

COVID COLLECTIVE KEY ISSUE GUIDE:

Social protection and different forms of social assistance



Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic led to widespread disruption of livelihoods and loss of income and exposed and reinforced existing inequalities (Rohwerder 2020). In response, almost all countries implemented some form of social protection, with social assistance in particular emerging at the forefront as a crisis response tool to help contain the socio-economic consequences (Lustig *et al.* 2020; Beazley *et al.* 2021). Yet experiences differ considerably across contexts, with some groups having received attention while others remained excluded or found it difficult to access benefits. The social protection adjustments and innovations adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic raise questions and offer insights for longer-term policy.

Key Issues

The pandemic saw a marked increase in social protection – but some were short lived

The number of social protection adjustments and resources mobilised in response to the pandemic was unprecedented – by January 2022, 3,856 social protection and labour measures were planned or implemented globally compared with 752 measures in January-May 2020 (Gentilini *et al.* 2022). In general, existing pre-crisis programmes were able to step up support more rapidly compared to response measures that entailed establishing a new programme (Bastagli and Lowe 2021). Social assistance accounted for 61 per cent of social protection and labour measures, with cash transfer programmes alone constituting 41 per cent of social assistance (Gentilini *et al.* 2022). While this helped in emergency response, it risked coming at the cost of wider social services.

Most social assistance measures instituted during the crisis were temporary: as of January 2022, only 21 per cent of social assistance programmes introduced since the pandemic were active (Gentilini *et al.* 2022), although economic contractions and resulting increases in poverty and food insecurity persist. Many programmes were extended beyond the initial period to support beneficiaries through the continuing pandemic challenges. However, extensions were often surrounded by uncertainty on whether and when they would be enacted, with lack of transition leading to administrative chaos and programmes ending abruptly and seemingly arbitrarily (Roelen and Carter 2022).

Exclusion and inequality challenges persisted

The direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19 affected population groups differently, often exacerbating pre-crisis inequalities: women were more likely to drop out of the labour force, bore the burden of unpaid care, and faced greater impacts on food security and protection (ILO 2021; UN Women 2020; Peterman and O'Donnell 2020; UNFPA 2020; WFP 2020). Refugees often found themselves among the most marginalised, and experienced higher job losses and evictions (Dempster *et al.* 2020). The pandemic highlighted the exclusion or under-coverage of certain vulnerable groups that were particularly affected by the crisis and previously overlooked (Bastagli and Lowe 2021).

Various vulnerable groups faced barriers to identification and registration into social protection schemes, and in receiving cash assistance payments. The UN Women and UN Development Programme Gender Tracker reported that only 23 per cent of social protection measures globally in response to the pandemic were 'gender-sensitive' (UN Women and UNDP 2021). Digital enrolment, screening and payments also exacerbated inequalities in contexts with significant pre-existing gaps in access to mobile phones, ID, and bank accounts (Bourgault and O'Donnell 2020). Access to social protection differed widely depending on the programme design, social protection infrastructure, policy context, and the capacity of organisations to provide 'last mile' services (Chen *et al.* 2021; Lowe, McCord and Beazley 2021).

Information and ID systems played a key role in enabling the delivery of social protection

Quick response is key to effective social protection crisis response. Yet, in some cases, schemes were announced quickly but took time to implement

or to extend to specific groups that needed to newly register their information (Lowe *et al.* 2021). Countries with universal ID systems or strong social registries and administrative systems were able to locate information on potential recipients in databases of multiple government agencies (including tax, social security and public and private payroll databases) and rapidly extend social protection (Lowe *et al.* 2021; Bastagli and Lowe 2021). However, in many countries existing registries and information systems were outdated and excluded large sections of the population, so options for extending assistance to new recipients were more limited (Lowe *et al.* 2021) and many argue that reliance on such systems led to exclusion of eligible beneficiaries. Social registries alone were often insufficient and many countries used other complementary databases held outside social protection systems, such as informal worker association membership lists (Roelen *et al.* 2021), satellite imagery data to identify poverty hotspots, or databases from civil society organisations and NGOs (Lowe *et al.* 2021).

Digital approaches played a key role in delivering social protection

Most governments increased their reliance on digital channels for outreach, registration and payments during the pandemic to facilitate a rapid crisis response (WIEGO 2021). Many governments added to their capacity to extend coverage with innovations leveraging technology (Guvan, Jain and Joubert 2022). New or enhanced efforts to collect information on un/under-represented groups were undertaken. Modified identification and registration during the pandemic often allowed new self-registration through digital (mobile, app or web) application processes. Benefit delivery also relied heavily on digital (especially mobile-based) payments. Globally, digital payments constituted 58 per cent of transfers, and another 22 per cent of programmes used a combination of manual and digital payments. This was true across high and low-income countries (Gentilini *et al.* 2022).

Notwithstanding the potential to identify and reach large populations in a short period of time,

digital approaches also risked exclusion, especially of the poorest and marginalised groups (Beazley, Bischler and Doyle 2021). The exclusion of less digitally connected or literate individuals and households was a concern in schemes accessed through online or SMS-based registration (Lowe *et al.* 2021; Roelen *et al.* 2021; Alfers and Bastagli 2021). Thus, the success of digital tools depended on pre-crisis financial and digital inclusion levels in terms of access to mobile phones, internet and data networks, and complementary efforts to include digitally excluded groups (Lowe *et al.* 2021; Bastagli and Lowe 2021). The use of digital approaches also created inadvertent risks of cyber-scams among populations who were less digitally literate (Roelen *et al.* 2021; Lowe *et al.* 2021).

Collaboration and partnerships with grassroots organisations played a key role

In response to the pandemic, governments often relied on new or enhanced partnerships with grassroots organisations, who played a crucial role in ensuring the inclusion of hard-to-reach and marginalised groups. The role of community, civil society and humanitarian actors with specialist population knowledge or access was vital for ensuring effective crisis response provision to previously un/under-served groups (Bastagli and Lowe 2021; de Hoop *et al.* 2020). Grassroots organisations were critically important for the inclusion of older people, people with disabilities, or people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (Roelen and Carter 2022). Yet, while partnerships with grassroots actors greatly facilitated 'last mile' delivery, they came with concerns about inadequate remuneration, lack of personal protective equipment, and an over-reliance on volunteerism, especially for women, prompting concerns about exploitative partnerships and inadequate provision of resources for partners to undertake such activities (Holmes and Hunt 2021).

Emerging Lessons

Role of strong and adaptive shock-responsive social protection systems

Social protection policies have historically been described as 'shock absorbers', and being able to adapt programming in response to changing realities is vital to support the most vulnerable. While many social protection measures enacted in response to the pandemic were temporary, they provided a proof of concept, signalling potential for learning and institutional change (Roelen *et al.* 2021; Alfers and Bastagli 2021). Going forward, policymakers and donors need to focus on strengthening social protection systems, considering the distinct needs of different groups.

Broader social services investment

While the Covid-19 pandemic response prioritised social assistance measures, well-functioning social services are important to be able to respond to such crises (Devereux 2021). The pandemic highlighted the benefits of strengthening links across schemes and pointed to the need to prioritise cross-programme links in policy design, and continued investment and strengthening of wider social services, including health. Despite this, in some contexts these services were negatively impacted and (temporarily) suspended due to pandemic containment measures and spending reallocations (Bastagli and Lowe 2021). Thus, going forward, governments need to prioritise social spending for other inclusive recovery measures (O'Donnell *et al.* 2021).

Comprehensive information and ID systems critical to include vulnerable groups

Mature digital ID platforms and social registries are essential for effective and inclusive social protection. Many countries introduced new

efforts to reach out to excluded groups in response to the pandemic. For instance, emergency social assistance measures targeting urban informal workers generated substantial new data on populations previously missed or misrepresented in existing information systems, which can facilitate improved future provision for previously 'invisible' populations (Lowe *et al.* 2021; Roelen *et al.* 2021). There is an opportunity to learn from and build on emergency response measures to include vulnerable groups in social protection, such as measures to include informal and self-employed workers in social insurance programmes, or to formalise informal social protection mechanisms such as savings clubs (Devereux 2021).

Introduce digital tools with caution

Digital tools for identification and payment can facilitate rapid rollout of social protection, but are also found to amplify pre-existing inequalities, and could throw up new concerns relating to intra-household power dynamics (Roelen and Carter 2022). For instance, experiences with digital payments were mixed for women. Making payments directly to women's accounts can enhance their financial inclusion and autonomy (Gentilini *et al.* 2022; Zimmerman *et al.* 2020) but women are more likely to lack the required ID documentation, and have limited access to mobile or bank accounts, which can exclude them from these programmes (Beazley *et al.* 2021). Thus, it is critical that shifts towards digital tools for programme identification and payments are centred on equity and make concerted efforts to ensure inclusion of the most vulnerable groups.

Acknowledge and fund grassroots organisations

The ability to rely on local knowledge about who is most in need is critical, especially in places where social registries or databases are outdated or exclude vulnerable groups. Grassroots organisations have played a crucial role as the community 'last mile' support to reach the furthest behind in pandemic response through communication, provision of practical support, and holding service providers to account. Going forward, it is vital that the role of grassroots organisations receive greater recognition and commensurate funding.

COVID COLLECTIVE PROJECTS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

Contributing to better evidence and understanding on social sector spending in developing countries, in the wake of the pandemic, and how to maximise that to promote human development outcomes

→ Ghana, Global

→ Center for Global Development (CGD)

Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA)

The project will contribute to better evidence and understanding on social sector spending in developing countries, in the wake of the pandemic, and how to maximise that to promote human development outcomes.

The role of social protection in mitigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and future shocks amongst people with disabilities in Peru and Thailand

→ Peru, Thailand

→ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM)

Centre of Excellence in Chronic Diseases (CRONICAS), Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredi
International Health Policy Program (IHPP), Ministry of Public Health

Sociedad y Discapacidad (SODIS)

This project aims to inform the design and delivery of disability-inclusive social protection, to boost resilience including during shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The research will explore the extent to which social protection systems in Peru and Thailand have been responsive to the needs of people with disabilities.

What are the lessons that state and non-state relief efforts during Covid-19 offer to social protection for informal settlements post-crisis?

→ India, Zimbabwe

→ International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)

Dialogue on Shelter Trust (DoSt), Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS)

This project was comprised of three main strands of work bridging local and global. One strand investigated if and how Covid-19 contributed to the creation of 'peace routes' across conflict lines in Syria. Another strand mapped the actors, institutions, and impact of the pandemic in post-coup Myanmar. The final strand connected varied data sources related to peace and conflict and covid to: track where Covid-19 responses have had lasting effects on democracy and peace; understand the relationship between the nature of the pandemic response and its lasting impact; and recommend good practice for conflict-sensitive pandemic response.



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This brief aims to provide rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. It was written by Tanvi Bhatkal, Researcher at the Institute of Development Studies, and commissioned through the Covid Collective.

The Covid Collective is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and is funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The Collective brings together the expertise of, UK and Southern based research partner organisations and offers a rapid social science research response to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19 related development challenges. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the UK Government, or any other contributing organisation.

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