DELIVERING FOR CHILDREN
SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
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unicef
for every child
Acknowledgments

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REIMAGING SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC:
A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is casting a long shadow in countries across the world and has quickly moved beyond a health crisis alone. As the UN Secretary General stated in The Impact of COVID-19 on Children: “Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims.” To understand the complex socio-economic impact of COVID19 on children and their families, we must look at three different streams.

The first stream is that of the virus itself. Despite low infection rates in children, the impacts can be deeply felt. Stories of children like 5-year-old Yuanyuan, whose family all tested positive for COVID-19, are sadly not a rare occurrence.

The second stream is the containment measures, such as school closures and confinement. While these interventions reduce the speed of the infection rates, they have severe impacts on children in terms of loss of education, lost incomes and psychological trauma.

The third stream – and the main focus of this article - is the larger economic crisis generated by the containment measures, a crisis that will push millions of children and their families back into poverty; a crisis that will affect countries far into the future, even after the end of the lockdowns. This will have the worst impact on children when we look at the number of affected children, its duration and its severity.

Without the right vision, the right planning, and the right investments, the future could be bleak for millions of children. But there is hope and a resolve from UNICEF to rise from this pandemic building a stronger future for all children, and their countries.

The picture today

In East Asia and Pacific, many governments have implemented strong policies to contain the spread of the disease and COVID-19-related deaths. Infections have remained low in comparison to many developed countries, but the impact of those interventions are being felt across the region in a profound way.

Children today are vulnerable. Many are out of school, more vulnerable to abuse both on- and offline, lacking access to a healthy diet to help them grow. Many families have been living with one and half months’ savings under their mattress. In a protracted socioeconomic crisis like this one, this means that without work they are a few days away from struggling to bring food to the table and cover the basic needs of their children. It means they will start selling belongings and could even resort to more desperate measures without government support.

After the pandemic, a new danger to address

As the world’s attempt was to flatten the curve of the virus, it is now equally important to flatten the curve of the socio-economic impact on children and their families, a curve with a higher deadly potential for children and their families.
Shutdowns cause a daisy chain of lost incomes. If a factory worker loses their job, they will not buy food from a street vendor, who will then be unable to afford to buy their ingredients from the market, and the market seller will have little or no money to buy produce from the farmer. They will all struggle to provide for their children. The result is an expected dramatic, fast and prolonged increase in child poverty in the region.

For children who were already poor and vulnerable, the situation is worsening. Those who had managed to emerge from poverty are falling back. There will be children who never experienced poverty before, now falling into poverty. Most of these families are not covered by any existing social welfare support, and in many cases do not have any kind of job and salary protection.

This is likely to be the biggest and most dangerous COVID-19-related impact for children. While infection rates of children in the region were in the thousands, it is estimated that the number of children falling into poverty will be in the millions.

To flatten this curve of the socio-economic impact on children and their families, there is a blueprint for action that can help children survive today, and also allow them to thrive and shape a better future for themselves and their countries.

Recover

To curb the immediate impact of the pandemic, governments should urgently scale up unconditional cash transfer programmes to reach all children during the lockdown and immediate aftermath.

This would help parents like Suthat Namgasa in Thailand to be able to provide for their children tomorrow. Governments must be bold and ensure they reach and protect every child with universal cash transfer programmes. Simply put, no child should be left unprotected at this time. And this is possible.

With a few exceptions, most countries in the region have functioning social protection schemes that can be quickly expanded. Many will have to make it easier and faster for people to access support, but we have already seen successful examples in the region of increasing in the number of beneficiaries (horizontal expansion), in the amount transferred to beneficiaries (vertical expansion), or both vertical and horizontal expansion.

Rebound

As countries are getting ready to restart their economies, there is an unprecedented political support and strong fiscal space for social expenditures that needs to be directed to child friendly solutions. Governments in this region have announced a broad range of stimulus measures, including packages to support the most vulnerable through social protection measures. But if we have learned something from past crises it is that expansion of social protection interventions will not last forever.

In a region which has historically spent well below the global average on social protection measures (7.4 per cent of GDP versus the 11.2 per cent global average), now is the moment to identify and propose policy approaches that can last beyond the immediate crisis and make countries better prepared for future shocks.

Strengthening public finance for social protection will be necessary and will require prioritised allocation of resources to respond to children’s health and basic needs.

Reimagine

All evidence suggests that this crisis is going to drag on, with significant risks to both mounting rates of poverty and inequality between and within countries.

Without a daring vision we not only risk losing the hard-won developmental gains in recent years in the region, we risk losing a generation of future thinkers, leaders, workers, and consumers.
Without the right investments from governments, the shadow of COVID-19 may hang over children and young people for a generation or more.

This is the time to be bold, with new, creative ideas that will help children flourish, and in turn support the economies of their countries. The global crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the fundamental role that stronger, universal, integrated and accessible social services —social welfare, education, health, early childhood development— play in protecting children and their caregivers from the negative effects of all sorts of crises. Cash transfers alone are not enough, and we need solid accessible and affordable social services.

UNICEF teams across the region are working closely with governments to not only respond to the needs of every child today, but to reimagine financing for children’s development in bold, new ways.

The promise of this dynamic and diverse region will not be realized without urgently investing in children and young people and preparing them for a new tomorrow.

The time is now to reimagine a stronger future for children.
Partnerships are critical to deliver results for children and to realize their rights. During COVID-19, UNICEF has worked with a broad range of partners at global, regional and country levels to deliver social protection to all children in the swiftest and most effective way.

**Governments**

Unlike other crises, governments in East Asia and the Pacific have been the main provider of cash transfers during COVID-19. Given the magnitude of the socioeconomic shock generated by the pandemic and the nature of the emergency measures and restrictions, the response has been funded and managed by the states themselves. Humanitarian and non-government actors have also aligned with existing social protection systems to deliver assistance.

Governments across the region have looked upon UNICEF as a partner of choice for policy and response design and implementation. This is the result of years-long UNICEF engagement with governments for building national shock responsive social protection systems that increase the resilience of children and their families. The work done in Myanmar, Cambodia, Viet Nam and the Philippines for example, laid the foundations of the guidelines on disaster responsive social protection to increase resilience developed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

**United Nations**

Collaboration with other United Nations (UN) agencies has been the most critical factor in a well-coordinated policy advocacy agenda and response at both regional and national levels.

Regionally, UNICEF is the co-chair of the United Nations Issue Based Coalition (IBC) on Empowerment and Inclusion, focusing on Social protection. With support from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the other co-chair, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the IBC prepared a regional report reviewing the regional situation and showing how short-term social protection measures could be transformed into comprehensive and shock responsive social protection systems.

As part of UNICEF work on disaster risk financing for shock responsive social protection in South East Asia, several technical consultations were held with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and UNESCAP.

At country level, ongoing partnerships with other sister UN agencies allowed UNICEF amplifying its technical expertise and mainstreaming child-sensitive and inclusive social protection responses throughout
the region. As the lead agencies in social protection, UNICEF and the ILO prepared on behalf of the UN country teams (UNCT) crucial technical notes and policy briefs in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia and Thailand to inform governments’ response.

UNICEF partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in China, Indonesia and the Pacific for strengthening the social protection responses to COVID-19 with forward-looking technical assistance. UNICEF, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) on the other hand, jointly supported the social protection response in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in the Philippines. In Malaysia, UNICEF and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) jointly carried out research to explore the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on low-income urban women and children. UNICEF partnered with UN Women and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Thailand and Viet Nam for policy options to the COVID-19 response. In Timor Leste, UNICEF provided operational guidance, together with the World Health Organization (WHO), on the health and safety aspect of the COVID-19 emergency cash distribution. In Cambodia, as part of the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors, the ILO and UNICEF joined forces to expand social protection for all through sustainable financing with the aim of expanding the coverage and adequacy of the social assistance delivery across life cycle.

Finally, as part of the existing joint UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Fund for social protection in eight countries in East Asia and Pacific UNICEF partnered with other UN agencies to provide technical guidance and policy options for COVID-19 response.

**Multilateral organizations**

UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific has widely contributed to the global stocktaking on social protection responses to COVID-19 led by the World Bank (WB) and UNICEF. Both regional and country offices have updated data about government responses on a regular basis. Furthermore, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are part of a UNICEF expert reference group on disaster risk financing for shock responsive social protection. In Mongolia, UNICEF partnered with the ADB to provide technical support to the government in the assessment of the increased cash transfers for COVID-19 response.

UNICEF has been providing technical assistance to ASEAN on shock responsive social protection: by supporting the development, approval and launch of the ASEAN guidelines on disaster responsive social protection to increase resilience, as part of a regional joint UN project; and contributing to the organization of the third ASEAN high-level inter-sectoral conference on social protection —rethinking social protection: towards inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery in ASEAN.

In addition to long-standing cooperation with UN agencies and development banks, UNICEF is leveraging new partnerships to gain strategic access to crucial ministries. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is emerging as a key partner in policy advocacy to expand social assistance in the immediate and long-term, and to increase broader social spending, including vis-à-vis the Ministry of Finance. COVID-19 has been an opportunity to push joint UNICEF-IMF policy advocacy agendas in Myanmar and Viet Nam.

**Development partners**

UNICEF has a well-established regional partnership with the European Union (EU), including the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). ECHO has been a key enabler in emergency preparedness for shock responsive social protection in South East Asia in the last years. Due to the policy dialogue and advocacy as well as the technical support with ASEAN member states, the regional social protection response to COVID-19 has been positively unprecedented. In addition, the EU-UNICEF public finance facility in South and Southeast Asia initiative contributes to the realization of children’s rights by supporting the best possible use of public budgets. It aims at enhancing the adequacy, effectiveness and efficiency of social sector for children’s rights and development.

Support from development partners such as Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has been essential for strengthening nascent social protection systems in the region. In Lao PDR for example,
UNICEF is supporting the design and implementation of a child benefit scheme that will become one of the pillars of the recently approved national social protection strategy.

**Academia**

UNICEF is committed to the highest research standards, also during a time when orthodox research methods have suffered a serious setback due to the imposed COVID-19 restrictions. UNICEF has engaged with global research centres and think tanks such as the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Centre for Disaster Protection —for their expertise in disaster risk financing for social protection—or the Economist Intelligence Unit —for socioeconomic impact assessments such as in Thailand. UNICEF has also partnered with the most prominent universities in the region for data collection and research, such as Thailand’s Mahidol and Chulalongkorn universities.
EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC:
MITIGATING THE SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 THROUGH SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR ALL CHILDREN

Key Facts and Data

Timeline of COVID-19 outbreak and response measures in selected countries
Table 1. Average number of days to implement social protection in response to COVID-19, by country grouping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>East Asia and the Pacific region</th>
<th>South-East Asia and East Asia</th>
<th>Pacific island countries and territories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>−10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Only a few countries in the Pacific have recorded community infections (for example, French Polynesia, Guam and Mariana Islands), while most cases were detected in people arriving in the country. All Pacific countries have enacted containment measures, nonetheless. Thus, the average is based on either the number of days since the first case of COVID-19 or since the first pre-emptive emergency measures were enacted.

Countries in the East Asia and the Pacific region have managed to control the number of COVID-19 infections better than other regions have, but they face a big challenge to recover from the socioeconomic impact of the global pandemic.

Child poverty in East Asia and Pacific could increase for the first time in 20 years, with an additional 22 million children in the region likely to fall into poverty in 2020. Regional output contracted by 2.2 per cent in the first half of 2020, reflecting the impact of pandemic-related lockdowns and a deep contraction in exports. The impact on regional economies was uneven, with output in China contracting by 1.8 per cent and shrinking by 4.0 per cent on average in the rest of the region.

Across the region, social protection has spearheaded public responses to the socioeconomic crisis brought about by the pandemic. Social protection is also the pathway to recovery; it is set to become even more relevant as the region and the world struggle with a long recovery path and face a dramatic economic crisis. Social protection has been, is and will be a game changer for millions of vulnerable children and their families in East Asia and the Pacific.

Since the very beginning of the outbreak, Governments in East Asia and the Pacific were among the first in the world to implement a wide range of emergency social protection responses. With the first wave of infections in January, countries enacted unprecedent emergency measures to slow the spread of the pandemic. By March (about 20 days after the first cases on average), most of the countries in the region announced the first social protection measures to counter the socioeconomic impact of the containment measures, which were pushing millions of children and their families back into poverty.

In Mongolia and the Pacific, countries put forward pre-emptive social protection measures (38 days before the first case in Mongolia and 10 days in advance on average in the Pacific) to provide economic stimulus and protection. Such stimulus can increase households’ ability to consume goods and services, and thus support local businesses that may struggle to sustain themselves.

By the end of the year, and despite all the efforts to control the spread of new infections, a few countries (Mongolia and Myanmar) took new drastic emergency containment actions. By then, populations had suffered the consequences of the global slowdown for almost a year, and many of their coping mechanisms had already eroded.
### Table 2. Regional evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data, Research, Events</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Internal) Working paper: “COVID-19 in times of social protection: What current social protection systems in East Asia and the Pacific can do to protect all children”</td>
<td>Rapid assessment and mapping of government’s social protection responses in the region to provide guidance to country offices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Internal) Guidance note: “Addressing the impact of COVID-19 on children in East Asia and Pacific Region: The critical role of social protection”</td>
<td>Mainstreaming the three foremost messages for UNICEF technical support on social protection during COVID-19 and beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy brief: “Developing shock responsive national social protection systems to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, facilitate speedy recovery and strengthen the resilience of vulnerable groups in ASEAN”</td>
<td>The note was jointly produced along with ASEAN, UNICEF, FAO, WFP and IFRC as part of a joint project on shock-responsive social protection and Forecast-based-Financing in ASEAN, to inform ASEAN Secretariat’s discussions on the response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Internal) Webinar: “Addressing the impact of COVID-19 in East Asia and the Pacific: What can current social protection systems in the region do to protect all children?”</td>
<td>To provide an overview of the current situation and ongoing social protection responses to COVID-19 in the region. To generate discussion and outline some key guiding principles for the response in the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Internal) Online workshop: Social policy 2020 online bridging sessions</td>
<td>The 2020 sessions aim to create a virtual space for discussion of the challenges and opportunities of Social Policy work in East-Asia and the Pacific and connect the work of Social Policy experts in the region.</td>
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</table>

### Table 3. UNICEF’s regional programmatic support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical support</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working paper: “The social protection pathways to nutrition: A stocktaking of evidence in Asia and the Pacific”</td>
<td>To summarize the evidence available in the region with the objective of facilitating discussion and drawing on the wealth of evidence gathered for the 2019 Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition (aka SOFI Report)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinar: “The social protection pathways to nutrition: Evidence in Asia and the Pacific”</td>
<td>To discuss the possible reasons behind the lack of clear impact of these social protection programmes on nutrition outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Internal) Working paper and online workshop: “Financing responses to disasters: Experiences, opportunities and challenges in disaster risk financing and shock responsive social protection – A review of practices and learning, with a focus on East Asia and the Pacific”</td>
<td>UNICEF held an expert consultation with key development partners and specialists (both global and regional) on the opportunities and challenges in financing shock responsive social protection systems to protect children from risks including poverty, disasters, pandemics and climate risks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UNICEF Technical Support

As soon as the first COVID-19 cases were identified outside China, UNICEF Social Policy teams in the country offices and the Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific (EAPRO) swiftly developed a threefold strategy for action to assess and address the impact of COVID-19 on children and households:

1. Measuring direct and indirect impact on children and households;
2. Mapping and assessing social protection responses to COVID-19 to guide UNICEF in providing in-country technical advice;
3. Assessing the impact of macroeconomic scenarios on countries and possible implications for social policy.

The first action EAPRO took was to include these three strategic pillars in UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC), setting indicators and outcomes at the country level. This would become the framework that guided the technical support UNICEF provided on social protection in the region during COVID-19.

EAPRO guided country offices in understanding the impact of COVID-19 beyond human health. An impact framework was developed to link: i) the direct health impact of the virus; ii) the impact of containment measures (such as lockdown and school closure); iii) the impact of the consequent economic crisis; and iv) the need for mitigating measures, such as social protection.

UNICEF assessed the ongoing responses to COVID-19 in the region according to strengths, weaknesses and readiness of pre-existing social protection systems in the region and analysed the circumstances that have led so many countries to consider the use of their social protection systems to mitigate the impacts of the global pandemic. Technical guidance was provided to UNICEF country offices in their support to government social protection responses.

UNICEF strengthened its coordination and collaboration with other United Nations agencies at the regional and country levels. Regionally, UNICEF is the co-chair of the United Nations Issue Based Coalition on Empowerment and Inclusion, which works around five components: i) youth skills and education; ii) response to health, food and labour market crisis of COVID-19 and recovery; iii) social protection; iv) universal health care; and v) food security and nutrition. The Coalition published the report "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: The story so far and future considerations", which includes a review of the regional situation and shows how short-term social protection measures could be transformed into comprehensive and shock-responsive social protection systems.

Critical Success/Challenging Factors

Throughout the outbreak, UNICEF Social Policy teams provided swift and timely technical advice to governments on social protection responses to COVID-19. Cutting-edge, bold collective thinking and feedback from countries across the region were critical to effectively protect all children as well as the most vulnerable.

The first challenge was the lack of updated and detailed information on the impact of the pandemic on children. The dramatic effects of fast and hard containment measures, such as lockdowns, and the consequent economic crisis, had a deep impact on households. Regular national household surveys did not capture those dynamic changes, and a series of rapid data collection or simulation exercises provided only a partial set of information to guide the expansion and design of social protection interventions.

Secondly, it was clear from the onset that only state-provided social protection in the region would be able to mitigate the unprecedented scale of COVID-19 impacts. Such systems have the potential to form a core component of wider recovery plans that seek not only to provide relief but also to influence a path to more sustainable and equitable economic and social development in East Asia and the Pacific.
As the leading agency on social protection in many countries in the region before COVID-19, UNICEF has been widely acknowledged for its distinct technical expertise in this area during the pandemic response. The capacity to provide concrete, timely and effective expertise was based on a strong field presence and consolidated collaboration with key counterparts in government, academia and civil society (such as Indonesia’s National Bureau of Statistics or Thailand’s Chulalongkorn and Mahidol Universities).

On the positive side, this pandemic has made it much easier for many governments and stakeholders to understand shock responsive social protection, which has resulted in an increased appetite for it among policymakers and greater political will for systemic reforms and adaptation.

UNICEF is working with governments, partners, and other United Nations agencies to use the opportunity presented by this crisis to review and reform social protection systems to “build back better”. UNICEF has pledged to build the resilience of the most vulnerable populations against future shocks, as well as to support their economic recovery from this global crisis.

But it remains a major challenge to design a system that can respond to the current and future crises. If UNICEF has learned something from past crises, it is that the expansion of social protection interventions will not last long. UNICEF must identify and propose policy approaches that last beyond the immediate crisis and better prepare countries for future shocks. Countries must strengthen public finance for social protection, and to do so will require prioritized allocation of resources to protect children’s health and meet their basic needs.

The COVID-19 crisis has increased the number of poor and vulnerable children in the region. To fulfil the pledge of leaving no one behind, it is critical to keep pushing to improve social protection and not allow the standard to fall.

**Way Forward**

UNICEF will keep generating evidence to better tell the story of social protection, not only to Governments, development partners, beneficiaries and donors, but also internally.

UNICEF will leverage its long-standing work on child poverty to help Governments to identify the “new poor” along with those others that should benefit from social protection programmes after the COVID-19 pandemic passes.

UNICEF will explore innovative financing for social policies within the current context of pandemic-related budget constraints.

UNICEF will develop a strong and integrated advocacy strategy to make the case for sustainable investment in social protection in the coming years.
Key Facts and Data

Table 1. Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First case of COVID-19</th>
<th>Outbreak declaration and measures</th>
<th>Date and type of social protection responses</th>
<th>Days to implement SP since first case of COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 January</td>
<td>16 April – Executive order for partial lockdown</td>
<td>17 April / 26 June Horizontal expansion</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Government of Cambodia acknowledged the need for an immediate, large-scale and coordinated social protection response to address the unprecedented health and economic crisis created by COVID-19. Cambodia’s existing social protection schemes however, faced major limitations in reaching many of those most affected by the crisis. Recent years have seen significant positive social protection developments in Cambodia, and schemes launched recently had an important role to play in the crisis. Nevertheless, large segments of the labour force whose incomes were hit by COVID-19 are not protected by existing social insurance and social assistance measures.

Against this backdrop, the Government of Cambodia launched a USD 1 billion emergency relief package, and on 26 June it officially launched the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme. This USD 300 million programme initially targeted an estimated of 540,000 households registered in the ID poor database (2.3 million individuals), but 631,500 households had enrolled. Actual beneficiaries were beyond the target since new households were added through an on-demand registration mechanism (i.e., the ID Poor). This meant a 6-fold expansion of coverage from the only cash transfer scheme in place.
Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence, Data and Research</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UN joint technical paper on policy options for social protection response to COVID-19</td>
<td>Support all registered households in existing ID Poor database: 692,101 households (2,390,161 people)</td>
<td>Social protection policy options and costing</td>
<td>The Government approved and implemented the Emergency Cash Transfer for poor and vulnerable, reaching 631,500 households</td>
<td>ILO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. UNICEF’s programmatic support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical support</th>
<th>Coverage Targets</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Population covered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implementation support for the conditional cash transfer (CCT) for poor pregnant women and young children</td>
<td>Up to 100,000 children 0-2</td>
<td>Delivery and Data Management Systems, Integrated Social Services</td>
<td>45,872 children currently enrolled in the CCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation support to the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme for poor and vulnerable households</td>
<td>669,441 households</td>
<td>Delivery and Data Management Systems; Post-distribution monitoring</td>
<td>631,500 households; 2,533,653 individuals; 221,627 children 0–5 years old; 91,319 persons with disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNICEF Technical Support

With support of UNICEF, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation adjusted the existing cash transfer schemes to cater for the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme.

The COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme was truly made possible by the existence of the new UNICEF-supported conditional cash transfer (CCT) for pregnant women and children 0-2 years old, as well as the ID Poor database. This existing delivery system allowed for quick programme design and deployment in the COVID-19 emergency.

With support from UNICEF, the CCT management information system (MIS) was upgraded to cater for the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme and has linked it to the ID Poor social registry.

UNICEF supported the Government to develop a series of remotely administered surveys to assess the delivery of the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme and identify barriers in access and implementation by service providers and beneficiaries – i.e., pregnant women, children 0–2 years old, people with disabilities. This was in addition to the ongoing survey on the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on beneficiary households, also supported by UNICEF.
Communication and training materials were developed with support from UNICEF and the massive training for communes charged with administering the programme was implemented, as well as the programme monitoring and evaluation framework.

As part of the UN Country Team, UNICEF contributed to the development of a policy options paper that advocated for the expansion (i.e., expanding coverage and increasing the level of the benefits) of cash transfers for all poor mothers and pregnant women, people with disabilities and older people.

**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

The COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme, as much as it was an emergency and discretionary programme, built on some of the key policy directions included in the national Social Protection Policy Framework 2016–2025. Specific categories of vulnerable populations – i.e., children 0–5 years old, older people age 60 and up, people with disabilities and people living with HIV – were included in the design. This was in line with the long-term direction of the policy framework focusing on the integration of cash transfer programmes into the Family Package of integrated social assistance, which is actively supported by UNICEF.

The COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme can provide valuable lessons learned for regular social protection programming, including political incentives to expand the coverage of poverty targeted programmes. UNICEF parallel support to the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme and the Family Package of integrated social assistance has opened up the space for the Government to make design linkages between the routine and the emergency measures. Recent floods in September in almost 19 provinces have accelerated policy and programme design discussions on the role of cash transfers in the response to natural disasters.

Also as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Family Package of integrated social assistance, as a long-term policy design for routine programming, is to have a more significant focus on adaptiveness – lessons learned from COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer will be included. This will then link to a more comprehensive shock responsive social protection framework that will be developed in collaboration with other UN agencies.

**Way Forward**

In 2021, UNICEF will continue policy advocacy and support to the Government of Cambodia, including through supporting the design and the delivery of the continued social protection responses to COVID-19, building on the Government’s pledged contribution in support of the poorest and most vulnerable.

UNICEF will build on lessons learned and leverage political will to further promote adaptive social protection measures, with a focus on concrete capacity-building and programme design support to adjust the COVID-19 cash transfer model to be more agile and responsive. UNICEF will build capacities for the rapid assessment and design of operational solutions for cash transfer delivery in the context of natural disasters.

UNICEF will continue to further strengthen delivery systems, including through system integration and tools development (e.g., the Family Package, social assistance single operator and MIS) while working in parallel on the cash plus options and strengthening policy and programme linkages among the core and complementary social protection programmes (e.g., social care services) with a view of expanding the coverage and scope of social protection.
In December 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported the first cluster of cases of viral pneumonia of unknown causes in Wuhan, Hubei Province, after which a novel coronavirus was eventually identified. The new coronavirus was not named as COVID-19 until 12 January 2020.

Throughout the period of the pandemic, China accumulated a wealth of experience using its social protection system to respond to the crisis. China announced the first extraordinary social insurance measures on the 27 of January, and two days later new social assistance measures: only 7 days after the first ‘people to people’ infection was identified and preventive and control measures of infectious diseases were taken. The country has been innovating in different ways ever since, notably by harnessing the potential of new technologies to bridge physical distances between vulnerable people and essential services.

Amid the mounting challenges, the Government is maintaining the target of eliminating rural poverty by the end of 2020. Furthermore, the Government has recently adopted the Directive on Reforming and Improving the Social Assistance System which provides the Government’s vision to build a tiered and classified social assistance system with Chinese characteristics for both urban and rural areas towards 2035. This reform process highlights the need for the improvement of social assistance in emergencies and shocks, including relief work for members of disadvantaged groups amid public emergencies, such as COVID-19.
Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence, Data and Research</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UN Policy Dialogue on Social Protection – Social Protection at the time of COVID-19 and beyond: Building an inclusive and sustainable social protection system.</td>
<td>Policy dialogue for inclusive social protection system and sustainable financing</td>
<td>ILO, UNDP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. UNICEF’s programmatic support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Support</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge sharing on innovative approaches to inclusive social protection systems and sustainable financing to inform the new Social Assistance Act.</td>
<td>Integrated and essential social services; Financing social protection; Child poverty</td>
<td>Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNICEF Technical Support

During COVID-19 response period, UNICEF China did not intervene programmatically on coverage expansion, delivery systems or the content of social protection schemes, but focused on policy dialogue.

A policy dialogue on “Social protection at the time of COVID-19 and beyond: building an inclusive and sustainable social protection system “, was held on 10 November 2020, convened by UNICEF, ILO and UNDP under the auspices of the UN Resident Coordinator in China, with the participation of central and provincial levels of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, National Healthcare Security Administration, and Ministry of Finance.

The policy dialogue offered an opportunity to four Government agencies to take stock along with UN partners as China continued to shift from crisis response to longer-term management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year coincides with the onset of the discussions of the first ever Social Assistance Act (draft) and the GoC’s announcement of its Social Assistance System Reform agenda toward 2035. Against this background, UNICEF support included:

- Technical inputs for the design and policy directions for the social protection policy dialogue to institutionalize innovative measures taken in response to COVID-19 in China into the Social Assistance System.

- Technical inputs and advice on the draft Social Assistance Act for China to ensure the most vulnerable children and their families’ access to social assistance is enshrined in the Act.

- Technical inputs and advice for the design and implementation of the Socioeconomic survey in response to COVID-19 led by the UN Resident Coordinator Office in China and implemented by UNDP with UNICEF and UNFPA as partners.

- Technical advice on social assistance system reform to establish a universal and child sensitive system in China (on-going).

Outputs related to social protection so far include the following:

1. A Summary Report from the Social protection Policy dialogue which will serve as a basis for further dialogue with the Government of China.


**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

During 2020, UNICEF also invested efforts in using global evidence to influence the high-level policy dialogue on poverty reduction and strategic investment in human capital gaps in China. UNICEF promoted China’s engagement in global forums (e.g., South-South cooperation forums) to share its experience and lessons learned in poverty reduction and provision of essential social services at scale with other countries.

The first joint policy dialogue on social protection was held with a focus on COVID-19 for China. China has not had national consultations on establishing a social protection floor, and this policy dialogue is as close to it as United Nations agencies have come so far. UNICEF and ILO are in the lead with support from UNDP. Hopefully this will lead to bigger opportunities to establish further dialogue on establishing a social protection floor in China and further discussions under the People and Prosperity Outcome of the new UNSDCF 2021-2025 for China.

UNICEF organised a policy discussion with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) and other partners on the new Social Assistance Act. While, the main purpose was to factor better the interests of children in the social protection system it also is expected to lead to bigger policy design decision on behalf of GOC with regards to establishment of the targeting poverty lines; single registry; coordination; management information; use of technology and as well as linkages with the welfare services system.

UNICEF China works in a constrained environment when it comes to access to public data and also transparency of public decision making. The Government was reluctant, for example, to conduct a full-fledged survey on the impact of COVID-19 on the households during the response phase. As an alternative, UNICEF decided to join a survey conducted by UNDP with the China International Centre for Economic and Technical Exchanges (CICETE), under the leadership of UNRCO. This has limited scope and also prevented UNICEF from generating a clear picture on the poverty impact of COVID-19, especially for children, and it is also unknown to what extent the enacted social protection measures have had an impact on children and their families. As such, the survey was deemed as of little use for policy recommendations.

**Way Forward**

Focus on advocacy to further escalate the social protection policy dialogue into a broader discussion on the social protection floor in China. It is important for UN agencies to invest time to develop a common platform to leverage influence and pool knowledge, especially when working with a strong development partner.

UNICEF has a unique position to advise the Government on the design and implementation of the new Directive on Reforming and Improving the Social Assistance System. For the new Country Programme Document, UNICEF will focus on legislative advice, the implementation of the new reform and the role of the private sector to help implement social assistance reform.

Additional focus will be paid to the fiscal side of the social protection system, especially at the county level, as well as how to implement a child-sensitive social protection system on the ground, as well as the shock-responsiveness of the system, to be able to accommodate and buffer shocks such as COVID-19.
On 2 March 2020 the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Indonesia; by 20 October, there were 373,109 confirmed cases and 12,857 deaths reported in all from the 34 provinces. Meanwhile, the public health measures taken to control the pandemic have had a widespread impact on the economy, people’s daily lives and all dimensions of children’s lives.

The socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on children in Indonesia can be grouped into four areas: (i) child poverty; (ii) learning; (iii) nutrition; and (iv) child care and safety. To mitigate this impact, UNICEF has supported the Government’s national and subnational policy response.

Table 1. Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First case of COVID-19</th>
<th>Outbreak declaration and measures</th>
<th>Date and type of social protection responses</th>
<th>Days to implement SP since first case of COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 March</td>
<td>31 March – National public health emergency</td>
<td>20 March / March, April, August Vertical and Horizontal expansion</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence, Data and Research</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simulations on the impact of public spending on social protection through COVID-19 safety net programmes</td>
<td>Social protection policy options and costing</td>
<td>Ministry Finance; National Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positioning paper: “COVID-19 and Children in Indonesia: An Agenda for Action to Address Socio-Economic Challenges”</td>
<td>Policy dialogue for inclusive social protection system and sustainable financing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. UNICEF’s programmatic support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Support</th>
<th>Coverage Targets</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village Fund Reorientation towards Social Protection</td>
<td>12.8 million children (80% of isolated children)</td>
<td>Targeting; Monitoring and Evaluation; Service delivery capacity strengthening</td>
<td>Ministry of Villages, UNDP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**UNICEF Technical Support**

During the pandemic, the Government expanded social protection by redirecting and retargeting the existing social protection programmes including launching new schemes to provide a safety net for the most affected population. UNICEF technical support to the COVID-19 response in Indonesia included the following:

- **Support to the Ministry of Villages and Disadvantaged Regions (MOV) in the design of a locally controlled ‘village fund’ for families not included in national social protection programs (BLT DD/unconditional cash transfer and Padat Karya Tunai Desa (PKTD), a cash for work programme).** To date, 6.5 million households that were unable to access national social protection programmes have been reached through this scheme. The modified village fund social protection programme includes a monitoring and evaluation system. UNICEF advocated for the expansion of vulnerability criteria by including girls, women-headed household, older woman and pregnant woman. From June 2020, MOV has updated its monthly report on cash disbursement beneficiaries based on the gender of the head of household. Complementarily, UNDP developed a digital system to help manage the use of Village Development Fund allocation for PKTD. UNDP also supported a targeting effectiveness assessment of the village fund’s cash assistance and developed a training module to ensure the inclusivity of the BLT DD.

- **UNICEF supported the Ministry of Finance and National Bureau of Statistics with simulations of the impact of public spending on social protection through COVID-19 safety net programmes, which in turn have helped to identify priority programmes for children for secured financing in the 2021 annual budget.**

- **UNICEF helped to strengthen the service delivery capacity of child protection programmes within the COVID-19 Task Force at the subnational level: Central Java, East Java and West Nusa Tenggara. This has provided advocacy space for the UN to discuss and coordinate several agendas such as child marriage, child neglect, equal access to education services and child protection services.**

- **UNICEF conducted a training for para social workers including the Integrated Child Welfare Service Centre, Pusat Kesejahteraan Sosial Anak (PKSAI).** The guidelines for social workers and information, education and communication materials for child-care institutions and mapping of vulnerable children affected by COVID-19 were incorporated into the training.

- **UNICEF also published a study analysing the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19. The study used a household phone-based survey reaching 1,000 households. As a result, UNICEF published a position paper on the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on children in Indonesia to increase public awareness upon the multidimensional impact of the crisis on children. This position paper was based on desk research and secondary data analysis.**
In addition to the COVID-19 emergency response, UNICEF continued to support the Government in strengthening the regular provision of social protection:

- Supporting the draft guidelines to increase coverage and benefits of unconditional cash transfers, including decentralized Child Grant programmes.

- Developing, together with the Ministry of National Development Planning (BAPPENAS), a specific approach to update the unified database for social protection. The piloting includes the development of mechanisms to target homeless people who are not registered in the civil registration system – absence of Identity Card – and promoting the role of village forums in determining the beneficiaries of social assistance programme.

- Technical support to the Ministry of Social Affairs on improving the registration for woman with disabilities including mapping the numbers of unregistered orphanage centres around the country, which are home to 400,000 vulnerable children.

**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

Coordination has proven to be challenging among line Ministries, between the central and the subnational or local level governments, and with different partners outside of government.

The Government’s social protection response has traditionally focused on mitigating immediate income risks and reducing poverty. Addressing structural inequalities, particularly gender inequality, is generally not the primary objective of the social protection interventions. There are still challenges to ensure that the eligibility criteria and beneficiary selection/targeting process consider other type of social vulnerabilities, including gender inequality. Additionally, social protection programmes are still affected by inclusion and exclusion errors. The UN has been pushing for a more inclusive and gender responsive social protection response, but this also requires stronger ownership and engagement of the Government to continue to drive this agenda forward.

Due to COVID-19 precautionary measures, such as restricting travel and cancelling large events, many activities are carried out through virtual means. Consequently, some activities take longer than expected and there is a tendency to focus on conducting studies and assessments.

**Way Forward**

Focus on inclusion: UNICEF has facilitated different interventions and studies to ensure that the most vulnerable population is included in social protection programmes, such as the assessment of the PKTD programme, the development of the child protection working group within the COVID-19 task force and the assessment of the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 for women and girls.

Scale up: More work needs to be done to scale up inclusion initiatives.

Policy coordination and participation: There is a need to strengthen linkages between national and subnational policy responses, improve local policy level implementation and expand engagement of civil society and women’s organizations in social protection response.
Key Facts and Data

Table 1. Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First case of COVID-19</th>
<th>Outbreak declaration and measures</th>
<th>Date and type of social protection responses</th>
<th>Days to implement SP since first case of COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 March</td>
<td>30 March – Nationwide lockdown</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lao PDR avoided a health crisis by implementing a swift lockdown and restriction of movement even before there was a confirmed case. As of August 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases in Lao PDR was 22 there were zero deaths. However, the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and lockdown policies in response to it affected households disproportionately by worsening existing structural vulnerabilities.

The existing social protection system leaves a large part of the population unprotected. The coverage of the National Health Insurance Scheme has expanded significantly, however, a large number of people do not have income protection – only 33.5 per cent of the intended population is reported to have some form of social protection coverage, lower than the regional average of 64.9 per cent, mainly contributory. To better address these challenges and to increase coverage of social protection overall, the Government recently approved and launched the National Social Protection Strategy. In terms of the COVID-19 response, however, no extraordinary social protection measures were taken, which left the Mother and Early Childhood Grant (MEGC) pilot programme as the only social welfare scheme in Lao PDR.
Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence, Data and Research</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Briefing note: “Developing a shock-responsive national social protection system to respond to the COVID-19 crisis”</td>
<td>Reach 11,611 pregnant women and children 0-2 with cash transfers; and 15,000 children in school age with school meals</td>
<td>Social protection policy options and costing; Policy dialogue for inclusive social protection</td>
<td>Presented to the Minister of Labour and social welfare, who used it to inform government’s decision making.</td>
<td>UN Country Team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. UNICEF's programmatic support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Support</th>
<th>Coverage Targets</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Population covered</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programme design and operations manual for the Mother and Early Childhood Grant pilot programme</td>
<td>1,400 pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under 12 months old</td>
<td>Social protection system and capacity building; Cash Plus; health, nutrition and child protection systems</td>
<td>Transfers expected to start in January 2021</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour and social welfare, ILO, UNCDF, DFAT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNICEF Technical Support

A technical note on shock responsive social protection was prepared on behalf of the UN Country Team by UNICEF, ILO and UNCDF. The UN Resident Coordinator delivered it to the Government, and it was received with high interest. The policy brief provided recommendations to reduce the social and economic impact of COVID-19. The proposed interventions were focused on supporting the recovery and stabilization of households in the short, medium and long term. It built on the measures outlined in the recently approved and launched National Social Protection Strategy, which had been prepared before the COVID-19 pandemic and did not capture social protection responses in that kind of humanitarian situation.

As one of the immediate measures to reduce the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on children under 2 years of age and pregnant women, UNICEF intensified the design and implementation of the Mother and Early Childhood Grant (MECG). The design of the pilot was informed by several channels, key among which are the initial discussions with the UNICEF country office, other UN partners and the World Bank. To complement the outcomes of these discussions, key informant interviews were conducted with relevant ministries within the Government and a range of international development partners operating in the country. Also, UNICEF, ILO and UNCDF have supported the Government in improving their capacities on social protection through sharing experiences from the region (Thailand and Cambodia) and from experts across the globe, while ensuring that the technical working group meets regularly to discuss and agree on programme deliverables. The Government participated in the selection of the pilot site based on evidence generated from a joint field mission to Attapeu and Savannakhet Provinces. Government also participated in a second field mission to assess the payment mechanism in Attapeu province in preparation for cash transfers in January 2021.
**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

The critical success factors in the design of the MECG scheme included the following:

- Lessons from countries within the region provided by the UNICEF regional office and globally helped to debunk myths on conditionality and targeting, thus enhancing policymakers’ buy-in and commitment to an unconditional transfer.

- Government involvement in planning and selecting the target district/province increased the confidence of policymakers in the possibility of the cash transfers being successfully implemented.

- Aligning and harmonizing MECG’s processes to those used by the World Bank new conditional cash transfer scheme. This underpinned Government’s learning and leadership in the social protection sector.

- Additional funds from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of Australia enabled the extension of the MECG pilot to provide child benefits for 18 months (including pregnancy through 12 months old rather than pregnancy through 3 months old as initially planned).

Systemic challenges in the country include the following:

- The financial ecosystem is weak, both in the public and the private sectors.

- There is limited fiscal space for social protection.

- There are trade-offs between a temporary payment mechanism and transfers through government systems.

**Way Forward**

Improve donor coordination on social protection in the country.

Support fundraising initiatives for the expansion of child grants to all children in the first 1,000 days of life (from pregnancy through 2 years of age).

Conduct an analysis of fiscal space and develop the business case for child-sensitive social protection systems and services.

In partnership with ILO, support the Government to develop a child-sensitive, shock responsive social protection policy, building on the evidence from the implementation of the MECG and the World bank conditional cash transfer programme.
MALAYSIA
POLICY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH EVIDENCE GENERATION DURING COVID-19

Key Facts and Data

Table 1. Timeline

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 January</td>
<td>18 March – First Movement Control Order</td>
<td>27 February / March, September Vertical and Horizontal expansion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first robust Movement Control Order in March was widely acknowledged as highly effective in controlling the spread of the virus: by end of April fewer than 6,000 people had contracted the disease in Malaysia and less than 100 people had died. Malaysia has acted rapidly and decisively in building a substantial social protection response to COVID-19. The various stimulus packages announced between 27 February and 23 September amount to MYR 260 billion (approx. 17 per cent of GDP) making it one of the largest fiscal responses in global comparative terms. However direct fiscal stimulus (including the social protection response) has been only a small component of the overall package. The three packages of measures aimed to reach a variety of different income and household groups including the bottom 40 per cent income group (B40), the middle 40 per cent income group (M40), self-employed and retrenched workers. The Government’s flagship social policy response – known as the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional – is a temporary intervention to provide lump sum payments to all families with a monthly income below MYR 8,000, with transfer values varying according to pre-COVID-19 household income level. However, the 2021 budget announced a significant expansion of mainstream social protection schemes (including Malaysia’s means-tested child grant) that, if implemented will play an important role in cushioning the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable families and children.
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Families on the Edge: Mixed methods longitudinal research on the impact of COVID-19 on women and children in lower income urban families and the effectiveness of COVID-19 mitigation policies”</td>
<td>Significant strengthening of Malaysia’s mainstream social protection framework for women and children in lower income urban families to sustain their wellbeing and ensure their recovery from Covid-19 crisis</td>
<td>Unprecedented media coverage of poverty and social protection generated USD 2 billion pledged for low- and middle-income families (3.5 million children) in households in the bottom 40% income group Extension of key social welfare programmes to all households living below the revised poverty line (405,000)</td>
<td>UNFPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Brief: “Mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on Malaysia’s children: Immediate and longer-term social protection policy options”</td>
<td>Coverage estimations for a universal child benefit include 3.2 million children 0–5 years old or 7.9 million children 0–14 years old</td>
<td>USD 2 billion pledged for low- and middle-income families</td>
<td>UN Resident Coordinator Office (RCO), ILO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical note: “Delivering on the Prihatin Rakyat commitment through a more strategic approach to social protection for children and families”</td>
<td>Up to 1 million children (10% of children) [from 69,000 at present]</td>
<td>Extension of key social welfare programmes to all households living below the revised poverty line (405,000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical note: “Proposal for inclusion in the Temporary Measures Bill to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement Control Order”</td>
<td></td>
<td>USD 25 million provided for transfers to single parent families and persons with disabilities</td>
<td>RCO, ILO, UNDP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**UNICEF Technical Support**

In May 2020 UNICEF and UNFPA jointly commissioned the Families on the Edge research project to explore the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on low-income urban women and children in Malaysia. This project explores the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on 500 families in Kuala Lumpur as well as providing insights on the relevance, adequacy and accessibility of key COVID-19 mitigation policies and other critical social services for this particularly vulnerable group. The project has tracked the impact of the crisis over a six month period, and at least four reports were published during this period. The project promoted dialogue among policymakers and the general public with a view to support consensus building on social policies that will deliver on the ‘build-back-better’ agenda.
UNICEF also led the development of a Joint UN proposal on strengthening social protection responses to COVID-19, which was presented by the UN Resident Coordinator and UNICEF to the Executive Director of the National Economic Action Council. As a result of this, the Council and United Nations agencies are co-convening a series of closed-door policy dialogue events. The first of these was held on 29 September. Further meetings, including one on social protection – to be led by UNICEF with ILO and UNDP support – are expected soon.

Finally, UNICEF has prepared several policy briefs and discussion papers and submitted these to various government agencies for consideration during the development of the 2021 budget and Twelfth Malaysia Plan. These include papers on: “Mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on Malaysia’s children: Immediate and longer-term social protection policy options”, “Strengthening social protection for children and families” (which included proposals for linking social protection with parenting support interventions) and “A transformative agenda for children and families in the Twelfth Malaysia Plan” – a consolidated set of multi-sectoral policy recommendations for Malaysia’s next five-year development plan. These briefs have been presented in person to several ministers and members of parliament.

**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

UNICEF leveraged the ongoing Families on the Edge study as a platform to discuss a range of social policy options with the Government, including strengthening social protection responses to COVID-19 and child benefits.

UNICEF’s evidence-based policy advocacy played an important role in stimulating additional financial support valued at over USD 2 billion for low- and middle-income families, including the 3.5 million children in B40 households. The day after UNICEF launched the report, the new stimulus package (*Prihatin Rakyat*) partially delivered on the commitment made by the Prime Minister, including:

- MYR 1,000 each for 3.7 million B40 households (USD 880 million);
- MYR 600 each for 1.4 million M40 households (USD 200 million);
- MYR 300 for 1.7 million unmarried individuals in M40 (USD 121 million).

Malaysia’s newly announced social protection measures remain nonetheless within the framework of one-off or lump sum *Bantuan Sara Hidup* (BSH) ‘handouts’ rather than sustained financial support through more inclusive social protection.

In November 2020, the Minister of Finance announced that core social protection schemes (including financial assistance for children) would be extended to all households living below the recently updated poverty line. UNICEF’s Families on the Edge study was explicitly mentioned during Parliamentary debates on the matter as well as in media interviews conducted by government officials. As a result, the children’s financial assistance scheme is expected to expand from 69,000 children to up to an estimated 600,000 children. The transfer level under this scheme was also significantly increased. However, there remains considerable uncertainty over how this new policy will be implemented. In particular, it is unclear how data on the incomes of such a large number of families will be collected or verified, or whether there is actually sufficient funding available for policy implementation. Meanwhile, public finances are rather stretched; even before the crisis Malaysia’s revenue to GDP ratio stood at only around 17 per cent. The current political context in Malaysia has not been conducive to longer-term policymaking over this period.

**Way Forward**

UNICEF will continue to leverage the ongoing Families on the Edge study to create opportunities to advocate for the inclusion of commitments to strengthen social protection for children and families in the Twelfth Malaysia Plan. In 2021 UNICEF will commission in-depth analysis of child-sensitive social protection policy options to stimulate further debate and seek to insert our analysis into relevant public, political and policy debates. It is hoped that the political context will stabilize in 2021 and that greater political interest in longer-term planning might emerge as a result.
Key Facts and Data

Table 1. Timeline

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 March</td>
<td>11 November – Partial lockdown (Ulaanbaatar)</td>
<td>1 February / February, April, May Vertical expansion</td>
<td>~38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even before the first registered cases, the Government of Mongolia implemented a robust package of measures to stimulate the economy and provide support to livelihoods amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. It was not until 11 November 2020 the State Emergency Committee and Ministry of Health announced the first verified case of community transmission in Mongolia. A first set of measures operated between April and September 2020 and was implemented through two packages – the first announced at the end of March and the other at the beginning of May. As part of the latter, Government’s response was threefold.

The flagship Child Money Programme (CMP) was vertically expanded (topped up) for six months (the pre-COVID-19 benefit levels rose from MNT 20,000 to MNT 100,000 per month), reaching 1,168,747 children from 526,856 households. The CMP will be topped up until the end of 2020. In doing so, the Government seems to have learned from the most recent experience in tackling the lasting effects of Dzud – harsh winters – on children’s human capital development. The approved 2021 national budget proposes to continue the CMP top-up until July 2021 in order to help the families overcome the economic difficulties of COVID-19.

Monthly food stamps were doubled for five months from 1 May to 1 October 2020 for all household members. Thereafter, the adult members of eligible households will receive the doubled benefit, while children will receive the usual amount until the end of the year.

Beneficiaries of social welfare pensions (persons with disabilities without social insurance, senior citizens who are not entitled to pension benefits from social insurance, orphaned or half-orphaned children and single parents) will receive an additional MNT 100,000 for five months (May to September), totalling their monthly allowance to MNT 288,000. This measure will also continue until July 2021.
### Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Area of Expertise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rapid social impact assessment on social and protection services for children and families during school closure due to prevention from COVID-19</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. UNICEF’s programmatic support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical support</th>
<th>Coverage Targets</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### UNICEF Technical Support

Very early in the COVID-19 outbreak, between March and July, UNICEF supported a ‘rapid social impact assessment on social and protection services for children and families during school closure due to prevention from COVID-19’.

In response to a specific request from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection to assess the role of the increased transfers for CMP and food stamps, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UNICEF agreed to conduct two complementary studies:

- **ADB provided technical support for an indirect assessment** of the theoretical impact of the social protection policies implemented by the Government of Mongolia on poverty and inequality. The simulation used 2018 Household Socio-Economic Survey (HSES) data and assumed that policies were implemented according to design, and a counterfactual was developed of what could happen in the absence of government intervention.

- **UNICEF supported a survey of beneficiaries of Government support to understand how well the schemes have been implemented, how benefits were used as well as the satisfaction of beneficiaries.**

The two studies are complementary and provide comprehensive insight into the effectiveness of social protection policies implemented by the Government of Mongolia. They also provide guidance for further adjustments to the policies for the transition from crisis to recovery.

### Critical Success/Challenging Factors

Prior to the onset of the global pandemic in 2019, UNICEF conducted a feasibility assessment of shock-responsive social protection measures for children. The assessment concluded that the existing governments’ mechanism for child benefit is the most suitable system to reach the children in most effective way during shocks, as 96.6 per cent of all children are registered in the system with operational bank accounts and even the smallest administrative unit has access to commercial banks.

Evidences and lessons from the **UNICEF’s pilot of the shock responsive cash transfers conducted in 2019-2020 winter served as basis for the immediate use by the Government for the COVID response to support the household livelihoods. Thus, around 850 billion MNT (300 million USD approx.) leveraged for the child money top-up in 2020, reaching out more than two-third of the households.**
UNICEF continued its policy advocacy to maintain the universality and the size of child benefit in 2021, which contributed in state budget allocation of 576 billion MNT required to maintain the current top-up of the child benefit in the first half of 2021 to help households with children in avoiding negative coping strategies caused by the pandemic.

The ADB assessment of social protection measures concludes that the CMP top-up benefits the most disadvantaged more than any other policy interventions that the Government has undertaken to stimulate the economy, including interventions with comparable costs to CMP.

Some international finance institutions, politicians and well-known economists criticize the universal CMP as a burden on the economy and recommend limiting benefits to the most disadvantaged children. Therefore, the sustainability of CMP is a critical concern of UNICEF.

There is a great interest among development partners to support the Government in strengthening the shock-responsiveness of existing social protection programs.

**Way Forward**

UNICEF Mongolia’s priority is to enhance its efforts towards generation of solid evidence of CMP impact on poverty and inequality, as well other impact of universal CMP on children’s well-being and development and policy advocacy. In this regard, UNICEF Mongolia is supporting robust monitoring and evaluation and documentation of the top-ups implemented in 2020 in response to COVID-19, both to contribute to learning and to demonstrate to potential new donors how system-readiness facilitates the provision of additional financial support during a crisis.

UNICEF aims to support the development of a long-term strategy for shock-responsive social protection in Mongolia that centres on affordability, flexibility to respond appropriately to different types of shocks/crises (e.g., with different targeting strategies) and appropriate institutional coordination mechanisms, and which establishes robust and transparent mechanisms for coordination or complementarity with non-governmental actors, including international NGOs, humanitarian agencies/donors, etc.
Until COVID-19 hit Myanmar and the world, Myanmar was on a path of consistent reduction of household poverty, which had contributed to lift millions of people out of poverty in recent years. As a result of COVID-19, child poverty is likely to increase by over 10 percent by the end of 2020, reversing the trend in Myanmar of recent years.

The Government of Myanmar announced swift immediate social protection measures as part of the COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan. This rapid response included a temporary increase of the size of transfers (vertical expansion) for existing beneficiaries under the ongoing social protection programmes (i.e., Maternal and Child Cash Transfer -MCCT- and Social Pension) with financial support of donor funds through Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT). This allowed approximately all 240,000 MCCT and 200,000 Social Pension beneficiaries to receive an additional one-off/top up of MMK 30,000 (USD 20) in July 2020. This top-up was added to the regular MMK 45,000 (USD 30) provided on quarterly basis to beneficiaries in Chin, Rakhine, Naga, Kayah and Kayin States. The government also scaled up the MCCT in Shan and Ayeyarwady in July 2020. The horizontal expansion of the benefits temporarily enrolled 272,000 additional/new beneficiary pregnant women in states and regions i.e. Kachin, Sagaing, Magwe, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw, Bago, Mon, Yangon. Taninthari, where MCCT is not being implemented.

In addition, also in July a one-off cash payment of 30,000 Myanmar Kyats (approx. USD 14) was made to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in areas where the MCCT is not yet active; and another for persons with disabilities. Existing registration and payments mechanisms set up for the MCCT and Social Pension were adapted and further tweaked to make risk informed, which was relatively rapid.
Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

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<th>Evidence, Data and Research</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
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<tr>
<td>Report: “Overcoming Child Poverty in Myanmar: Investing in Human Capital, responding to COVID-19”</td>
<td>Rapidly expanding the existing cash transfer programmes to 1 million people (pregnant and lactating women and older people)</td>
<td>Rapid socioeconomic impact assessment; simulation and modeling on social protection response and impact mitigation</td>
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Table 3. UNICEF’s programmatic support

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<th>Technical Support</th>
<th>Coverage Targets</th>
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<tr>
<td>COVID-19 risk-informed and risk adjusted procedures for the Maternal and Child Cash Transfer (MCCT) and Social Pension (SP)</td>
<td>About 1 million people (pregnant and lactating women and older people)</td>
<td>Delivery systems; Social and Behavioural Change Communication; Communication for development.</td>
<td>Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNICEF Technical Support

UNICEF supported Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MSWRR) to organize a social protection sector coordination meeting to discuss the Government’s response to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19.

UNICEF also supported Department of Social Welfare to adopt risk-adjusted procedures for existing national social protection programmes which are being used for both vertical and horizontal expansion of the programmes. Currently, MCCT is being implemented in seven states/regions, covering approximately 375,000 women and children. The Social Pension programme supports people aged 85 and above in all of the 14 states and regions and Nay Pyi Taw Union Territory, covering more than 220,000 older persons. The registration and payment of these national programmes were predominantly based on manual and paper-based delivery and required the physical presence of a large number of beneficiaries. It was thus critical to adapt programme operations to social distancing and avoid large gatherings. Temporary administrative arrangements were introduced to minimize the transmission of risk and ensure smooth delivery of the programmes during the crisis, with a strong focus on “do no harm”. UNICEF issued simple and easy instructions to the programme implementation staff and regular follow-up was done through different means, including electronic communication and social media.

In addition to this, existing messages through social and behavioural change communication (SBCC) and communication for development (C4D) were adjusted and further scaled-up, with a strong focus on preventing the spread of the disease. These messages also aimed at sensitizing beneficiaries in using the cash to meet immediate needs in first place, thus prioritizing food, nutrition, health and hygiene, including exclusive breastfeeding, infant and young child feeding practices, etc. The payment sites of the cash transfers programme continue to provide an additional opportunity to scale up social and behavioural change communication activities and share the relevant materials/resources to the families, women and children.

Starting April 2020, UNICEF provided technical assistance to a sub-national government to directly facilitate the State level social response on COVID-19: Task Force of community programs in Kayin State (SSRCOTF) with UN agencies, government institutions, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Ethnic Health Organizations (EHOs), Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and donors. Nine community-based social response programmes were developed with the aim to support 7 vulnerable groups identified by the groups: Families with minimum socio-economic wellbeing; Returnees/Internal Migrant Workers; Families living in the Camps (in particular of women and children); In-service front-line workers in health sector; Persons and children with disabilities; Elderly and Youth (in particular for empowerment and psychosocial support).
UNICEF has also advocated to expedite in launching the regular disability cash grant which is aimed to start in FY2021-22 with government budget in one area of Myanmar. To prepare well for the equitable access to disability grant and based on the principles set by the Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), UNICEF is supporting the government in setting up the disability registration and certification system by using the remote assessment methodology and online/offline application. The registration and certification will be the foundation for the persons/children with disabilities and proposed a budget estimate of USD 8 million for the initial phase of the disability grant.

Regular social cash transfers are critical to support the immediate needs of the persons and children with disabilities in these difficult times. As such, the UN-SERF action plan (which is the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 in Myanmar), echoed the importance of swiftly launching the disability grant and proposed a budget estimate of USD 8 million for the initial phase of the disability grant.

**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

Consistent, reliable and high quality policy, advocacy, technical and capacity support was provided by UNICEF to the Government of Myanmar with an emphasis on protecting key design and implementation principles supporting universality, inclusiveness and integrated systems approach.

**Way Forward**

UNICEF will continue supporting the strengthening of the shock responsiveness of the social protection system in Myanmar. The risk adjusted procedures will further be refined and expanded as a result of the formative evaluation of the MCCT and emerging experience of the programme implementation amid COVID-19.

UNICEF will keep supporting MSWRR/DSW in developing and operationalizing a robust and modern management information system. The proposed system will: i) bring various social protection programmes databases (MCCT, social pension, case management, planned child allowances and disability grants) together as an important foundation to harmonizing the social protection programmes’ beneficiary databases and delivery mechanisms; ii) achieve efficiency and effectiveness in implementation of these programmes; and iii) generate required information to supervise the programmes, ensure accountability and make important decisions about programme expansion, design changes and implementation reforms, including leveraging the information and data in the event of any disaster to expand programmes to the affected population.

UNICEF will support the Government in launching the planned child allowance programme to cover families with children 3–5 years of age. This will be linked with the MCCT for children that recently graduated from the MCCT after completing 24 months. Further, UNICEF is also supporting the Government to prepare for launching Disability Grant to support persons with disabilities.

Regular and predictable cash transfers can make a critical impact on welfare and development outcomes for families with women and children, considering the economic impact of the COVID-19. As a way forward, UNICEF will support the Government in connecting cash transfer beneficiaries with information, knowledge and social and basic services. This will help to achieve multiple and complex outcomes related to health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, birth registration, child protection services, early childhood and childcare. Taking comparative advantage of UNICEF Myanmar supporting a multi-sectoral approach will help in building adequate linkages between the demand side and the supply side of interventions. On the demand side, the MCCT already creates incentives for the beneficiary families to seek awareness and receive services related to health and nutrition. There is a further opportunity to increase the range of services offered to cover complex and multidimensional risks. This can be done through creating a referral system of key national social protection programmes internally within MSWRR and external with other ministries, such as the Ministry of Health and Sports, Ministry of Education, etc.

Since the impact of COVID-19 on the local economy is expected to be adverse and long term, there is a need to link MCCT beneficiaries with productive and financial interventions like microfinance, health insurance, saving groups, income generating activities, livelihoods and skills trainings, such as technical and vocational education training programmes.
PHILIPPINES
EXPANDING SOCIAL PROTECTION COVERAGE IN TIMES OF COVID-19

Key Facts and Data

Table 1. Timeline

<table>
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<tr>
<th>First case of COVID-19</th>
<th>Outbreak declaration and measures</th>
<th>Date and type of social protection responses</th>
<th>Days to implement SP since first case of COVID-19</th>
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<tr>
<td>30 January</td>
<td>25 March – Republic Act 11469</td>
<td>25 March / April, May to Nov Vertical and Horizontal expansion</td>
<td>55</td>
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To mitigate the socioeconomic impact of pandemic-related policy measures, the Government passed in 25 March 2020 the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, No. 11469, which included the provision and implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), worth PHP 200 billion, through various national line agencies. SAP provides cash transfers to 18 million low-income families nationwide ranging from PHP 5,000 – PHP 8,000 per family based on prevailing regional wages. It also provides wage subsidies to displaced low-wage earners in the formal sector. The intended beneficiaries of the SAP are poor families with people with disabilities, older people, pregnant mothers, solo parents, displaced informal workers and other vulnerable groups. Qualified beneficiaries, who also include the existing 4Ps households, received the cash transfers for April and May 2020. By the end of May, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) had already provided cash transfers to 17,449,500 families. The government extended the payout up to November for the second tranche.
Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Child Poverty Effects and Efficacy of Social Protection Responses to COVID-19 (Ongoing activity)</td>
<td>Analysis of the efficacy of the social protection responses, in particular the SAP program for 18 million households.</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research; Monitoring and Evaluation</td>
<td>Department of Social Welfare and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy brief: “Making Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) universal and inclusive among children of beneficiary households”</td>
<td>Expansion to cover an additional 1,023,874 children to the current 8.6 million (4.2 million poor households)</td>
<td>Policy dialogue for inclusive social protection</td>
<td>Department of Social Welfare and Development</td>
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Table 3. UNICEF’s programmatic support

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<th>Technical Support</th>
<th>Coverage Targets</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
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<tr>
<td>Operationalization of emergency cash transfer (ECT) in BARMM</td>
<td>1,000 poor households with pregnant/lactating mothers and/or children 0–2 years old</td>
<td>Horizontal expansion and delivery of social protection</td>
<td>BARMM – Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD), FAO, WFP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulation of Methodology for the Tagging of Government Expenditures on Social Protection (SP) Programs and conduct of Expenditure Analysis of Social Protection in the Philippines</td>
<td>Public Finance Management; Sustainable financing of social protection systems</td>
<td>National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), Department of Budget and Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**UNICEF Technical Support**

In implementing the SAP, DSWD aimed to work with development partners on areas such as identifying people who should have been included as beneficiaries but were left out, developing interventions per type of beneficiary, expediting the delivery of the emergency subsidy, and developing a validation system and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), including digitization of social protection payments. Noting ongoing interventions from other development partners in social protection and to avoid duplication, UNICEF contributed to the M&E component of the SAP.

To that end, UNICEF commissioned two researches: a rapid assessment of the social and economic impact on households with children of non-pharmaceutical intervention measures for COVID-19; and an assessment on the child poverty effects and efficacy of social protection responses to COVID-19. The socioeconomic impact assessment captured information on households’ access to social protection interventions at the height of the most restrictive quarantine period. The child poverty effects assessment, on one hand, has two components:

- **Ex-ante microsimulations** to model the poverty effects of COVID-19 on households and children using worst case and best case scenarios.

- **Ex-post assessment** of the efficacy of social protection responses intended to mitigate the poverty effects of COVID-19.
As part of the COVID-19 response, together with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and World Food Program (WFP), UNICEF augmented the Government’s response by operationalizing an emergency cash transfer to 1,000 poor households with pregnant/lactating mothers and/or children 0–2 years old in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), who had been excluded from both SAP and the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps):

- UNICEF reprogrammed 20 per cent of the SDG Fund (USD 144,600), repurposed for the emergency cash transfer – USD 100,000 for emergency cash transfers; USD 34,600 for information and communications technology and USD 10,000 for M&E.

- Following the SAP delivery strategy, payments were also manually distributed by social workers from the Ministry of Social Services and Development in May, using partner government systems.

- UNICEF used SCOPE, the beneficiary database management platform of the World Food Programme to allow deduplication of beneficiaries, tracking and monitoring. Social workers from the Ministry used this same platform to deliver the first round of SAP payments to beneficiaries of the 4Ps.

UNICEF convened a series of webinars and roundtable discussions on the implications of COVID-19 and social protection, and the implementation of SAP. It also convened the Sub-Working Group on Social Protection under the United Nations Thematic Working Group on Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 in the early months.

Critical Success/Challenging Factors

A major challenge in effective implementation of SAP was the absence of an updated and objective poverty registry and there is no national ID. Except for the 4Ps and social pension, DSWD relegated beneficiary targeting to local government units which encountered several issues leading to delays in SAP distribution. The DSWD launched the ReliefAgad, a digital platform for registering beneficiaries for the second tranche of SAP payments. DSWD indicated they are moving ahead with the full digitization of social protection payments in response to COVID-19 to facilitate safe and efficient cash transfers.

The digitization of payments for the second tranche of SAP payments is nonetheless limited only to urban centres and areas where there is Internet connectivity. It excludes the geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas where, arguably, some of the poorest also reside. Manual payments will still be the mode of cash transfers for these areas. DSWD continues to receive complaints of exclusion from SAP payments for other equally affected vulnerable groups.

Initial results of the ECT implementation in BARMM point to higher uptake of essential health services for children 0–2 years old, since pregnant/lactating mothers had to go to village health centres to have their children registered. UNICEF was able to demonstrate a simpler process of targeting: families with 0-2 year old children and excluded from 4Ps and SAP.

Way Forward

In light of financing from other development partners for social protection for COVID-19, UNICEF will continue to work on the regular programme of policy and operational support to the 4Ps – making it nutrition-sensitive, more inclusive (not only on lifting the three child limit but also looking at children with disability issues in the programme), refinement of the 4Ps case management system and case referral pathways. The World Bank and ADB have recently approved combined loans of USD 1 billion to support cash transfers in 4Ps, including digitization of payments as part of their COVID-19 response.

Under the Joint SDG Fund for Social Protection, UNICEF will continue to support laying the foundations for shock responsive social protection in BARMM. The following activities will soon commence:

- A review of the poverty registry and various household lists and assessment forms will soon commence to integrate vulnerability indicators.

- An operations manual and financial guidelines will be developed for the implementation of various small cash transfers schemes in BARMM.

- Depending on funding approvals from other donors there is potential to implement subsequent emergency cash transfers in BARMM for COVID-19.
In order to swiftly provide support to the most vulnerable population using existing cash transfers, the cabinet approved a measure to supplement existing cash transfers to defined vulnerable groups with an additional monthly payment of THB 1,000 (approximately USD 32) for three months. The recipients include all beneficiaries of the Child Support Grant (1.4 million people), in addition to beneficiaries of the Disability Grant, Old Age Allowance and State Welfare Card programme who have not received other COVID-19 related financial support. In total, the new cash transfers cover an estimated 8 million families, with a total budget of THB 23.8 billion (USD 765 million). Other major social protection support by the Government includes financial assistance of THB 5,000 per month for three months to 13 million informal workers and 10 million farmers. There were 3,700 confirmed COVID-19 cases as of 19 October.
Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UN joint socioeconomic impact assessment</strong></td>
<td>Providing forecasts of macroeconomic indicators as well as sectoral impact analysis including poverty and social protection</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research</td>
<td>UNDP, UNCT, National Economic and Social Development Council, Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), Economist Intelligence Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Online survey on COVID-19 impact</strong></td>
<td>Analysis of the concerns, economic impact (income and expenditure) as well as access to online learning</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research; Social module (education, anxiety, etc.); and Economic module (expenditure, income, employment etc.)</td>
<td>National Statistical Office, TDRI, IHPP, Chulalongkorn University (Faculty of Economics), UN Data Group for Thailand</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Research of COVID-19 impact on young families and children with disabilities</strong></td>
<td>Analysis of impact on beneficiaries of CSG and Disability Grant with policy recommendations</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research; Inclusive social protection</td>
<td>TDRI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research on impact of COVID-19 on children left behind</strong></td>
<td>Analysis of impact on income and expenditure as well as household debt situation</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research; Inclusive social protection</td>
<td>Institute of Population and Social Research, Mahidol University</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>UN joint technical paper on social protection response to COVID-19</strong></td>
<td>Costed recommendations to top-up social transfers</td>
<td>Social protection policy options and costing</td>
<td>ILO, UN Women, IOM</td>
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**UNICEF Technical Support**

The Government’s policy decision followed immediate and strategic advocacy efforts led by UNICEF in collaboration with the ILO, UN Women and IOM as early as March when the number of COVID-19 cases was limited.

In a swift response to the COVID-19 socioeconomic impacts, UNICEF and the UN partners submitted a Policy Note to the Government at the Prime Minister and key ministers’ level in March with a package of costed policy recommendations on the use of social protection to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities in Thailand.

With the technical support from the UN, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security led the development of the proposal to top-up cash transfers. The proposal was endorsed by the Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, and it was approved by the Cabinet after a policy review process led by the National Economic and Social Development Council.

This policy note was a key tool for advocacy at the highest level. Acknowledging that the most vulnerable are being hit hardest by COVID-19, the strength of this policy advice resided in pinpointing existing social grants as a perfect vehicle for the Government to reach the most vulnerable population easily and with extremely limited additional transaction costs.
Importantly, the policy options were presented with their estimated costs to facilitate fiscal discussions on feasibility.

Public advocacy was another key element of strategic engagement for building wider support to influence top decision-makers. Building on a strategic partnership with one of Thailand’s top media outlets, UNICEF launched extensive communication campaigns, including human interest stories, feature articles and video clips. UNICEF also mobilized a wider range of actors to build support, including academics and more than 100 organizations under the civil society coalition for the Child Support Grant, to bring the challenges of children and families to the centre of policy discussion and public attention.

Evidence generation has also highlighted the vulnerabilities of families with children and has led to UNICEF’s successful advocacy for expanding the Child Support Grant to all children under 6 years old to be approved by the National Child and Youth Committee, pending Cabinet submission by early 2021.

**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

The success of the action built upon existing partnerships and trust developed over the years, with United Nations partners as well as stakeholders in the Government. The involved UN agencies have been working on social protection systems strengthening with the MSDHS under the joint SDG fund on Social Protection. UNICEF has been a long-term partner on child sensitive social protection systems, including the Child Support Grant.

The strong support and policy push by the Ministry was another key success factor to successfully obtain the budget, which resulted from long-term capacity-building and strategic relationship building.

**Way Forward**

Continue technical support and advocacy on the universal Child Support Grant, to be approved by the Cabinet following full endorsement by the National Child and Youth Committee.

Conduct a comprehensive review of the social protection systems to further strengthen the linkages of different programmes in building an integrated social protection system.

Strengthen linkages between cash transfers and relevant services, particularly for the Child Support Grant, to address multidimensional poverty faced by children.
As of November, Timor-Leste had recorded just 30 cases of COVID-19 and no community transmission and no deaths. Nevertheless, the economic consequences of the pandemic have been severe and far-reaching. On 2 April, parliament approved USD 250 million withdrawal from the Petroleum Fund for general spending as well as stimulus package for the economy. The package, which included cash transfers to manage economic and financial risks from the COVID-19, was finally approved on 20 April.

As part of the package, the Government enacted the first near-universal cash transfer in the country’s young history. At a cost of over USD 60 million, the Uma Kain payment took the form of a one-off cash transfer of USD 200 – equal to USD100 per month for the first two months of the state of emergency in April and May – to all households with a monthly income of less than USD 500 in all of the 452 villages in the country. The pay-outs finally took place during the month of June (and July in Oecusse). The experience with COVID-19 has significantly increased government buy-in for universal social protection.

A new Economic Recovery Plan was approved by the Council of Ministers on 12 August and its implementation is forthcoming. It includes a wide array of measures to boost the economic recovery of the country in the two years following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan includes a food basket voucher programme, extraordinary support measures for informal workers, and a full section dedicated to social protection, with the approval of the National Social Protection Strategy at the forefront.
### Table 2. UNICEF’s programmatic support

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<th>Population covered</th>
<th>Partners</th>
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<tr>
<td>Guidance on the health and safety aspect of the emergency cash distribution, inclusion of information to families, and provision of personal protective equipment.</td>
<td>318,257 households to be reached through Cash Plus</td>
<td>Cash Plus; Nutrition-sensitive social protection</td>
<td>298,816 households received payouts</td>
<td>WHO, ILO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### UNICEF Technical Support

Funded by the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Funds, the UN country team – including UNICEF – provided technical and financial support for the implementation of the emergency cash transfer scheme. Led by the ILO, the United Nations, along with other development partners, provided technical support to the Government in designing the most effective, efficient and safe implementation plan for the scheme. UNICEF also used its Global Thematic Humanitarian Fund (softly earmarked pooled funds, whose flexibility is key to responding quickly to evolving needs) to support the distribution of information to families along with the cash as well as the provision of personal protective equipment for the implementation team.

UNICEF provided guidance, together with the World Health Organization, on the health and safety aspect of the cash distribution. UNICEF also successfully advocated for the inclusion of information to families, contributing to the implementation of the first cash plus scheme in Timor-Leste:

- UNICEF conducted extensive end-user monitoring on the cash plus aspect, to better understand families’ needs and preferences on receiving information.

- UNICEF and the Timor-Leste Commission for the Rights of the Child conducted an online survey for adolescents and youth on their COVID-19 experience. Respondents indicated that in their family, the cash was mostly spent on food, which confirms findings from other research. Half of them felt they had an influence on how the cash was used.

- UNICEF provided personal protective equipment (masks and hand sanitizer) for the post-complaint mechanism payments.

### Critical Success/Challenging Factors

When advocating for a cash plus scheme, UNICEF originally envisioned the provision of a service, i.e., distributing tapes to measure mid-upper arm circumference for malnutrition screening. However this initial idea was not possible, due to logistic constraints to print the accompanying screening instructions as there was limited capacity for printing large numbers in-country and borders were closed.

UNICEF’s relationship with the Ministry of Health was key to the cash plus aspect being accepted. It was critical to advocate through different stakeholders.
The use of flexible funding (such as thematic funding or regular resources) was and is key, as it enables UNICEF to respond to unexpected, last-minute Government requests and to pursue opportunities as they arise.

**Way Forward**

The COVID-19 cash transfer has helped build the case in Timor-Leste for both universal social protection and for cash plus interventions. UNICEF will continue to look for opportunities to keep this interest alive and push these further, as the Government may expand its cash transfer scheme to vulnerable families so that it covers younger children. The Government is generally expected to give a greater focus to social protection once it adopts the National Social Protection Strategy.

The COVID-19 cash transfer has given the opportunity to UNICEF to demonstrate its support to the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion, for instance with express procurement of personal protective equipment for front-line personnel making the post-complaint mechanism payments to beneficiaries. UNICEF will also continue to work closely with other UN agencies, particularly the ILO, to identify opportunities for both advocacy and direct support.

The COVID-19 cash transfer, and in particular the difficulty that the Government has had with establishing the list of cash transfer beneficiaries, has helped build momentum for the unique identifier initiative, supported by UNICEF and UNDP. The Government is exploring how to provide citizens with a unique identifier, which should, in turn, facilitate planning and reduce fraud, particularly for social benefits. UNICEF will continue to be fully engaged in supporting this initiative, including through fundraising and facilitating a societal debate on the benefits and needed safeguards to make it a success.
To contain the outbreak, the Government of Viet Nam put in place regulations restricting the mobility of people, closing schools and non-essential service facilities. As of November, the country had 1,281 confirmed cases, and 35 deaths. The National COVID-19 Response Plan – a multi-sectoral response to the crisis – was first issued on 20 January and updated on 31 January and in November. Resolution No. 42 included a social protection package worth VND 62 trillion (approximately USD 2.6 billion) to provide cash support of VND 1 million (approximately USD 43) for those most vulnerable and workers per month per household or worker who lost an informal sector job from April to June 2020; and it provided enterprises impacted by the pandemic with low interest credit to pay workers’ salaries.

Yet, just as regular social assistance in Viet Nam is weak and marred by exclusion and low coverage – less than 1 per cent of children aged 0–3 years and 9.5 per cent aged 4–15 years receive any benefit – the design and implementation of the Government’s social protection support package during COVID-19 omitted or underserved several specific groups. In particular, many families with children were not eligible for the cash assistance package under Resolution No. 42 due to narrow beneficiary categories, complex eligibility criteria, cumbersome administrative processes and a lack of budget at the local level in the absence of transfers from central level.

Many families with children struggled to make ends meet due to lost or reduced income and weak social protection systems, forcing many to cut spending on food or borrow money. Those who were already socioeconomically disadvantaged before the pandemic experienced even more severe impacts during COVID-19, particularly poor and near-poor families, families with children with disabilities, single-parent families, migrants, families in remote areas (primarily ethnic minorities) who already had limited access to health care, welfare and education services.
Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence, Data and Research</th>
<th>Area of Expertise</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rapid Assessment on the Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Families in Viet Nam</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research</td>
<td>Ha Noi University of Public Health, JICA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid Assessment on Social Assistance needs of Children and Families in Viet Nam Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic</td>
<td>Socioeconomic research; Monitoring and Evaluation</td>
<td>MOLISA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Analysis on Social Impacts of COVID-19 and Strategic Policy Recommendations</td>
<td>Social protection policy options; Social protection system reform</td>
<td>FAO, ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, WHO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Decree 136 with a focus on social assistance for children and propose policy options for the development of a new Decree in line with MPSARD targets and relevant to the context of a lower middle-income country</td>
<td>Social protection systems building and reform; Shock-responsive social protection</td>
<td>Maastricht Graduate School of Governance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**UNICEF Technical Support**

In response to the shortcomings in emergency social protection response in Viet Nam, UNICEF and other UN agencies stepped up technical support to develop the Master Plan on Social Assistance Reform and Development 2017–2025 and Vision to 2030. The Master Plan aims to increase the benefit level of social assistance and expand coverage to more children, especially to children under 3 years of age as well as emergency assistance to all affected children. UNICEF has provided technical support for the revision of Decree 136 proposing the expansion of regular cash assistance as a basis for strengthening shock responsive social protection, with some important policy recommendations:

- The financial resources needed for universal child benefits are expected to decrease over time owing to Viet Nam’s stable and rapid GDP growth combined with the downward trend in child population growth (i.e., a decline in birth rate). Coverage of all children under 3 years of age will require an investment of around 0.66 per cent of GDP (if benefit level is raised to VND 720,000 per month) or 0.89 per cent of GDP (if benefit level is raised to VND 1,000,000). Simulations indicate that universal benefits for all children under 3 years of age will cost only 0.45 per cent of GDP in 2025 and 0.32 per cent of GDP in 2030 (if benefit level remains at VND 720,000 per month).

- Decree 136 in particular and social assistance policies in general should become more shock-responsive to proactively protect children from multiple risks at both idiosyncratic and covariate levels. Therefore, the decree should not only recognize covariate shocks (i.e., hazards including natural disasters, pandemic and economic shocks) but also idiosyncratic shocks that often happen at household level.
• Establish a mechanism for timely collection, analysis and dissemination of data on the impacts on children as a way to institutionalize rapid assessments into the social assistance system and design policy responses, including emergency social assistance package financial resources.

UNICEF has generated extensive evidence and synthesized it into concise briefs for policy dialogue and external communication to strengthen the social protection system in the long term, as follows:

• Assessment of Targeting Approaches and Mechanisms (Inclusion and Exclusion Errors) in Existing Social Assistance Schemes.

• Study on Improving the Effectiveness and Coverage of Social Assistance for Children with a Focus on Consolidation Policy.

• Protecting Public Investment in Children in Viet Nam.

• Building a Shock-Responsive Social Protection System in Viet Nam with a Focus on Children.

• Rapid Assessment on the Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Families in Viet Nam.

• Rapid Assessment on Social Assistance needs of Children and Families in Viet Nam Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

• UN Analysis on Social Impacts of COVID-19 and Strategic Policy Recommendations for Viet Nam.

UNICEF engaged in high-level policy advocacy through a 2-tier approach:

1. Through diversified institutional partnerships with Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, National Assembly, Office of the Government, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ministry of Justice, UN agencies, development partners (such as GIZ), international finance institutions (particularly the International Monetary Fund, also in relation to their Article IV consultations).

2. Through UNICEF Viet Nam’s Representative, who was personally involved in high-level advocacy events with key Government leaders, and displayed UNICEF’s technical support during COVID-19 in countless media interviews and venues.

**Critical Success/Failure Factors**

Diversifying partnerships – In addition to long-standing cooperation with UN agencies, leveraging new, yet like-minded partners that have strategic partnership with crucial ministries is important – for example, as a result of a series of high-level dialogues, the International Monetary Fund is emerging as a key partner in policy advocacy to expand social assistance in the immediate and long-term, and to increase broader social spending, including vis-à-vis the Ministry of Finance and in relation to Article IV consultations. Consequently, in its press release summarizing outcomes of the Article IV mission, the IMF stated that “over the medium-term, the emphasis should be on mobilizing revenue for financing green and productive infrastructure, strengthening social protection systems, and safeguarding debt sustainability.”

COVID-19 as an opportunity to push policy advocacy agenda – The partnership with the Government has enabled a nationwide survey and highlighted the importance of institutionalizing rapid assessments as part of a shock responsive social protection system. Evidence was generated and disseminated in a timely manner for policy reform processes, acknowledged by key Government leaders (for example, the Deputy Prime Minister, the National Assembly and line ministries), development partners and international finance institutions. Involving UNICEF Viet Nam’s own Representative is key to leverage high-level policy advocacy and partnerships for reform via the National Assembly, the Government, development partners, international finance institutions, the United Nations and the media.

**Way Forward**

UNICEF will continue with its policy advocacy in finalizing the revision of Decree 136 and will carry out a feasibility study on shock responsive social protection.
# Key Facts and Data

## Table 1. Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pacific island countries and territories</th>
<th>First Covid-19 case</th>
<th>Outbreak declaration and measures</th>
<th>Date and type of social protection responses</th>
<th>Days to implement SP since first case of COVID-19 or Emergency measures*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>19 March</td>
<td>3 February – Travel ban</td>
<td>21 March / March, April, August Vertical expansion</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook Islands</td>
<td>No cases</td>
<td>26 March – ‘Code Yellow’ measures</td>
<td>16 March / March, April Vertical expansion</td>
<td>–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>No cases</td>
<td>20 March – State of emergency</td>
<td>1 February / April, June Vertical expansion</td>
<td>–48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon Islands</td>
<td>3 October</td>
<td>27 March – State of emergency</td>
<td>24 March / March, May, September Vertical expansion</td>
<td>–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonga</td>
<td>No cases</td>
<td>20 March – State of emergency</td>
<td>1 April / April Vertical expansion</td>
<td>–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuvalu</td>
<td>No cases</td>
<td>20 March – State of Public Health Emergency</td>
<td>26 March / March, May Vertical expansion</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanuatu</td>
<td>10 November</td>
<td>26 March – State of emergency</td>
<td>1 March / March, April, August Vertical expansion</td>
<td>–25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: Only a few countries in the Pacific have recorded community infections (for example, French Polynesia, Guam and Mariana Islands), while most cases were detected in people arriving in the country. All Pacific countries have enacted containment measures, nonetheless. Thus, the average is based on either the number of days since the first case of COVID-19 or since the first pre-emptive emergency measures were enacted.
As of 11th November 2020, nine Pacific island countries and territories (Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, New Caledonia, Northern Mariana Islands, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Wallis and Futuna) have reported 16,008 cases and 140 deaths from COVID-19. Responses to the pandemic have almost erased Pacific island tourism, interrupted trade and supply chains and potentially reduced remittance flows. All Pacific island countries and territories have suffered from reduced commerce and trade, the decline in government revenues and increased government debt and unemployment. However, inflation has generally been contained, and development assistance and budget support has increased. Ten Pacific island countries are in the top 20 aid-dependent countries in the world, with limited fiscal space as some economies are already faced with high debt levels. Finally, remittances, important to most Pacific economies, are expected to decline as Pacific migrants lose their jobs abroad.

To address the economic loss created by COVID-19, most Pacific island countries have adopted stimulus packages. Fiji and Vanuatu, for example, announced packages of USD 400 million and USD 32 million, respectively. Stimulus packages vary from one country to another, but in general they include a mix of government, banking, superannuation and monetary policy reforms. Some Governments have, for example, said that they would subsidise the salaries of workers laid off by the COVID-19 measures, remove school fees and provide tax relief to the business sector and workers. Workers have been allowed and encouraged to access their respective provident funds. On average, safety net spending in six Pacific countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu) is the most important identified priority at 22 per cent of the total, followed closely behind by health spending (21 per cent), then by business support (13 per cent), food security (9 per cent) and infrastructure (4 per cent).

The key questions are whether the stimulus packages will work, and whether they will be sustainable if the pandemic continues for a long time. Those countries hit by Tropical Cyclone Harold in early April – Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu – had to expand or revise their stimulus packages to respond to the hardest-hit areas.

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<td>Socioeconomic research; Social protection policy options and costing</td>
<td>Ministries of Finance, National Planning and National Statistics Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of the social cash transfer programmes in Cook Islands 2013-2018</td>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation; Social protection system strengthening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of social protection systems in Tokelau, Samoa and Niue</td>
<td>Social protection system strengthening</td>
<td>UNDP; Tokelau’s Department of Education, Health and Finance; Ministers of Finance, Social Welfare and Internal Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Fiji’s Parenthood Assistance Payment programme</td>
<td>Social protection system strengthening</td>
<td>Ministry of Economy; Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UNICEF Technical Support

Most Pacific island countries (except the Cook Islands and Fiji) have no comprehensive social protection system involving cash transfers that target children, women and vulnerable families. This means that social protection systems are quite limited in terms of positively impacting poor families and reducing poverty levels. In its work on social protection, UNICEF focuses on the following four components: i) social transfers; ii) programmes that ensure economic and social access to services; iii) social support and care services; and iv) legislation and policies that ensure equity and non-discrimination in access to services and livelihoods for children and families.

In 14 Pacific island countries, the UNICEF Pacific multi-country office supports evidence generation, systems strengthening and South-South cooperation.

UNICEF led socioeconomic impact assessments for social protection and basic services in Fiji, Samoa and Solomon Islands. The main objective was to measure how many more people may fall below the poverty line due to significant loss of income in high-risk sectors. The recommendation provided evidence to policymakers on various costed options for the expansion of existing social protection programmes and the introduction of temporary programmes to support newly vulnerable and poor people.

Through the Joint SDG Fund, UNICEF in collaboration with other UN agencies is supporting the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau to review existing social protection programmes, to establish a formal social protection floor, including programme design, policies and fiscal space analysis, and to strengthen management information systems.

In the Cook Islands, UNICEF supported the Government-led evaluation of existing social protection programmes. The findings enabled the Government to scale up existing programmes during the COVID-19 response. A cabinet paper was drafted seeking endorsement of the evaluation report and implementation of its recommendations. The Government is already considering significant changes to the programme design and size of benefits, and it is strengthening its management information system.

UNICEF is supporting the Government of Fiji to review the existing Parenthood Assistance Payment programme, develop a monitoring and evaluation framework and identify synergies between existing social welfare programmes. The review is currently underway.

UNICEF is supporting the Governments of Tuvalu and Kiribati to develop social protection legislation and policy, respectively. Community consultations are complete and legislation is being drafted under the guidance of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Attorney General’s Office.

UNICEF in collaboration with the Government of the Marshall Islands conducted the Integrated Child Health and Nutrition Survey, which resulted in leveraging USD 12 million in World Bank grants from the Individual Development Account for early childhood development. Approximately USD 3 million is allocated for design and implementation of nutrition sensitive social transfers for children and pregnant mothers.

Through the health and nutrition programme, UNICEF is supporting the Marshall Islands with developing of costed High Impact Nutrition framework. The Social Policy Section supported costing of the framework and provided technical advice on the component for nutrition sensitive cash transfers. The draft framework has been submitted to the Government for review and endorsement.

Since 2018 UNICEF supported learning opportunities for Fiji, Kiribati and Tuvalu. A South-South exchange programme, planned for the Cook Islands and the Marshall Islands in 2020, has been postponed to 2021.
**Critical Success/Challenging Factors**

The lack of a comprehensive social protection system in the Pacific, except for Fiji and the Cook Islands, is a critical factor hindering the social protection agenda. Other challenges include the lack of political will; poor targeting and programme design; limited data; limited fiscal space; and lack of capacity. Also, most Pacific island countries are classified as fragile States, and they are vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change.

**Way Forward**

UNICEF will work closely with the 14 Pacific island countries to build their institutional capacity to develop and deliver equitable child-sensitive social protection systems, particularly in the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Niue, Tokelau, Tonga and Tuvalu.

UNICEF will use evidence from existing programmes to advocate for the development of social protection programmes across the Pacific and encourage countries and territories to learn from the experiences in the Pacific and countries in Asia that are leading the way on child- and disaster-sensitive social protection.

To strengthen existing social protection systems to better protect children and respond to natural disasters/climate change and public health pandemic, UNICEF will work with respective government departments to improve specific areas as needed, such as strategies, policies, programme design, information management, targeting and programme coverage (including during emergencies), and delivery efficiency and effectiveness.

UNICEF will work with government departments in the 14 countries to generate evidence on the impact of existing programmes related to poverty, equity, economic development and general human development indicators.