



SOCIAL PROTECTIONS DURING COVID-19

WEATHERING SHOCKS AND BUILDING FOR BETTER

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how social protections can help societies, economies and individuals to cope with shock and crisis. In particular, weak healthcare systems and unemployment protections have hurt efforts to fight the pandemic, many of which were weakened by austerity policies introduced in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.¹ In contrast, strong social protection systems have helped to support economies during the crisis, while also building long-term strength and wellbeing for societies at low cost compared to the benefits.²



Social protections are public policies and programs that aim to decrease the vulnerability of individuals to lifecycle changes and shocks.³ Common social protections include:

- **Safety nets, such as welfare payments** (eg. cash transfers), insurance schemes (eg. income or unemployment insurance), and state-delivered services (eg. universal free health care).
- **Life cycle protections that provide support** in particular circumstances or events, such as pregnancy, birth, becoming a care giver, retirement, unemployment, illness, injury and disability.
- **Government investment in economic growth**, including supporting skills development, re-skilling, and job creation (eg. grants to support repositioning of small business, and investment in new sectors such as green technologies.)

The need for strong and wide-ranging social protection policies and programs has been clear since before the COVID-19 crisis. Growing instability, as a result of climate change, and decreases in job security have made resilience building more urgent for governments.⁴

By investing in individuals' ability to cope with shocks, social protections reduce poverty, promote human rights and equality, and transform social and economic structures.

71% of the global population are not covered by comprehensive social protection systems.⁵

61.6% of people across Asia and the Pacific are not protected by ANY social protections.⁶

1.1% of PNG's GDP was spent on social protections.⁷

6% of the population in Vanuatu have access to the old-age pension.⁸

¹ Catelene Passchier, 'Recovering from the COVID-19 crisis: What policies are needed?', interview by ACTRAC INFO, ILO, 29 May 2020, https://www.ilo.org/actrav/media-center/news/WCMS_746322/lang-en/index.htm.

² UNESCAP. 2011. "The Promise of Protection: Social Protection and Development in the Asia Pacific". https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/SDD_PUB_UN-Promise-of-Protection.pdf.

³ Around the world there are different uses of social protections terminologies and cross overs between meanings. This is partly due to the ways that social protections have evolved differently around the world. For more information on commonly used terms, see 'Box 1-1, Social Protection Terminology' of UNESCAP. 2011. "The Promise of Protection", p7.

⁴ Garcia Mora, Alfonso & Rutkowski, Michal. "Pension payments and pandemics – four potential policy responses". World Bank Private Sector Development Blog, 14 May 2020.

⁵ ILO. 2017. "World Social Protection Report 2017-19: universal social protection to achieve the sustainable development goals" https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomib/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_604882.pdf.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Asian Development Bank. 2019. "The Social Protection Indicator for the Pacific: assessing progress". <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/513481/spi-pacific-2019.pdf>.

⁸ ILO. 2017. "World Social Protection Report 2017-19".

Social protections are a human rights issue with clear obligations for states, as outlined in international laws including: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the International Covenant on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families; the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁹



Social Protections are also a key area of focus for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Triennial Conference of Pacific Women.

Social protection policy settings are gendered. Women are at greater risk of personal and economic shocks, and are therefore important targets of social protections, but are underrepresented in existing policies.

Women's vulnerability to these shocks is caused by unequal gender roles and norms, which can also be improved with well-designed social protections.



SDG target 1.3

Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

BECAUSE

- **Women make up the majority of people in unstable work** — in the informal economy, and in casual and part-time jobs — women are more likely to lose work, and less likely to have access to social protections.¹⁰
- **Women undertake a large share of unpaid care work**, women have less time to do paid work, and often rely on men for money in times of crisis.¹¹
- **Crises magnify the power and gender roles that cause violent attitudes**, women are at greater risk of gender based violence during times of shock.¹²
- **Women are often employed in the public or social services sectors**, women are particularly affected by increases or decreases to funding for social protections.¹³

13th Triennial Outcomes Document

Ensure appropriate social protection measures for poor women, and their dependants, that provide cash and in-kind transfers, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks and enhance the social status and rights of marginalised people.

3.3% vs 2.0%

Social protection spending in the Pacific benefitted men over women, at an average rate of 3.3% to 2.0% of GDP per person in 2015¹⁴

85%

of market vendors in Fiji are women, with limited protections as workers in the informal economy¹⁵

⁹ "UN Human Rights Instruments", Social Protection & Human Rights, accessed 23 June 2020, <https://socialprotection-humanrights.org/legal-depository/legal-instruments/un-human-rights-instruments/>.

¹⁰ Abbott, David & Handayani, Sri Wening. "Expanding Social Protection in the Pacific". Development Asia 'Insight'. <https://development.asia/insight/expanding-social-protection-pacific>.

¹¹ ADB. 2019. "The Social Protection Indicator".

¹² COVID-19 Response Gender Working Group. 2020. "Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on Women in Fiji". http://www.fwrn.org.fj/images/Gender_and_COVID_Guidance_Note_-_Rapid_Gender_Analysis.pdf?fbclid=IwAR21wLpM2lq54POrYbiKNYQnN2pwGxLcjzvl2j5kuW1gdZRIOSIQFbw6rc.

¹³ De Henau, Jerome. "Austerity isn't working for everyone – especially women". The Conversation. 8 March 2017.

¹⁴ ADB. 2019. "The Social Protection Indicator".

¹⁵ COVID-19 Response Gender Working Group. 2020. "Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on Women in Fiji".

WHAT DOES A FEMINIST SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

UNIVERSAL COVERAGE

Universal social protection programs provide basic safety nets and services for everyone, through 'non-contributory schemes'. This means individuals do not need to pay anything to get essential help.

- ▶ The ILO considers a basic social protection model to include access for all to essential health care, old-age pensions, disability pensions and child allowances.¹⁶

¹⁶ UNESCAP. 2011. "The Promise of Protection".

- ▶ Thailand brought together multiple health insurance schemes to create a universal health care coverage scheme that provides free health care to all.¹⁷

¹⁷ ILO. 2017. "World Social Protection Report 2017-19"

Accessible to all: Protection schemes are well advertised and designed, so that everyone knows about them and can access them. This includes people living with disability, escaping violence, from diverse language backgrounds, with low literacy, without a fixed address, and without access to internet.

Supported by funding and institutions: Social protections are backed by strong government funding and systems. Government departments work together to make sure taxes and income are collected and programs are delivered. The costs of social protections are understood by society as an investment in long term wealth and security.

- ▶ According to UNESCAP, the cost of a basic social protection package in Pacific countries is estimated at 1 to 3 per cent of Gross National Income.¹⁸

¹⁸ UNESCAP. 2011. "The Promise of Protection".

- ▶ The Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Palau have used money earned from fish licenses to invest in social protections.¹⁹

¹⁹ Abbot & Handavani. "Expanding Social Protection in the Pacific".

Gender responsiveness is included in all budgeting and planning processes, so that social protections work to create gender equality. Policies promote the value of care work, both paid and unpaid, in order to boost women's economic independence.

- ▶ In South Korea the government has invested in expanding child care services, including providing universal childcare vouchers regardless of employment status or income.²⁰

²⁰ Yoon, Jayoung. 2014. "Counting Care Work in Social Policy: Valuing Unpaid Child- and Eldercare in Korea". *Feminist Economics*, 20:2, pp. 65-89.

Informal workers are included, even though they can be hard to reach. Initially, informal workers are included through wide-reaching non-contributory schemes and 'contributory schemes', like pensions and insurances that require small payments over time from policy holders. Longer term, social protections help people in the informal workforce move into more stable work with greater protections through skills training and changes to employment laws.

- ▶ The Maternal and Child Cash Transfer in Myanmar provides support to mothers in the informal workforce without access to maternity leave and other protections, by providing cash transfers at the time of pregnancy and birth.²¹

²¹ ILO. 2017. "World Social Protection Report 2017-19".

Migrants and immigrants are included, whether or not they are citizens or residents. Social protections help migrants to contribute to the economy and society, by providing a safety net if things go wrong in an unfamiliar country.

Policies that do not include migrants are understood to reduce stability, by increasing poverty and homelessness in times of crisis.

- ▶ During COVID-19, Thailand has extended free health care to foreign residents infected with the disease.²²

²² ILO. 25 March 2020. "Social Protection Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: country responses in Asia and the Pacific". https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_739587.pdf

- ▶ Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka have introduced social protections schemes that cover nationals while they are working overseas.²³

²³ ILO. 2017. "World Social Protection Report 2017-19".



TARGETED AND IMPACTFUL

Additional protections are available for those who need it most. Providing greater support to people with particular needs or vulnerability helps to stop people falling into a cycle of poverty, and raises the wellbeing of society overall.²⁴

²⁴ Hanna, Rema & Olken, Benjamin, A. 2018. "Universal Basic Incomes versus Targeted Transfers: Anti-Poverty Programs in Developing Countries". *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 32:4, pp. 201-226.

- ▶ **Bolsa da Mãe (Grant for Mothers) in Timor-Leste provides annual cash transfers to vulnerable households with children, giving priority to female-headed households. The program aims to reduce poverty and to promote vaccinations and school attendance.**²⁵

²⁵ "Bolsa da Mãe (Grant for Mothers)", [socialprotection.org](https://www.socialprotection.org/discover/programmes/bolsa-da-m%C3%A3e-grant-mothers), last modified 22 June 2020. <https://www.socialprotection.org/discover/programmes/bolsa-da-m%C3%A3e-grant-mothers>

Social protections invest in change. Programs provide sufficient help so that participants have enough time, money and skills to take steps towards making sustainable changes in their lives.

Impact is measured, with disaggregated data consistently collected to identify who and how well the social protections are helping.

South-South feminist experience and knowledge is shared to inspire innovation and accountability.

- ▶ **Feminists from around the world have come together through an [online forum](#), to document responses to the crisis, share resources, and to stand in solidarity throughout these challenging times.**

BALANCING SHORT AND LONG TERM NEEDS

Short-term shocks are managed through greater social protection programs to support people during crises to meet basic needs, including food, water, sanitation and healthcare, and to take paid leave without losing work. In times of severe crisis, support is provided for frontline workers and their families, such as nurses and firefighters. This includes providing necessary equipment and protective gear, as well as good income and workplace conditions. By protecting people from the full-force of a crisis, short term social protections reduce financial worries for individuals and increase confidence in the economy overall.

- ▶ **In Indonesia, garment workers (mostly women) will receive paid leave if they may be infected with COVID-19. The Government is also giving cash transfers through the 'Pre-Working Card' to provide people who lose their jobs with some income for four months.**²⁶

²⁶ "Response Tracker", *Feminist Response to COVID-19*. Accessed 24 June 2020. <https://www.feministcovidresponse.com/response-tracker>

Long term needs are considered when designing current policies, to ensure short term gains are not treated as more important than building a sustainable and equitable future.

- ▶ **During COVID-19, Viet Nam has paused payments of social insurance premiums into retirement funds for up to one year for businesses facing difficulties.²⁷ Without policies to top-up these missed payments, this policy will only delay the problem, leaving people to retire with less money in future. Women, in particular, tend to retire with fewer savings, which places them at risk of homelessness.**²⁸

²⁷ "Policy Responses to COVID-19". IMF. Accessed 24 June 2020. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#V>

²⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission. 2019. "Older Women's Risk of Homelessness: Background Paper". <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/older-womens-risk-homelessness-background-paper-2019>

INNOVATIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES TO COVID-19

India is promoting online pension payments to **reduce the use of cash.**²⁹

El Salvador is **removing costs of basic utilities services**, such as electricity and water, by paying subsidies.³⁰

South Korea is **paying up to two-thirds of income** to support employers to keep employees.³¹

Viet Nam is providing a **daily food allowance to infected people** in quarantine.³²

The Kerala state government in India is **providing midday meals to children** who would normally receive school meals.³³

²⁹ Garcia Mora & Rutkowski. "Pension payments and pandemics". *World Bank Blog*, 2020.

³⁰ Rutowski, Michal. "How social protection can help countries cope with COVID-19". *World Bank Voices Blog*, 15 April 2020. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/how-social-protection-can-help-countries-cope-covid-19>

³¹ Ibid.

³² ILO. 2020. "Social Protection Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis".

³³ Ibid.