



KYRGYZ REPUBLIC //
**Expanding Universal Social
Protection for Children in a Volatile
Social Policy Context**





Issue

The Kyrgyz Republic is one of the poorest countries in Europe and Central Asia, with a poverty level of 22.4% and child poverty of 28.3% in 2018. Currently, 36.6% of children under the age of 3 live in a household below the poverty line.⁵⁶ Moreover, it has a young demographic structure and high fertility rate, with almost a third of the population aged under 15 as of 2017.⁵⁷ While Kyrgyzstan's government spends 10.6% of GDP on social protection, only 0.6% is spent on social assistance for children. The pre-existing antipoverty benefit – the *Monthly Benefit for Poor Families* (MBPF) was the only scheme providing income support to poor households with children. However, the MBPF suffered from limited coverage, issues of fraud, low benefit value, maladministration, and high targeting errors (60% of eligible children were excluded).⁵⁸ Consequently, the Government wanted to reform the MBPF.

In June 2017, the Government legislated to reform its child benefits system, bringing in a universal birth grant, a quasi-universal child benefit (UCB) for children aged

0-3, and a grant for large families.¹¹ Funds for the reform were allocated to the Government budget for 2018. This represented a major achievement for all agencies involved.

However, the reform was suspended prior to being implemented, owing to political volatility, an absence of evidence-based policymaking, and detracting debates on the 'deserving' versus 'undeserving' poor. Consequently, reform advocates were unable to convince decision-makers of the merits of a universalistic approach. A further blow was delivered in 2017 when the IMF and the World Bank (WB) expressed concerns about fiscal sustainability and requested that the Government reconsider the reform. The IMF subsequently stressed the importance of "restoring targeted social benefits." The reform's implementation was deferred, and in February 2018, the Government issued a new draft Law that omitted any quasi-UCB element and maintained the means-tested MBPF.¹² The amended reform became effective as of 1st April 2018.⁵⁹

Actions



Pre-2017 reform: UNICEF continuously assessed the performance of the MBPF, demonstrating it was unfit-for-purpose, and thereby built the case for much-needed reform. UNICEF also argued that the demographic structure represented a unique opportunity to influence long-term development by reducing child poverty and investing in children and adults-to-be.

UNICEF analysis and research shaped policy advocacy arguments and communication messages which later contributed to the adopted reform. UNICEF was also part of the consultation forums led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (MLSD), which aimed to develop by-laws and implementation guidelines. This collaboration resulted in the MLSD, the Ministry of Finance, and the Governmental/Prime Minister's Office taking a lead in costing and budgeting for the proposed reform.

Post-2017 reform deferral: while UNICEF's pre-reform actions remain valid approaches, UNICEF has renewed its efforts to advance the case for the quasi-UCB and firmly put it back on the policy agenda through (1) *knowledge generation*, (2) *enhancing partnerships*, and (3) *policy advocacy*.

1. **UNICEF is redoubling its knowledge generation efforts and developing several analytical 'products' to drive policy advocacy arguments to reform social protection for children in the direction of universalistic provision.** These efforts include *poverty analysis* to document child poverty annually, incorporating a multidimensional-poverty measurement into the national statistical system by collaborating with other UN agencies. UNICEF is continuously assessing the performance of the MBPF, and the analysis will highlight bottlenecks in programmatic enrolment and administration. These activities will be reinforced by further modelling of reform scenarios to demonstrate alternative pro-children policy options. UNICEF has been in partnership with the parliament since 2017, with more systematic work starting in 2018. UNICEF partnered with the Kyrgyz Parliament to strengthen its knowledge base and ensure that new reforms to state child benefits are based on robust evidence and analysis. For example, UNICEF secured the support of several MPs, led by the Vice Speaker, and local NGOs to monitor the performance of the MBPF.

¹¹ The law proposed to introduce a universal birth grant for each child; a universal categorical monthly benefit for all children aged 0-3, a monthly large family grant for the third and subsequent children in families with three or more children aged 3-16.

¹² For an extended account of the suspended reform, see ILO-UNICEF. 2019. *Towards Universal Social Protection for Children: Achieving SDG 1.3 - ILO-UNICEF Joint Report on Social Protection for Children*. Accessible at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_protect/-soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_669336.pdf

In parallel, UNICEF has been working with the Vice Speaker, MPs, and the President's Office, preparing a draft Law on the State Benefit to introduce a quasi-universal 0-18-month child benefit. The proposed benefit will be a combination of a proxy means test and affluence-test to filter out wealthier families and so address equity concerns. Political economy played a big part in the derailing of the 2017 reform. Consequently, UNICEF recognised the importance of modifying the degree of universality to be more politically palatable.

2. UNICEF has enhanced partnerships since the derailed reform by attempting to deliver consistent cross-agency 'one-voice-policy-advice' to the government. To achieve this, UNICEF has held regular technical exchanges with the WB, ILO, and EU. UNICEF and the ILO have tried to align the activities of the UN agencies and Development Partners' framework to achieve SDG 1 (1.2. and 1.3), and the ILO's Social Protection Floors Recommendation #202, to the goal of reviving a quasi-UCB. Relatedly, UNICEF is working with the WB to ensure the MBPF is child-sensitive by developing a more inclusive targeting methodology so as to reduce adverse impacts while still advocating for the

0-18-month quasi-UCB. Furthermore, UNICEF has been working with Maastricht University and UNU-MERIT to establish a common understanding on social protection and social spending analysis with the IMF in the Kyrgyz Republic. This has shown promise in establishing a shared position with IFIs, which could support UNICEF's quasi-UCB goal.

3. UNICEF has tried to develop a 'culture of social protection' through public and policy advocacy to promote a greater understanding of its impacts and societal value. This will cultivate a more receptive attitude towards inclusive social protection, which secures political buy-in and the sustainability of future reforms. Lessons learnt from previous experiences show that managing political economy dynamics and effective strategic communication is paramount. Advocacy work is thus emphasising human capability development and how timely investment in comprehensive ECD through social protection achieves a 'triple bottom line'⁶⁰ which delivers for children, business, and the economy. The analytical products developed through the knowledge generation drive will support attitudinal shifts which are more favourable to inclusive social protection.

Impact



UNICEF played a pivotal role in mobilising the case for the 2017 reform process to such an extent that the country was on the brink of introducing universal provision for children aged 0-3. While the reform's deferral was a setback, it nevertheless is a powerful testimony to how UNICEF helped reconfigure the policy discourse in the country in a direction more favourable to the well-being of children.

UNICEF continues to generate evidence on the performance of the existing social assistance scheme for children, the options for policy reform and analysis of

fiscal space, and to engage in policy debates through advocacy and effective partnerships. UNICEF remains committed to developing a way forward towards a new adequate child benefit system that is more equitable and inclusive and responds to the multidimensional vulnerabilities that Kyrgyz children and their families face. The new draft law for a 0-18-month quasi-UCB is likely to be revisited after the October 2020 general election.

ENDNOTES

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