigenous people, ethnic minorities, rural populations, migrants, the forcibly displaced, or informal economy workers. The significant gaps in coverage, comprehensiveness and adequacy during COVID-19, alongside their devastating legacy on human wellbeing, highlight the need for social protection systems to provide adequate support across the lifecycle accessible to everyone, taking into account the diversity of those not yet covered and their needs; and giving priority to those rendered most vulnerable. This requires, as a basic principle, that the inclusion of all those who suffer from structural discrimination is mainstreamed in the design and implementation of social protection systems. Listening to the voices of excluded groups and their organizations will be essential in developing more inclusive social protection systems that effectively meet people's needs.

Social protection system design can contribute to the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. This requires a systematic consideration of markers of exclusion and barriers, be it related to gender, disability, age or others across all steps of system and programme design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. For example, women workers are often excluded from social insurance schemes by a design that fails to address their limited contributory capacity or interruptions in their employment records due to (unpaid) care responsibilities; or disability benefits relying on "incapacity to work" certification create barriers for including people with disabilities in the labour market. A comprehensive approach needs to address vulnerabilities and risks across the lifecycle, and ensure coordination across different services, such as high-quality health and care services. Finally, systematically supporting the voices, participation and leadership of women, people with disabilities and other people concerned, also in times of crisis, ensures the appropriate design and implementation of social protection policies and response measures.

Digital and innovative approaches for outreach, registration and payments, based on strong social information systems enabling also information-sharing across multiple databases from the social protection sector and beyond, helped many governments to implement swiftly large-scale temporary expansions of coverage. This may be one of the lasting legacies of the COVID-19 crisis that can be harnessed to realise social protection extension ambitions over time. However, digital approaches have also carried significant risks of excluding those facing the highest barriers to access, unless exclusion was explicitly and proactively tackled via additional non-digital approaches and complementary support to leave no one behind. Population categories at particular risk of exclusion include those who are (digitally) illiterate, unbanked, and those without mobile phones/Sim cards, access to the internet, and access to formal IDs, often in rural areas. It will further be essential to integrate and institutionalize tools and mechanisms that were developed and used for the ad-hoc response into the long-term social protection system by ensuring an inclusive and rights-based approach to the use of digital solutions for social protection delivery.

More broadly, COVID-19 demonstrated the vast inequalities regarding institutional capacities and infrastructure for the implementation of response measures and expedited reforms in administrative structures to bring people into the policy ambit of the state. Many countries invested considerably in their capacities for implementation at each step of the delivery chain, accelerating progress that otherwise may have taken years. Others leveraged and tweaked inclusive approaches that had been set in place before the crisis, such as on-demand registration mechanisms, which are intrinsically 'shock-responsive'. In addition to delivery systems, institutionalized capacities and structures for coordination are equally important to ensure the overall coherence of the social protection system, including with crisis response measures. This also includes coordination with humanitarian responses. Where possible and appropriate, the delivery of humanitarian cash transfers should be linked or aligned with local and national social protection systems (Grand Bargain 2020).

Well-maintained data systems and high-quality and disaggregated data is key to ensure adequate and timely responses. Building shock-responsiveness and adaptiveness into the social protection system and ensuring preparedness to scale up in times of crisis is important to ensure adequate and timely responses. Essential to this are also capacities for sound data systems. Responsiveness and preparedness require age-, gender- and disability disaggregated data to

understand the full range of vulnerabilities and life cycle risks facing different parts of the population today and in the future, no matter whether these stem from co-variant or idiosyncratic risks (TRANSFORM 2020).

Strategies for the extension of social protection should be part of broader, integrated development strategies, including strategies including strategies that facilitate life transitions and empower people to better navigate structural transformations. Three out of five workers, as many as 2 billion workers worldwide, are informally employed. Although often only used as temporary measures, COVID-19 has demonstrated that mechanisms and instruments to cover these workers are available. It is important to capitalize on these experiences to build more permanent solutions to ensure coverage of workers in the informal economy. Furthermore, the achievement of decent work and sustainable development requires strong linkages between social protection, economic, employment, education and care policies. One such example is the effective coordination between contributory and non-contributory social protection schemes, public employment programmes and active labour market policies, which will be key to support people through work and life transitions and empower them to better navigate structural transformations. Another example is ensuring affordable, accessible, quality care services to redistribute unpaid care, often disproportionately provided by women, and facilitate their access to employment and transition to the formal economy.

COVID-19 responses and social protection policy making in general require effective social dialogue and participation of civil society in the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of social protection policies (ILO 2021c; 2020b). Countries that had already well-established social dialogue structures and mechanisms for consultation of civil society actors were better able to integrate workers' and employers' needs and concerns in their response measures and respond to the needs of the population. Actively involving representatives of workers', employers' and civil society organisations as well local actors in the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of social protection policies and programmes is essential for effective and inclusive crisis responses that reflect the concerns of different population groups. The crisis has shown that this is vital in ensuring the access of difficult-to-reach populations, the appropriateness of the design of schemes and their implementation, and the wide dissemination of information. Beyond the immediate crisis response, social and national dialogues on the future of social protection will be key to foster nationally-owned, comprehensive and broadly

supported social protection policies and to decide on priorities and pathways to gradually work towards achieving universal social protection, with a view to strengthening social cohesion and the social contract (UN SG 2020).

The financing challenge⁴

Investment in social protection was insufficient even before the COVID-19 crisis and the crisis response measures in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have been ad-hoc, unsustainable and insufficient. Taking into account the impact of the crisis, developing countries would need to invest an estimated additional US\$1.2 trillion – equivalent to 3.8 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) – to close the annual social protection financing gap in 2020. Low-income countries represent US\$77.9 billion of this total financing gap, equivalent to 15.9 per cent of their GDP (ILO 2020a). Spending in response to COVID-19 was highly uneven, with low-income countries investing only a small fraction of what high-income countries were able to muster for the protection of the health, incomes, jobs, and livelihoods of their populations, with financing largely stemming from external sources, including loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Gentilini et al. 2020). However, even before the pandemic, LMICs had faced severe budgetary constraints, including due to debt servicing: one fifth of low- and middle-income countries spend more on debt service than on education, health and social protection combined (Richardson et al. 2020). Protecting and expanding levels of social spending against fiscal pressures is a key concern to avoid drifting further apart. Whereas international financial institutions (IFIs) and central banks have encouraged higher-income countries to spend and pursue expansionary fiscal measures to avert economic contraction, this policy recommendation was not applied to developing countries, with the threat of undue austerity measures looming (IMF 2020; Georgieva 2020). This compounds concerns about the insufficient availability of financing for lower-income countries to navigate this crisis (Gallogly-Swan 2020; UNCTAD 2020) and beyond. It threatens long-term social and economic scarring and is incompatible with an inclusive, human-centred recovery and development.

Even countries that have mobilized substantial resources, may not have reached those most in need. High-income countries have been spending historic amounts in response to COVID-19. About 8 per cent of global GDP, or an estimated \$10.8 trillion, was allocated to the COVID-19 response from February to 31 July 2020 alone. However, a little more than 90 per cent of this amount was spent on fiscal stimulus

⁴ A summary of experiences and lessons learnt from COVID-19 for the financing of social protection is available in the SPIAC-B COVID-19 working group paper on Sustainable and adequate financing for social protection for the COVID-19 response, recovery and beyond.

interventions, including packages of interventions directed to, or through, businesses (Richardson et al. 2020). While this stabilizes the economy, retains jobs and ensures business continuity, the relatively smaller share spent on social stabilization efforts raises concerns about insufficient support for the most vulnerable who were neither in formal employment nor owned a business. This risks reinforcing the drifting apart of already divided societies.

Social protection needs to be placed at the heart of economic recovery programmes as an investment in human development. Social protection systems have a vital role to play in supporting the equitable recovery of livelihoods and economies following the pandemic. Social protection is a sensible investment in human capabilities and not a cost. The large and growing evidence on the productive impacts that social protection can have, for example, in terms of women's participation in the economy (Bastagli et al 2019; de Henau and Himmelweit 2021; Richardson et al. 2020; UN Women 2014), or agricultural and non-farm investments (Daidone et al. 2019; Handa et al. 2018; Pace et al. 2021; Prifti, et al 2019), coupled with the substantial economic multipliers these systems can foster within economies (ITUC 2021; Taylor and Filipinski 2014), suggest that social protection must be considered a key element of recovery.

Domestic resource mobilization and national ownership are the cornerstones for sustainable financing of social protection. This will require strong political will to address immediate as well as persistent challenges, actively exploring multiple financing sources, improvements in public finance management, and working towards international tax justice. The pandemic has led to severe deteriorations in public finances in resource-constrained countries, but many countries managed to increase temporarily their fiscal space. Even countries with nascent systems were able to deliver social protection response measures, where strong political will was paired with tailored support. Acknowledging the competing priorities that low- and middle-income countries face with regards to their national budgets, they are not without choice and even lower-income countries have options to expand fiscal space (Ortiz et al. 2019). These include increasing progressive tax revenues and social security contributions, improving tax compliance, reducing leakages and illicit financial flows, building on innovative solutions to extending social security to workers in the informal economy; taking into account equity and sustainability considerations. A more accommodative macroeconomic framework, for instance by easing budget constraints and allowing a greater degree of deficit spending, may also be important, where needed backed up by IFIs. Importantly, fiscal space needs to be expanded in

ways that do not place additional burdens on vulnerable population groups, for instance by increasing consumption taxes without considering their distributional impacts.

The international community has a key role to play to support and complement national resource mobilization efforts, both through increased international cooperation and enhanced international solidarity. International cooperation is essential in the areas of tax collaboration as well as debt relief. Initiatives in this respect include the Base Erosion and Profit-Shifting (BEPS) initiative, aiming to fight tax base erosion and profit shifting; as well as the Debt Service Suspension Initiative and the Common Framework for Debt Treatments. International solidarity is critical as well, with countries living up to their Official Development Assistance commitments, or the exploration of other global and solidarity-based financing mechanisms. Ideas that have been proposed in this regard include the creation of a global fund for social protection (see UN 2021), global solidarity taxes, or the IMF's call for temporary "COVID-19 recovery contributions raised on high incomes or wealth to help meet the extraordinary financing needs following the pandemic" (Klemm et al. 2021). Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs) are promising tools to create synergies between different development objectives, define financing strategies that go beyond shorter-term political cycles, and align international support with national efforts in a well-coordinated way, in line with the national context, capacities and priorities.

Overcoming the pandemic and future crises can only be achieved through substantive and widespread solidarity. Aside from the rights-based, economic and social justifications for social protection, enlightened self-interest borne from this crisis has also bolstered the case for social protection as a rational objective for all. The crisis has made it well understood how our individual wellbeing and fate is intrinsically bound up with collective wellbeing, and that if a COVID-19 infected person cannot quarantine owing to insufficient income replacement, this, therefore, represents a public health risk to others. Public health efforts to contain the virus through social protection and related social policy measures are likely to falter if solidarity is absent, both at the national and global scale. This also pertains to ensuring equitable access to vaccines if we are to tip the scales towards collective immunity and evade further virus mutation, a repeated cycle of lockdown causing economic and social harm in order to ensure avoidable mortality and disease.

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The SPIAC-B will continue to support global and national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery efforts by monitoring and aggregating emerging evidence and practices from SPIAC-B members and their constituents. We will facilitate rapid learning from the pandemic so that countries can continue to strengthen their social protection systems. Learning is further facilitated by the range of social, political and international partners providing information on the latest challenges, crafting effective responses and supporting implementation.