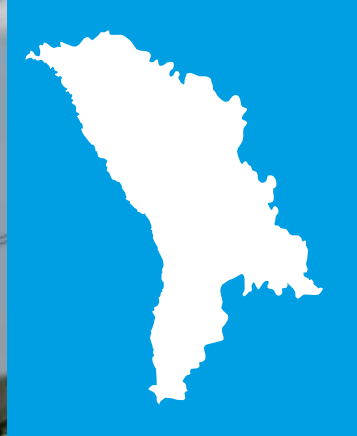




MOLDOVA //  
**Conducting Analysis and  
Microsimulation to Increase Coverage  
of the 'Ajutor Social' Programme**





## Issue

Moldova faces a range of challenges that adversely impact the wellbeing of children. These include a weak economy, a polarised society, and a volatile political environment. Although Moldova's human capital index increased slightly in recent years (0.58 for 2018), at its current 0.63, the country still lags behind the regional average. GDP growth has averaged around 4.5% since 2010 and is forecast to maintain at that rate. While unemployment remained low, at just 3%, the country has a large informal economy (approximately one-third of the workforce), which negatively impacts fiscal revenue and financing of social services. Within such an environment, poverty among children of 11.5% continues to be higher than the general poverty rate of 9.6%. Children in Moldova continue to remain disproportionately poor, with pronounced rural-urban inequalities. Moreover, the poverty rate for households with three or more children was 23% in 2015, compared to 7.5% for families with one child.<sup>61</sup> Around 18% of children in rural areas live below the poverty line, compared to only 2% in urban areas.<sup>62</sup>

Moldova's social assistance system has faced continuing challenges in the prevention and elimination of vulnerabilities. Although spending on social assistance programmes is generous compared to countries with similar levels of development, the overall effectiveness of the social assistance system is weak and characterised by fragmentation into several low-performing programmes. In 2018, the Government of Moldova spent 35% of its public expenditures, or 11% of GDP, on social protection programmes.<sup>63</sup> The country's main poverty-focussed social assistance programme, the '*Ajutor Social*' (AS), is a national means-tested social assistance cash transfer programme, covering approximately 7% of the population. Introduced in December 2008, the AS aims to reduce poverty (both the number of poor people and the depth of poverty) and to improve opportunities for disadvantaged households so as to reduce overall inequality of opportunities. Providing cash benefits of AS to low-income households improved the situation of those with tight budget constraints, thereby supporting their consumption levels. This helps them maintain a minimum living standard (i.e. adequate nutrition, children's access to services, education, and health). The AS also attempts to promote labour market

participation for people able to work. Together with seasonal grants of Winter Support, the AS programme cost 0.6% of GDP in 2016.<sup>64</sup> However, coverage for the most vulnerable population groups by the AS was limited, and low benefit levels – disconnected from minimum national subsistence levels – fuelled persistent poverty. The share of families with children receiving the AS programme declined from 52% in 2014 to 41% in 2017.<sup>65</sup>

Since its inception, the *Ajutor Social* has been the subject of continued research, monitoring, and evaluation commissioned by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Social Protection (MHLSP). A review of the Proxy Means Test was done in 2012 to increase coverage and effectiveness.<sup>66</sup> The monitoring and evaluation of evidence culminated in a 2017 formal independent evaluation which found that the AS was much better targeted at poor populations than the earlier system of 'Nominative Compensations' and child allowances.<sup>67</sup> This targeting efficiency meant that poverty reduction achieved an estimated 30% reduction in headcount and poverty gaps and up to 5% reduction in poverty severity. Consequently, recipients in poor households were substantially better off compared to non-recipients from the lowest decile group. These general findings were substantiated by subjective measures that showed beneficiaries considered their life had improved through AS.<sup>68</sup>

While the AS evaluation presented clear evidence that the policy fulfilled its objectives of poverty reduction, giving guarantees to certain disadvantaged households, the limitations of the AS design have also come under more recent scrutiny. Analysis of the coverage of children and child poverty by the Moldovan social protection system indicated poor coverage for two types of households with children that had a higher risk of poverty: *those with three or more children and households in which there were people (children or adults) with disabilities*. Similar concerns were corroborated by The Committee of the Rights of the Child report on Moldova. This pointed to the vulnerability of children in single-parent, rural, and Roma households (CRC 2017). The AS thus needed further reform to build on existing progress and ensure these two specific households were better served.



## Actions

Building on recommendations from an earlier study on cash-based social protection for children in Moldova, UNICEF partnered with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to provide technical support to the MHLSP to analyse costing models of social protection measures for vulnerable children. This culminated in an analytical report<sup>69</sup> to explore AS reform options; how better coverage and outcomes could be achieved for three 'vulnerable' households (i.e. households with three or more children, households with a child or adult with a disability, and single-parent households). Together these households are the 'priority households' which are the subject of UNICEF recent evidence building and advocacy efforts. This analysis also attempted to estimate the costs of AS reform, and what costing model would demonstrate this. The results of this exercise will enable the government to achieve improved coverage for three priority groups, should it wish to pursue further reform and fine-tune the AS.

The UNICEF-commissioned report used analysis of the Moldova Household Budget Survey (MHBS) for 2017 to consider the current coverage of the three identified priority households: their entitlement and AS take-up; potential reform options best suited to improve coverage and outcomes for these priority households. These reform options are simulated by giving different AS design options; different qualifying conditions and parameters for entitlement calculation so that a simulated set of reforms can show improved coverage and outcomes. Moreover, these reform options can be costed and the tool allows for the exploration of potential reform using 'micro-simulation'.

UNICEF ran two simulation scenarios for a possible reform of the *Ajutor Social* programme to explore concrete options. The first scenario changed the way income is considered - also referred to as 'income disregards'. In this group, four different scenarios considered disregards of universal benefits for the three 'priority households' or changes to earnings disregards for all households. The second scenario changed the calculation of the GMI. Thus, in this group, four different scenarios considered changes across all households with dependent children, in the weighting given to children in the GMI and other more specific changes to the weighting given for people living in the priority households. If improving coverage is the primary aim of the AS reform, the results from the simulations are that the scenarios that increase the coverage the most are the ones that disregard social benefits for priority households. However, this work also needs to be complemented by further analysis of the relationship of the AS with other social benefits (e.g. other universal and contributory parts of the social protection system), the constraints inherent in the Social Assistance Automatic Information System and the operational MIS, to develop concrete policy options.

The micro-simulation used the micro-data from the 2017 MHBS; the last year of that survey that contained a special module on claiming and receiving AS. The 2017 MHBS data was used to construct a micro-simulation model that replicated the rules for entitlement and AS entitlement(s) and allowed simulations of alternative rules of entitlement based on policy reform scenarios. The MHBS data allowed for the profiling of the priority households and some diagnostic analysis on their characteristics and on their AS claiming and receipt.







## Impact

UNICEF and the ODI concluded the micro-simulation exercise with the MHLSP to show them a range of options for increasing coverage of the AS for the three priority households. These simulations have tremendous heuristic and analytical value as they help promote understanding of how the AS functions for children and especially the three vulnerable groups. Moreover, it indicates where there might be possibilities for reconfiguring the AS. The simulations have generated a deeper understanding and clearer picture of how the AS functions and, importantly, where knowledge gaps still exist; how the AS might need to be linked with other benefits, as well as highlighting MIS gaps. Without such an endeavour potential progressive reform would be unlikely.

UNICEF presented the results to the MHLSP in 2019, as well as to development partners. One of the main recommendations to the Government was to consider other changes to the AS that can be implemented alongside any changes in the way entitlement is calculated. These changes would reflect the constraints inherent in the Social Assistance Automatic Information System (SIAAS) and the operational MIS. More informed simulations will be required to build on this preliminary work.

UNICEF articulated the report outcomes, based on the microsimulations, to the government as three carefully nuanced and caveated recommendations. The simulation tool is now available for the Ministry to use and adapt, and training is in place on how to use it. Thus, UNICEF's first recommendation was to use the simulator tool to explore a range of policy reform options that flow from UNICEF's preliminary scenarios developed by the micro-simulation exercise. Using evidence and creating tools through which government can easily test their policy assumptions is an important part of the policy reform process.

UNICEF's second recommendation stressed the importance of considering other changes to the AS that can be implemented alongside possible changes in the way that entitlement is calculated. These changes would reflect the constraints inherent in the SIAAS, an operational MIS that was identified by USAID. Some of these issues include those previously identified: longer periods of awards for those who have unpredictable earnings to help smooth income fluctuations and counter 'risk aversion' that may result from onerous requirements to revalidate claims; building periodic adjustment to AS amounts to reflect price and earnings inflation; more detailed examination of

financial incentives to earn and seek work. The use of the SIAAS to assist in future reform analysis is important, and its information should help inform reform scenarios and help interpret the simulation results on revised AS eligibility. However, UNICEF cautioned against over-reliance on the SIAAS to consider AS reform that seeks to expand coverage. A limitation of the SIAAS database is that it only contains records of previous AS claimants, and will not be able to consider data representing those who are newly entitled under any reform, but have never claimed before.

The third UNICEF recommendation centred on the need to widen the appreciation of the problem of higher poverty risk for priority households and reflect this by changing entitlement rules to increase the AS adequacy for these households. Higher transfer levels are necessary, but not sufficient in themselves to solve the problem of low-income households vulnerable to poverty. This requires considering the AS's relationship to other parts of the social protection system; the promotion of employment and improved productivity for low-skilled workers; addressing the barriers to work for parents with young children and people with disabilities. These are both supply and demand-driven and may reflect discrimination that requires specific legislative reform; and investments in administrative capacity – both in systems and people - to provide a mix of cash transfers and appropriate services. However, these investments rely in part on the successful implementation of decentralised services and clearer roles in raising revenue locally to fund them.

The policy reform options generated by UNICEF's report and microsimulation are currently providing a useful discursive context in which possible AS reform options can be considered. The objective of UNICEF's research was to explore policy reform options in the rules for the calculation of AS entitlement and to produce a costing model that can capture the resulting demands on public expenditure. UNICEF has demonstrated what a micro-simulation approach can do and the costings it can produce. In the medium term, our recommendations for next steps by the MHLSP should be to consider the results further, in a context whereby the underlying AS reform options match the specific objectives for improving coverage of priority households, and the wider set of choices and constraints set by the social protection system and its financing and operation. Over the longer term, we recommend that more comprehensive micro-simulation approaches be developed to consider AS as part of the overall tax-benefit system.

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