



GEORGIA //
**Transforming the Social Protection
System for Children through
Poverty Analysis**





Issue

Children in Georgia face significantly higher rates of poverty than any other age group, regardless of the poverty threshold applied. According to the current official absolute poverty rates published by the National Statistics Office, today, 25.5 per cent of children live in poverty, compared to 20.1 per cent of the rest of the population.¹³³ This challenge is compounded by the fact that existing social protection programmes have failed to properly identify these children, even though the systems were intended to be pro-poor.¹³⁴

The Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) programme – the flagship social protection programme in Georgia – only covers around 11 per cent of households.¹³⁵ The TSA has experienced some problems, as for many years it had no specific child benefits and it did not accurately identify households with children. At the same time, the Government of Georgia has had concerns about the performance of the system in terms of the TSA's exclusion and inclusion errors and the highly subjective assessment of household wealth status by programme staff.



Actions

In recent years, UNICEF Georgia made a concerted effort to promote wider social inclusion in the country. This effort comprised: one, conducting a thorough analysis of the existing social protection system. This analysis focussed on the social assistance architecture in particular and strove to better understand the inequities generated by different programmes; two, engaging in advocacy activities to promote a revision of Georgia's social assistance system, to remove key barriers and bottlenecks that prevented children accessing these programmes; and three, supporting the Government's reform of the social protection system to limit inequities for children experiencing poverty. This was a crucial undertaking to ensure that the best interests of children in Georgia were served.¹³⁶ Combined, these actions successfully triggered upstream policy changes for children living in extreme poverty.

To establish a clear understanding of the coverage and impact of Georgia's existing social assistance system, UNICEF utilised its biennial panel household survey, the Welfare Monitoring Survey (WMS),¹³⁷ and performed an additional analysis on options for reducing child poverty in the country. This full-spectrum analysis examined the TSA programme, old-age pensions, disability, and other benefits, to understand the situation of children living in poverty. The analysis also covered the trends in monetary poverty by age group, rural-urban differences in child poverty, and poverty rates by the number of children in households. Crucially, the analysis of the poverty rate by age group showed that child poverty was higher than the population's poverty rate, regardless of the poverty thresholds applied (i.e. extreme poverty, general poverty, or relative poverty). It also highlighted the particularly high rate of extreme poverty for children aged 5–14.¹³⁸

Besides the several rounds of the WMS, further assessment of the TSA programme was also pursued. This analysis revealed that the TSA had higher coverage of households without children than households with

children. This difference was particularly pronounced for the lower consumption deciles. For example, households with children had only half the coverage rate of those households without children in the second to fourth consumption decile. Thus, many households with children missed out on receiving the benefit. Moreover, the survey facilitated simulations of various alternative policy options.¹³⁹ For example, it modelled the impact on child poverty if a child benefit component were to be introduced to the TSA and the existing policies were reformed. This analysis contributed to an eventual change in the social protection system in Georgia.

The analysis also helped solidify effective collaboration with government and development partners as the survey and analysis were undertaken in close consultation with both entities. In addition to the child poverty analysis and policy option simulations, UNICEF advocated for reform of the TSA and the need for an additional/alternative benefit. Furthermore, UNICEF extensively engaged in discussions with governmental, non-governmental, and international stakeholders on the issue of child poverty. This partnership mobilisation assumed the form of workshops, conferences, media engagement, and individual meetings with high-level officials, including the Prime Minister. Ultimately, these activities helped put child poverty high on the national agenda.

A partnership with the World Bank also emerged and resulted in a joint statement on a vision and principles for a fiscally sustainable and progressive social protection system.¹⁴⁰ This statement emphasizes the need for a social protection system that protects the chronically poor, especially children, prevents poverty *ex ante*, and provides opportunities for better livelihoods. This partnership translated into both organisations advocating for TSA reform – a commitment so strong that a subsequent World Bank loan to Georgia was made, on the condition that the country implemented a reform of the TSA. The government of Georgia agreed and implemented the reform.¹⁴¹



Impact

UNICEF's child poverty analysis and alternative policy simulation, combined with policy advocacy and partnership building, resulted in the introduction of a remarkable child benefit programme in May 2015 to the Targeted Social Assistance programme.¹⁴² The new means-tested (PMT) child benefit component of the TSA covers around 16% of all children in the country – approximately 136,000, at present. The pre-existing TSA benefit has a lower eligibility threshold to qualify, whereas the eligibility threshold for the child benefit component is higher. It therefore promotes higher coverage of households with children.¹⁹ From 2015 to 2018, an additional USD5 was paid to a family with children. Related to this overall drive to improve the social protection system for children, and to tackle the demographic challenges faced by the country, the government introduced a geographically targeted age-restricted (e.g. 0-2) quasi-universal child benefit (qUCB) to families in areas with low birth rates. Combined, the new means-tested child benefit added to the TSA programme and geographically targeted qUCB, marked an important step towards making the Georgian social protection system more child sensitive.

UNICEF has continued to perform a biennial (WMS) survey since 2009, as well as in-depth assessments

to improve the performance of social protection programmes. For instance, five survey rounds occurred between 2009-2017. More recently, one of the outcomes of continued discussions with the Government was the announcement in December 2018 of a five-fold increase in the means-tested child benefits amount, as well as the introduction of a food voucher component from January 2019, also resulting in an increase of over USD25 million in state budget allocation.

Georgia's evidence-based advocacy and alternative policy simulation approach may be a successful strategy for replication elsewhere for engaging with government partners and generating important policy reform. A large impact evaluation of the TSA and means-tested child benefits programmes, which should also assess which modality of child benefits (cash or cash combined with food vouchers) works better for children in Georgia, is currently underway. At the same time, the original poverty analysis and policy simulations continue to support the implementation of the benefit and maximise the impact of these interventions for the most disadvantaged children.

¹⁹ Based on the PMT score, the threshold for the main TSA and child benefit component is 65,000 points and 100,000 points, respectively.



ENDNOTES

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