

# UNICEF Social Protection Response to COVID-19

**Technical note**

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COVID-19 is a public health emergency with immediate and long-term economic impacts which risk devastating effects on children and families. Strengthening social protection responses are essential to mitigate these impacts. UNICEF works with governments and other partners in over 100 countries to help strengthen social protection systems, including to respond to both short-term and protracted crises. This note outlines key areas where UNICEF is ready to rapidly scale up our ongoing work:

## Immediate response:

1. Urgent scale up of cash transfer programmes to reach all children.
2. Rapidly expanding access to healthcare and other services, and messaging.
3. Supporting expansion of family friendly policies, such as paid leave and sick leave.
4. Strengthening public finance response for social protection

## In the medium and longer term

5. Strengthen and expand shock responsive social protection systems

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## Situation and the role of social protection

The COVID-19 global public health emergency has both immediate and long term economic and social impacts. While children are largely spared the health impacts, they are twice as likely as adults to already live in poverty and are extremely vulnerable to its social and economic consequences. With the poorest and most vulnerable segments of societies at greatest risk, the impacts of COVID-19 on children has the potential to be devastating and lifelong with profound repercussions on societies and communities.

Social protection proved crucial as a response during the 2008 financial, food and fuel crisis. Coverage, while still insufficient, has grown exponentially in lower and middle income countries in the decade since, greatly increasing its potential to be part of the COVID-19 response. Existing and newly scaled-up cash transfers can help alleviate financial barriers families face to access goods and services. Additional efforts to support comprehensive social protection coverage are also needed, including measures to ensure universal access to quality health care; family friendly policies and employer protections, and support to all children to access necessary services.

Supporting the economic stability of families in times of crisis also has important macroeconomic impacts. As emphasized by the [IMF](#) and [World Bank](#), social protection serves as a pillar of counter-cyclical economic policy by delivering rapid financial support to those that need it as crisis hits, providing resources to those that will use them to both directly protect themselves and support the economy. With economies currently under the greatest threat since the 2008 financial crisis, the importance of counter-cyclical economic policy cannot be overstated.



Despite the vital role of social protection, 4 billion people today have no access to any form of social protection, including 2 out of every 3 children. The most urgent priority is rapidly increasing coverage in response to the crisis, and many countries are already moving in this direction. In the medium and the longer term, the crisis underlines the need to both accelerate progress towards universal social protection as well as make social protection systems shock responsive, so they can rapidly respond to future crises as they emerge.

## UNICEF response and strategies

As outlined in [UNICEF's recent social protection framework](#), our work on social protection, including shock responsive social protection, spans more than 20 years and includes working actively with governments in over 100 countries along with UN agencies, the World Bank and IMF as well as civil society partners. We take a rights-based approach with inclusion at its core. And while guided by considerations of child sensitive of social protection, we work on social protection systems overall and support governments in developing coverage across all stages of the life course and for all people. Finally, UNICEF works on [shock responsive social protection](#) in both development and humanitarian contexts, including the increasing number of protracted crises the world is experiencing. Through this work, we have developed a number of areas where we are well placed to contribute to the immediate response, while at the same time building sustainable long-term systems. UNICEF's key areas of contribution to response will always be context specific, but include:

### Immediate response

- 1. Urgent scale up of cash transfer programmes to reach all children.** Nothing will be more urgent than supporting governments to adapt cash transfer programmes in response to the crisis. This includes programme scale up to ensure that all children and families, particularly those engaged in the informal economy and whose incomes are affected, have sufficient resources to deal with the health and economic crisis without engaging in irreversible coping strategies. UNICEF's work includes:
  - Understanding the impacts on children of the crisis and how systems can respond. UNICEF follows a context-based approach and advice to governments to programme design and support, as well as assessing the impacts of the crisis we have a shock-responsive feasibility assessment to see how systems can respond.
  - Supporting programme adaptation: Including ensuring that routine cash transfer programmes are not disrupted as a result of the crisis and/or expanding the existing cash transfer programmes horizontally (to more people) and vertically (increasing transfer amounts). Where government systems are not in place or cannot be used, this can include supporting direct provision of humanitarian cash transfers.
  - Support to rapid crisis appropriate implementation: Including beneficiary identification, updated communication, payments systems (including not exposing recipients at payment points), linkages to other services, programme monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and management information systems (MIS).
- 2. Rapidly expanding access to healthcare and other services, and messaging.** Social protection programmes connect with poor and vulnerable populations who are most likely to be affected by COVID-19, creating opportunities to increase coverage of services, including:
  - Expanding access to health: Access to quality healthcare is a fundamental part of UNICEF's response. From a social protection perspective, where healthcare is not free at the point of delivery, cash transfer programmes facilitate access to health care by supporting ability to pay out of pocket payments. This can be furthered by removing co-payments and fee waivers, and expansion of access to health

insurance, including connecting cash transfer recipients to health insurance programmes.

- Messaging and linkages to other services: scaled up access to services and support in areas such as nutrition and social welfare as well as provide COVID-19 related messaging.

### **3. Supporting expansion of family friendly policies, such as paid leave and sick leave.**

In contexts with high rates of formal employment, contract and temporary work, family-friendly policies such as paid parental and sick leave, flexible working arrangements and access to affordable, quality childcare will be essential. They enable workers to protect themselves and their families and to care for children and relatives during the COVID-19 outbreak. UNICEF's action includes working with governments and the private sector in adjusting policies and services including extending these rights to more employees and extending the length and size of benefits.

### **4. Strengthening public finance response for social protection.** Supporting a strong and rapid social protection response will require urgent allocation of sufficient resources. Crucially this must be done without placing further strains on national budgets or crowding out existing vital services. Some countries have the ability to create this fiscal space, others with debt and public health system distress and related challenges will need support from the international community. In this context UNICEF can support governments to:

- Accurately plan and cost measures to respond to health and social protection needs and integrate these into emergency or supplementary budgets
- Take swift action to direct or redirect resources for health system and social protection priorities, including opportunities for rapid mobilisation of concessional finance from the IMF and World Bank (see UNICEF's guide for public finance and engaging with the IMF for COVID-19), or from identification of savings or reduction in planned expenditure in other areas where this is feasible, avoiding cuts in sectors crucial to children and that are heavily impacted by the pandemic response
- Ensure approved funds are rapidly delivered to frontline service providers or households through mechanisms such as advances, front-loaded transfers or simplified spending authorisation or procurement, balanced with appropriate accountability for ex-post review.

## **In the medium and longer term**

### **5. Strengthen and expand shock responsive social protection systems.** The immediacy of the crisis requires immediate response, but also underlines the necessity of building sustainable long-term shock responsive social protection systems. All UNICEF's work considers this longer-term perspective, including:

- Long term shock responsive social protection systems. An underlying part of all UNICEF's work on social protection is to work with governments to develop and strengthen sustainable, comprehensive and inclusive social protection systems. As the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, it is crucial that systems are built to be shock responsive, such that through policy, to operational mechanisms to the people that run them are able to respond to both short term and prolonged crises.
- Working toward universality: currently 2 out of 3 children have no access to any form of social protection with coverage often weakest among the most vulnerable including children with disabilities, girls, migrants and refugees. This fundamentally weakens a systems ability to respond to shocks. UNICEF works with governments to expand this coverage towards universality, including considering universal child grants through evidence building and policy and programme.
- Inclusion as a central tenet of social protection: UNICEF has been working towards sustainable, shock-responsive and inclusive social protection systems for the

long-haul, and this won't stop, though it will adapt to the global COVID19 pandemic. UNICEF has technical capacity and strong partnerships with others to support analytical and diagnostic work, needs assessments, design, adaptation and accessible evidence to improve systems for the most marginalised, particularly girls, boys, women and persons with disabilities.

- Learn the lessons of austerity that followed the 2008 financial crisis response. While all UNICEFs efforts are on responding to the immediate crisis, from children's perspectives it is crucial to be thinking in the longer term. In many countries the fiscal response to the 2008 financial crisis were followed by years of austerity. UNICEF will work with governments to ensure that post crisis children's opportunities are not damaged by diminished services in social protection and other sectors.

## UNICEF's role, partnerships and coordination

Supporting governments to rapidly scale up access to social protection in times of crisis as well as working towards sustainable long terms systems is requires a network of coordinated partners. At the global level UNICEF is a member of the social protection coordinating body (SPIAC-B) including supporting and coordinating a joint statement on our approaches to social protection response to COVID-19. We are also co-leading the subgroup with DFID and IFRC on humanitarian cash transfers and social protection as part of the cash workstream of the Grand Bargain, which is currently scaling up knowledge management and learning among humanitarian cash and social protection practitioners for the response. As multiple national and international actors turn their attention to the COVID-19 response, UNICEF also plays a strong coordinating role at national level often convening and chairing development partner social protection groups, including with government engagement.

## Current documents and guidelines

- UNICEF's [Global Social Protection Programme Framework](#)
- UNICEF's [Programme Guidance on Shock Responsive Social Protection Systems](#)
- Sector level commitments and benchmarks on social protection (forthcoming)
- UNICEF's Shock responsive social protection feasibility assessment tool (forthcoming)
- EU's [Guidance Package on Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus](#)



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