



# UNICEF'S SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Strengthening social protection systems before,  
during and after crises

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The coronavirus pandemic has triggered an unprecedented socioeconomic crisis, which threatens to roll back years of progress in reducing child poverty, leaving children deprived of essential services and families struggling financially. **Without concerted action to expand social protection systems, families who are already barely getting by will likely be pushed into poverty, and the poorest families could face levels of deprivation that have not been seen for decades.** UNICEF is strongly supporting governments and people in over 115 countries to deliver social protection and strengthen systems – and is committed to continuing and expanding this work during the COVID-19 response and recovery.

**– Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director**



## UNICEF'S SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSE TO COVID-19

**COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on children and their families. Current estimates suggest that an additional 117 million children will be living in poverty in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, with impacts extending into the medium and longer term.**

Beyond income, the pandemic is deepening poverty across every dimension of a child's life, including health, education, nutrition, housing, water and sanitation. In addition to these vulnerabilities, children who face further exclusion due to gender, ethnicity, geographic location, displacement or disability status, will be adversely impacted. Unless addressed, these compounding effects will be felt most immediately by children and their families, but the longer-term impact on societies and economies could be devastating.

**Social protection is a recognized strategy for poverty reduction, as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1, 3, 5, 8 and 10), with a proven role in supporting children and families.** It is a critical risk management strategy that is particularly crucial in times of crisis, as joblessness and poverty rise. It is also a lifeline, protecting families from falling deeper into poverty and helping them avoid negative coping strategies. Moreover, extensive evidence shows that social protection programmes have positive impacts across a range of areas, from improved access to health and education to increased food and economic security and child protection outcomes.

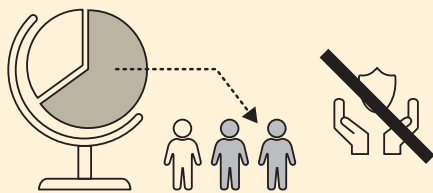
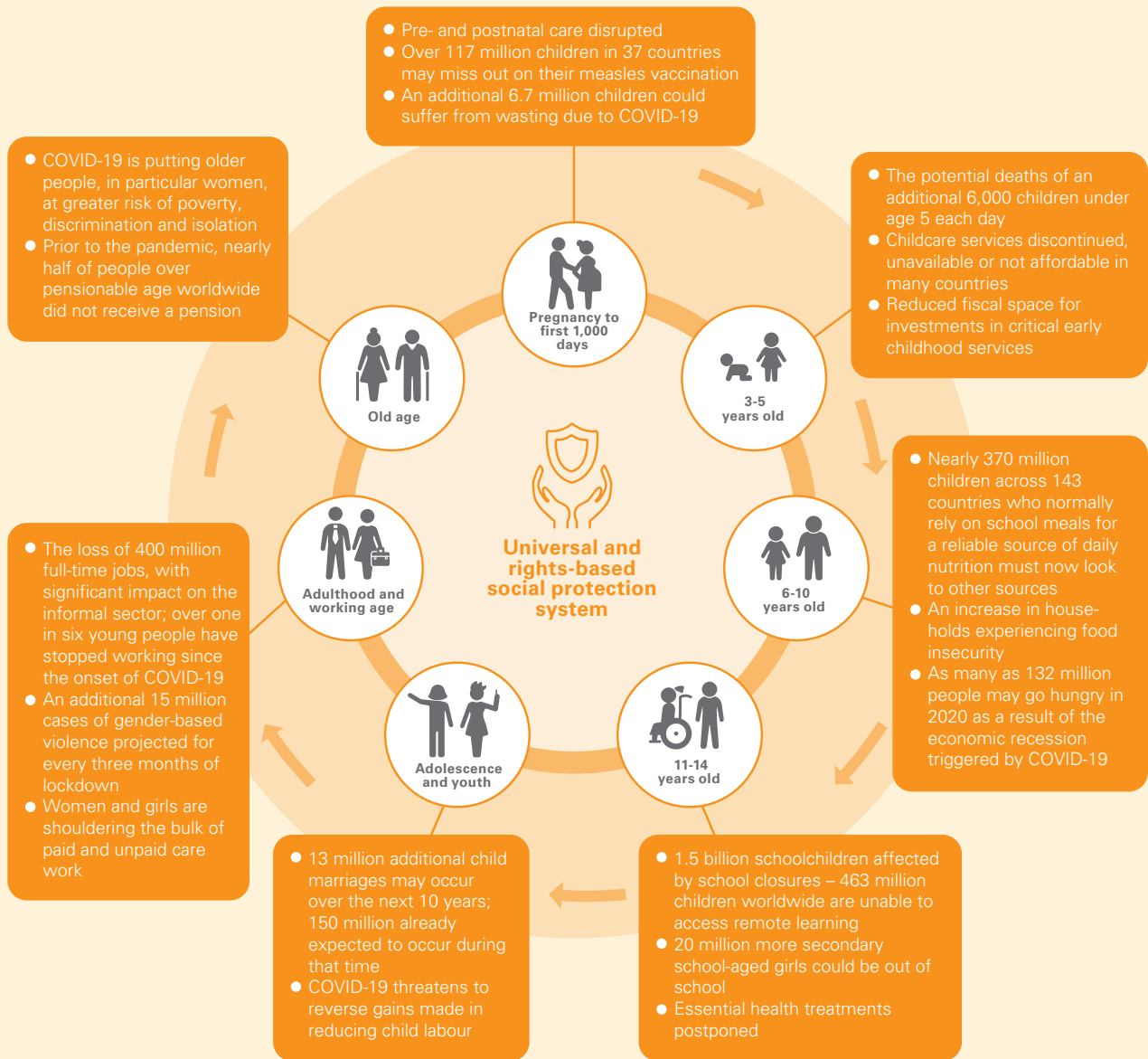
**In response to COVID-19, over 190 countries have expanded their social protection coverage, including more than 155 countries that have expanded national cash transfer programmes.**

However, the pandemic has also highlighted existing gaps in social protection systems across regions: Two out of three children have no access to any form of child or family benefits, and protection gaps are found in relation to those working in the informal and care economy, in equitable access to health insurance, and in gender-sensitive and inclusive social protection. So, while the response has been positive, the challenge is to make sure it is not simply a stop-gap solution, but the start of a longer-term process of building sustainable social protection systems.

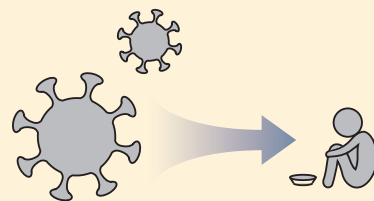
**With teams on the ground in over 115 countries, UNICEF is ready and able to support governments' social protection response and recovery programmes.** UNICEF has been working with governments for over 20 years to build and strengthen social protection systems in a variety of contexts.

Already, in response to the pandemic, UNICEF has helped strengthen national systems that are reaching over 44 million households.

# Impact of COVID-19 throughout the life course



**Prior to the pandemic, 2 out of 3 children globally did not have access to any form of social protection**



**COVID-19 may push an additional 117 million children into poverty by the end of 2020**

## UNICEF'S COMMITMENT

UNICEF is committed to evidence-based solutions and has a 20-year track record in building resilient, responsive and sustainable national social protection systems.

- **TRUSTED BY GOVERNMENTS AND PARTNERS:** UNICEF has been present in most countries for over 70 years and is trusted as an honest and transparent partner to governments, the UN family, research partners and civil society organizations. UNICEF also chairs social protection working groups in many countries and regions.
- **THERE IN EVERY CONTEXT – BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CRISIS:** UNICEF is present in every context in the world working on social protection, from pressing humanitarian settings to low-, middle- and high-income countries. Within countries, we work across sectors and at every level of government from central authorities to local governments and communities.
- **RIGHTS-BASED AND INCLUSIVE:** Guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF is dedicated to a rights-based approach to social protection. The highest priority is given to reaching the most vulnerable, including girls, children with disabilities, indigenous children, children living in extreme poverty in rural and urban areas, and refugee and migrant children and their families, through inclusive social protection interventions.
- **WORKING INNOVATIVELY AND HOLISTICALLY ACROSS SECTORS:** UNICEF is committed to evidence-generating solutions, leveraging expertise among stakeholders and across sectors, including health, education, child protection, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and HIV prevention, treatment and care, among others to support systems-based, integrated approaches that enhance sector outcomes and their sustainability over time.
- **FOCUSING ON NATIONALLY LED AND FINANCED SOLUTIONS:** Working with established partners, including international financial institutions, UNICEF supports governments on public finance, social sector budgeting, fiscal space analysis and prioritization to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of social protection investments.
- **PASSIONATE, MISSION DRIVEN AND TIRELESS:** The passion and pride of working for the world's children drives everything we do. Ultimately, working with UNICEF on social protection means partnering with teams who are strategic, passionate and relentless in achieving our mission of reaching vulnerable children and families.

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I am pleased to acknowledge the consistent support of UNICEF in the expansion of South Africa's social protection programmes, which have contributed significantly to our development objectives by extending services that promote and protect the rights of vulnerable children, including almost universal access to birth registration, basic education and primary health care. The child support grant now reaches over 65 per cent of South Africa's children, and is playing a vital role in supporting children and families during the economic impacts of COVID-19.

– Hon. Lindiwe Zulu, Minister of Social Development, South Africa

UNICEF is committed to supporting government-led response and recovery efforts, providing technical advice, operational support, monitoring and evaluation guidance, and capacity development. The most vulnerable children and families are at the core of our support to countries to build integrated and inclusive social protection systems.

## A foundation of evidence: research and analysis



- Multidimensional socioeconomic impact assessments
- Real-time surveys
- Risk and vulnerability analysis
- Assessments of social protection systems, including readiness assessments
- Research and impact evaluations

## Integrated programming: design, operations and scale up



- Design and implementation support to cash transfer programmes
- Cash plus: ensuring cash transfers are linked with access to services that reduce risk and augment results (including education, health, nutrition, and child protection)
- Facilitating linkages between different social protection measures across sectors (such as fee waivers, health insurance, cash and school feeding, among others)
- Social welfare workforce strengthening, including family outreach interventions, case management and capacity building
- Improved and expanded health insurance towards universal health coverage
- Childcare and employability of adolescents: supporting the expansion of family-friendly policies, including adequate and paid parental leave, fee waivers or subsidized childcare services, including in the informal sector
- Development and integration of management information systems for better identification and outreach

## A systems framework: policy, legislation, coordination and financing



- Strengthened policy, strategies, legislation and coordination of the social protection system
- Support to strengthen the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of national social protection financing, including costing, investment cases, fiscal space analysis and identification of potential sources of finance; the last may comprise budget reallocations, expanded access to concessional finance, taxation or subsidy reform, and/or the monitoring or tracking of public expenditure
- Gender-sensitive/responsive social protection programmes addressing gendered life course risks, access to services and economic empowerment
- Social protection systems sensitive to persons living with disabilities

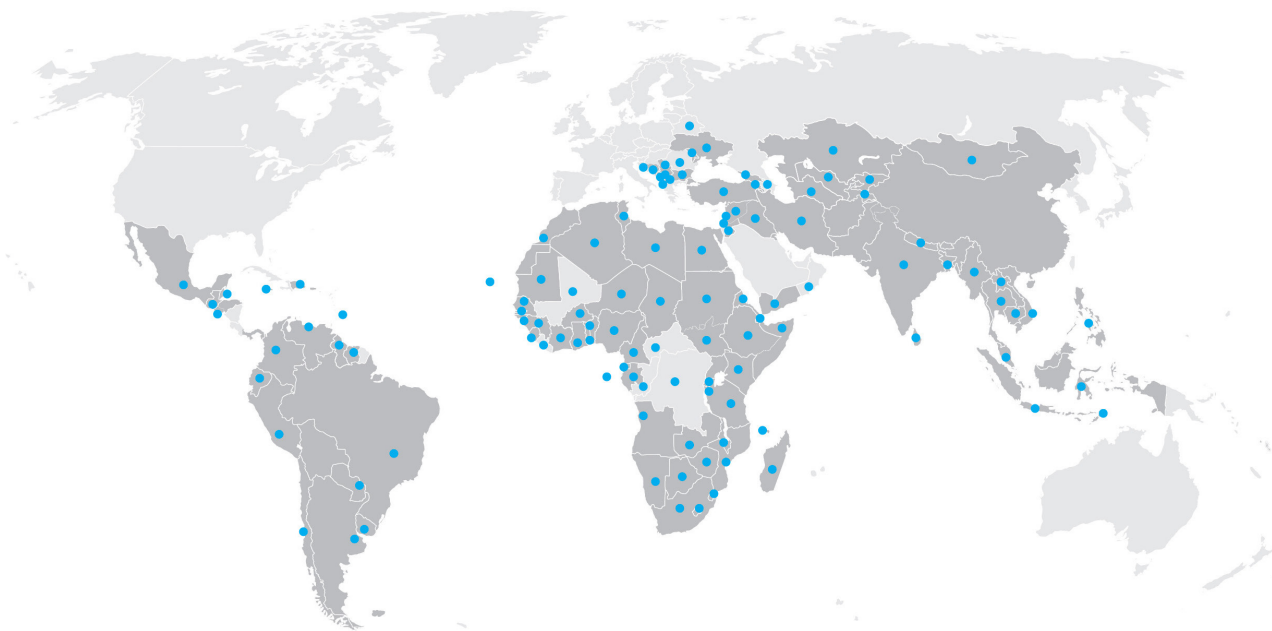
## Social protection in fragile, risk-prone and crisis contexts



- Design and implementation support to maintain, scale up and augment national cash transfers programmes during a crisis response, including the strengthening of cash plus components
- Direct rapid delivery of humanitarian cash transfers where needed, supporting linkages and development of nascent social protection systems where they do not exist or are overstretched
- System assessments – determining the readiness of national social protection systems in implementation of a cash transfer programme and assessing the most appropriate delivery options
- Strengthening the shock responsiveness of national social protection systems, and supporting the development of policy and programme capacity and the ability to respond to future crises, including in the contexts of migration and displacement

UNICEF's capacity and global presence has placed it at the centre of the international response to COVID-19. The map below shows the extent of UNICEF support before COVID-19 hit, and now during the response and recovery phase.

## UNICEF's support to strengthening social protection systems and the COVID-19 response



- Before the crisis: UNICEF support to strengthen social protection systems
- During and after the crisis: UNICEF support provided in the social protection response to COVID-19

### UNICEF Madagascar leads coordination efforts to facilitate a cash plus response

UNICEF brought together the World Bank, the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Union, the Red Cross and key non-governmental organizations to support the Government's strategy to continue existing social protection programmes, and expand coverage to children and families most affected by the pandemic. Since 2016, UNICEF has helped strengthen the national safety net programme through both technical assistance as well as support for the expansion of cash transfers that promote primary and secondary education in target areas. The social protection response to COVID-19 is focusing on the

three largest cities, with particular attention to urban communities where income was severely affected by confinement measures. The emergency cash transfer (100,000 Ariary or US\$26 per payment) reached over 240,000 families by July 2020, with an emphasis on cash plus interventions facilitating access to basic services in the poorest households, and a priority on water and sanitation.

### UNICEF Jordan enables effective delivery mechanisms to expand the national social protection programme in response to the pandemic

As a well-established partner to the National Aid Fund and the humanitarian social protection initiative



(Hajati), UNICEF was able to help the Government in swiftly rolling out an emergency cash assistance programme to families affected by the economic impact of COVID-19. In collaboration with the World Bank, UNICEF provided assistance that helped the Government reach almost 400,000 beneficiaries. UNICEF's support included targeting, registration, managing payments, as well as setting up grievance redressal mechanisms that supported identification of almost 20,000 unregistered beneficiaries. RapidPro, an innovative SMS and digital communication tool, was an essential element. Towards leveraging lessons from the current response, UNICEF is working with the Government to articulate a new shock responsive social protection chapter to the National Social Protection Strategy, which UNICEF helped develop and launch in 2019.

### **UNICEF Sierra Leone supports the Government to integrate services related to gender-based violence (GBV) into the social protection response**

To respond effectively to the impact of COVID-19 on children and families, the government decided to adjust the national social safety net along with an emergency cash transfer programme for households of informal workers in urban areas. UNICEF is promoting the extension of training on preventing and responding to GBV, and on psychosocial support to front-line social protection workers, and strengthening awareness of existing GBV services. UNICEF is also providing technical support for the adapted social safety net's behaviour change communication package to ensure synergies with existing campaigns focusing on GBV, child marriage, and child health and nutrition. The pre-targeting round of U-Report polling revealed that community monitors felt well prepared to fulfil their role in targeting. Additional training needs were identified related to conflict management and the handling of complaints.

### **UNICEF Tajikistan invests in preparedness to test the Government's shock responsive social protection system**

Prior to the onset of the crisis, UNICEF, in close collaboration with the government and other partners, developed a model and standard operating procedures for an emergency social protection programme based

on the national Target Social Assistance (TSA) scheme. The development and piloting of the model is part of UNICEF's ongoing emphasis on shock responsive social protection preparedness, which began in 2017 with an assessment of the national social protection system's capacity to respond to crises. The supplemental COVID-19 cash transfer will top up transfers to current TSA beneficiary families with children under 2 who face food insecurity. UNICEF will work with the World Bank to document the experience and capture lessons learned to further advocate for strengthening the shock responsiveness of the social protection system.

### **UNICEF Sri Lanka's leadership influences the strategic and policy elements of the social protection response**

From the outset of the crisis, UNICEF's strategic engagement and advocacy with the Presidential Secretariat, Department of National Planning, and the Presidential Task Force for the COVID-19 Response contributed to a quick and large cash transfer response. UNICEF Sri Lanka developed recommendations based on the UN Framework for the Immediate Socioeconomic Response to COVID-19, which was presented to the Government. The cash transfer is estimated to have benefitted 47 per cent of households, and subsequently expanded to reach 66 per cent of households. UNICEF continues to advocate for universal child, old-age and disability benefits to support people affected by the pandemic.

### **UNICEF Guatemala uses innovative platform to achieve results at scale**

Prior to COVID-19, UNICEF engaged with the Ministry of Social Development to strengthen the social registry and revamp information systems. At the onset of the pandemic, UNICEF and the World Bank supported the design and implementation of Bono Familia, an unconditional emergency cash transfer programme that identifies poor families based on energy consumption. Building on this process, and in a concerted effort among government entities, commercial banks and call centres, UNICEF supported the creation of an innovative platform to identify, register and pay benefits to affected families. Innovations included electronic registrations, token distribution and electronic

signatures. More than 2 million poor and vulnerable families are being reached across the country, representing 70 per cent of households in Guatemala. It is the largest social programme in the country's history in terms of coverage and investment, with a current budget of US\$780 million.

### UNICEF Thailand effectively advocates for supplementary cash grants for all

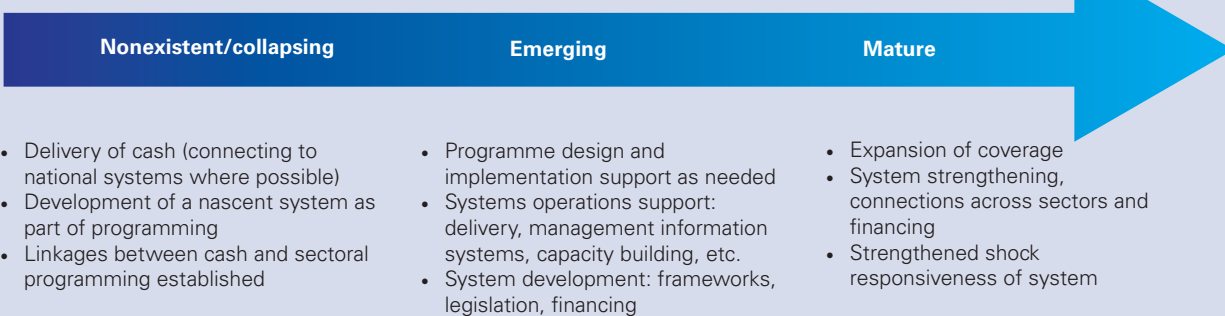
At the onset of the pandemic, UNICEF, in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN Women, developed a strategic policy note and engaged with the Prime Minister's Office, key decision-makers,

media, academics and civil society to advocate for a vertical expansion of the existing child support grant, disability grant and old-age allowance for vulnerable and severely affected communities. In mid-June, the Government approved a new range of social protection measures to further protect the most vulnerable families. A significant portion of these measures are directly aligned with the key policy recommendations that UNICEF and other UN entities, on behalf of the UN country team, submitted to the Prime Minister and key ministers. This new cash transfer top-up (THB1,000 or US\$32 for 3 months) will cover an estimated 8 million families, with a total budget of THB23.8 million (US\$765 million). UNICEF successfully argued that these grants should be provided to all child support grant recipients.

## UNICEF's social protection support across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus



### SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM



### Additional Resources

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# Technical guidance and key documents on social protection



UNICEF's Global Social Protection Programme Framework

## UNICEF's Global Social Protection Programme Framework

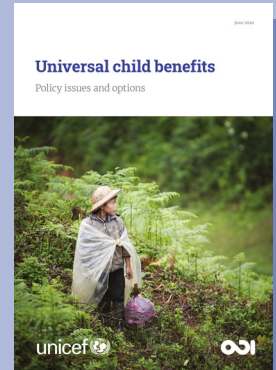
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Programme Guidance: Strengthening Shock Responsive Social Protection Systems

## UNICEF Programme Guidance: Strengthening shock responsive social protection systems

[Read the report](#)



Universal child benefits  
Policy issues and options

## Universal Child Benefits: Policy options and issues

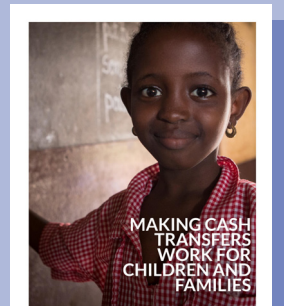
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Gender and social protection in South Asia: an assessment of the design of non-contributory programmes

## Gender and Social Protection in South Asia: An assessment of the design of non-contributory programmes

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MAKING CASH TRANSFERS WORK FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

## Making Cash Transfers Work for Children and Families

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Gender-Responsive Social Protection during COVID-19: Technical note

## Gender-Responsive Social Protection during COVID-19

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TECHNICAL NOTE  
Social Protection for Children and Families in the Context of Migration and Displacement during COVID-19

## Social Protection for Children and Families in the Context of Migration and Displacement during COVID-19

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Inclusive Social Protection Systems for Children with Disabilities

## Inclusive Social Protection Systems for Children with Disabilities in Europe and Central Asia

[Read the report](#)



Towards universal social protection for children: Achieving SDG 1.3

## Towards Universal Social Protection for Children: Achieving SDG 1.3

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Passionate, mission driven and tireless – working with UNICEF on social protection means partnering with connected teams across all regions who are passionate and relentless in achieving our mission of reaching vulnerable children and families

unicef  for every child