

Social Protection and Building Back Better

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant sweeping changes for economies and societies, with the most devastating consequences for individuals and groups with pre-existing vulnerabilities. These impacts are likely to be compounded in contexts with greater fragility. As attention shifts from addressing urgent humanitarian needs and crafting quick response systems to long-term solutions, **it is time to think about the role of social protection as part of a longer-term solution to living with Covid-19, as well as supporting efforts to build back better.**

This paper considers how social protection can offer support and be supported in short, medium- and long-term responses, under different scenarios for how the pandemic might unfold. Planning must anticipate the possibility of an enduring pandemic, one stretching over many years if not decades. Thus, **the expansion of social protection should not be limited to a short-term response to immediate needs.**

Rather, **Covid-19 presents an opportunity to establish firm foundations for more comprehensive social protection systems for years to come**, including leveraging greater domestic expenditure and international assistance.

This aspirational vision to build stronger social protection systems in the longer term is tempered by a number of pressures and dynamics:

- In many contexts, and facing the unpredictable nature of Covid-19, addressing the continuum of responses is indispensable to building back better. **Protecting food security and basic needs should drive responses at scale** given the unevenness of both transmission and the resources and capacities to act.
- New short-term measures to extend social assistance should **build on and improve existing national administrative and delivery structures of social protection systems**, without crowding out existing vital services.

- If the pandemic persists over a long period, **maximising coverage of the most vulnerable** should be the core focus, while strengthening capacity, fiscal space and accountability to the greatest extent possible.
 - **The ambition is to build national social protection systems that can scale and flex to respond** to any new emerging crisis in the future, but the way of building them, and the speed at which this will be done will be context dependent.
 - The **foundations must be anchored in national legal and policy frameworks** that prioritise long-term poverty reduction, and financed in an equitable and sustainable manner.
- The ultimate vision of universal social protection across the lifecycle requires **getting the basics right** to begin with. Specific recommendations of this report include:
- Linking new instruments for taxation at global and national levels with **fiscal expansion**, supporting deeper and wider social assistance for the furthest behind.
 - Establishing and **strengthening administrative capacity and accountability** mechanisms, with governments being held accountable for upholding citizens' rights.
 - Scalable social protection responses must be linked with **policies and investments in complementary public goods and services** across sectors: infrastructure, education, and systems for health and nutrition.
 - Building back better needs a **strong inclusive lens** – including gender, in order not to risk backsliding on the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 – and must be **climate smart** to safeguard social protection systems and beneficiaries from the threat of global climate shocks.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has already had far-reaching consequences for poverty, food security and livelihoods around the world. It threatens to undo many decades of progress towards the global commitments to reduce poverty, hunger and other forms of illbeing (e.g. FSIN 2020; UNU-WIDER 2020). Social protection has been a core response to Covid-19 and its socioeconomic consequences (ILO 2020a: 2). As of 10 July 2020, 200 countries and territories across the world had introduced or were planning to introduce more than 1,000 social protection measures in response to the pandemic (Gentilini *et al.* 2020), albeit disproportionately in high-income countries. The majority constituted some form of social assistance and focused on expanding coverage, making benefits more generous or simplifying administrative requirements (*ibid.*). Measures in relation to social insurance and labour market policies – again, disproportionately

in high-income countries – have included paid sick leave, social insurance contributions being waived or subsidised, and wage subsidies (*ibid.*).

Provision of basic needs and livelihoods in the wake of sudden and unanticipated shocks traditionally sits within the remit of humanitarian response and is typically provided as short-term (and one-off) support. Social protection, on the other hand, is provided as a regular safety net that allows people to manage the more predictable threats to their livelihoods. Ideally, a continuum of support and response would be provided to help households manage risk and stress across a range of circumstances and contexts – a vision laid out in the Irish Aid (2017) *Social Protection Strategy*.

Innovative programming in recent years has enabled social protection in different contexts to scale up assistance in response to large covariate shocks, facilitated by targeting

systems and contingency funding that provide programmes with the ability to respond more quickly to acute needs in a crisis situation than conventional humanitarian responses. This is what has become known as shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) (O'Brien *et al.* 2018). The rapid response in the use of established social protection programmes to manage the impacts of what is an acute and unanticipated shock, places Covid-19 social protection responses squarely within the SRSP agenda.

While the pandemic has pushed governments to adopt extraordinary measures to rapidly expand coverage, the appetite for much-needed investments in sustainable social protection benefits over the longer term remains to be seen. Although Covid-19 and its far-reaching economic and social consequences have been noted as a 'wake-up call alerting the global community to the urgency of accelerating progress in building social protection systems' (ILO 2020a: 1), much of the work on social protection as part of the Covid-19 response has focused on design and implementation of immediate to medium-term measures (see, for example, Vaziralli 2020). The longer-term ramifications of Covid-19 present a conundrum with respect to social protection: while the need for support will grow and remain high for years to come, the resources to provide such support will become increasingly constrained.

This plays out against the backdrop of great unevenness in terms of social protection coverage. Even before the Covid-19 crisis, approximately 55 per cent of the world's population – as many as 4 billion people, including two out of every three children – were not covered by any form of social protection (UNICEF 2020b). The consequences of this limited reach have been exposed as Covid-19 has continued to spread across new geographies, and with particularly devastating impact for populations and groups with pre-existing vulnerabilities. The Covid-19 pandemic makes the focus on the furthest behind, a



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cornerstone of *A Better World* (Irish Aid 2019), Ireland's international development policy, more essential than ever. Those who were already the furthest behind due to various existing disadvantages, exclusions and forms of marginalisation are at greatest risk of bearing the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic. As the immediacy of the crisis wanes in some places, and attention shifts from addressing urgent humanitarian needs and crafting quick response systems to long-term solutions, it is time to think about the role of social protection as part of a longer-term solution to living with Covid-19, as well as supporting efforts to build back better.

This paper looks ahead and considers how social protection can offer support and be supported in building back better from the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper focuses on the role of social protection as part of wider responses to the pandemic. We focus on two scenarios for how the pandemic might unfold and, therein, explore the role of social protection within three phases: the immediate term, medium term and longer term.

Across a range of possible scenarios, social protection systems will need to be strengthened in a way that maximises support for those who are most vulnerable in a flexible,

adaptive and non-linear manner. The long-term vision is ultimately one of universal social protection across the lifecycle, corresponding to the Irish Aid (2017) *Social Protection Strategy*. This requires getting the basics right, including the fiscal space and administrative capacities of systems that are owned by national governments and accountable to citizens. It also necessitates a continuum of response, a strong inclusive lens emphasising gender, and being climate smart.

We consider how social protection contributes to the broader theme of building

back better and how Covid-19 can serve as a wake-up call to build and strengthen social protection systems. This includes refocusing spending priorities to address the needs of the most vulnerable and the poorest, finding innovative ways of linking new taxation at the global level with financing social assistance programming in the poorest contexts, developing administrative capacity and systems-strengthening, and ensuring support for building peace and social cohesion by placing social accountability centrally within the social protection response.

The Covid-19 crisis and its implications for poverty and vulnerability

The consequences of Covid-19 for countries' economies, poverty and vulnerability, as well as state capacities to address these, are far-reaching. Regional economic forecasts reflect how rapidly the crisis has escalated, as well as the differentiated consequences of the pandemic for very different regional and national economies. The World Bank estimates an economic contraction in sub-Saharan Africa of between -2.1 and -5.1 per cent this year, costing the region between US\$37bn and US\$79bn in lost output (Calderon *et al.* 2020). In Asia, the IMF projects growth to be -0.6 per cent in 2020 for Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam (IMF 2020). Preliminary forecasts of expected losses of work and income have already been dwarfed by actual losses, with the self-employed, daily wage labourers, informal sector workers and small-scale producers among the hardest hit.

The number of people falling into extreme poverty is projected to range from 49 million (Mahler *et al.* 2020) to as many as 419 million worldwide (UNU-WIDER 2020). In Africa, 30 million children could be pushed into poverty as a result of Covid-19 (Save the Children 2020). The crisis will also have devastating

effects on food security, leading to hunger and child malnutrition (FSIN 2020). Even before the onset of the pandemic, at the end of 2019, 135 million people in 55 countries and territories faced acute food insecurity, and a further 183 million were considered to be in a state of stressed food insecurity conditions – a shock away from sliding into acute food insecurity (*ibid.*).

The combination of the social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic will exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities ('Covid-intensified') and create new vulnerabilities ('Covid-specific') (Devereux *et al.* 2020). The unfolding consequences of the pandemic



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threaten to wipe out years of progress in poverty reduction. The poorest households, often female headed and with a high dependency ratio, as well as casual labourers and petty traders, suffer disproportionately. They tend to spend the largest share of income on food but typically lack savings or access to credit. Other groups who are vulnerable to the economic impacts of the pandemic include urban informal workers, farming and herding households, migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees, and children.

Increases in the price of commodities due to the disruption of markets and shortages of goods on the market have immediate impacts for already food-insecure and food-stressed populations. Further, disruptions to agricultural market supply chains threaten both production and marketing, as farmers lack inputs and labour (FAO 2020). Agricultural production is likely to contract between 2.6 per cent in the most optimistic scenario and 7 per cent in the scenario with trade blockages. Food imports are also forecast to decline substantially (from 13 to 25 per cent) due to a combination of higher transaction costs and reduced domestic demand (Calderon *et al.* 2020).

It is important to acknowledge that, in many places, Covid-19 represents one of multiple crises and that the shock that the pandemic presents will differ by context. For example, a locust plague in some parts of East Africa presents a larger risk to food security and livelihoods in that area than Covid-19 does. That said, Covid-19 is a crisis unlike any other. Its global spread and the fact that countries across the income spectrum are all affected allows for a sense of solidarity and an opportunity to be ambitious in building back better. At the same time, the global recession that is likely to play out will dampen the enthusiasm and squeeze opportunities to do so. This is particularly pertinent in relation to social protection.

Social protection is a vital response to poverty, vulnerabilities and uncertainties



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created and exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. Supporting incomes means that household and individual recipients can contribute to minimising the negative outcomes of other shocks, including those relating to conflict in fragile settings, as well as illness or the death of family members from Covid-19. By providing access to some of the basic requirements for safe and secure lives and livelihoods, social protection supports people's ability to withstand the consequences of multiple colliding shocks and stressors.

While the impacts of Covid-19 have increased, and will increase further, the need for governments to provide support and state capacity to address these consequences has been stretched and overloaded. Even before the crisis, many populations and groups in urgent need received insufficient or no support at all. While an estimated 4 billion people lack access to any type of formal social protection, global aggregate figures conceal stark inter-regional inequalities in terms of access.

Africa has the lowest coverage of social protection: 80 per cent of the population across the region are not covered by any pension, safety net or social protection programme. Owing to fiscal and capacity constraints, social safety net programmes often cover only a small proportion of the poor and are concentrated in rural areas where chronic poverty is highest (Bodewig *et al.* 2020). These constraints will be amplified further as the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic unfolds.

Social protection and building back better

'Building back better' is a phrase that has a history in humanitarian and disaster studies, describing the link between recovery and building greater resilience – especially at the community level – to future hazards (GFDRR n.d.). Crucially, it implies not just recovering to the previous status quo but using 'crisis as an opportunity' to link recovery to change and transformation towards better systems.

The notion of building back better is twofold in terms of social protection. First, social protection will have an essential role in addressing the consequences of Covid-19 and vulnerabilities relating to the virus in the medium term, when societies, governments and multilateral institutions will be focused on recovery; as well as part of longer-term efforts to create fairer and more equal societies. Second, Covid-19 presents an opportunity to strengthen and build better social protection systems, with the possibility of leveraging greater domestic expenditure on, and international assistance for, social protection over the long term.

In this section, we explore the interface between social protection and building back better in three phases in relation to Covid-19. There are many unknowns in thinking about the future, including when or even if a vaccine will be discovered and deployed. Planning must anticipate the possibility that Covid-19 could remain for many years to come, circulating among the world's population. Thus, the expansion of social protection should not be limited to a short-term response to immediate needs but should be seized on as an opportunity to establish firm foundations for comprehensive social protection systems, including fiscal space, institutional arrangements and administrative structures, delivery capacities and accountability mechanisms.¹



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We consider two scenarios, with different implications for social protection needs and capacities in relation to building back better. Each one includes short-, medium- and long-term phases.

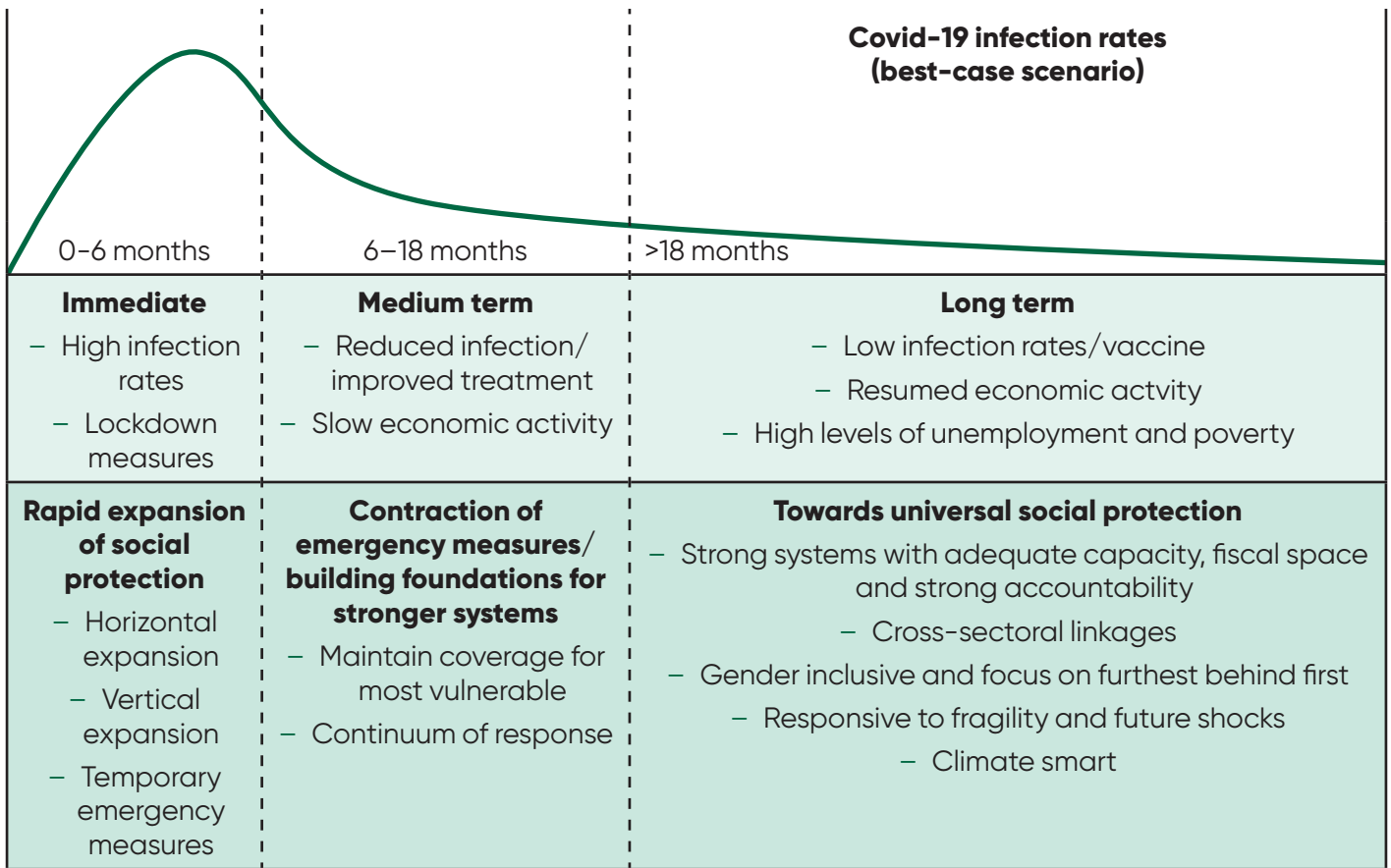
Figure 1 shows the best-case scenario, which assumes an accelerated timeline for Covid-19 therapies and prevention in the next 12–18 months, occurring alongside a sustainable reduction of the infection rate and allowing for a quicker pivot to building back better systems in a post-pandemic period.

Figure 2 shows an alternative scenario, which assumes a protracted period before effective therapies and a vaccine are identified and deployed. It entails a longer medium-term phase, during which a 'new normal' may persist for many years, when the virus spreads unevenly in different places and at different times (hypothetically up to seven or eight years, as depicted in Figure 2).

It is important to note that the two scenarios present two ends on a continuum, ranging from an optimistic best-case scenario to a more pessimistic alternative scenario.

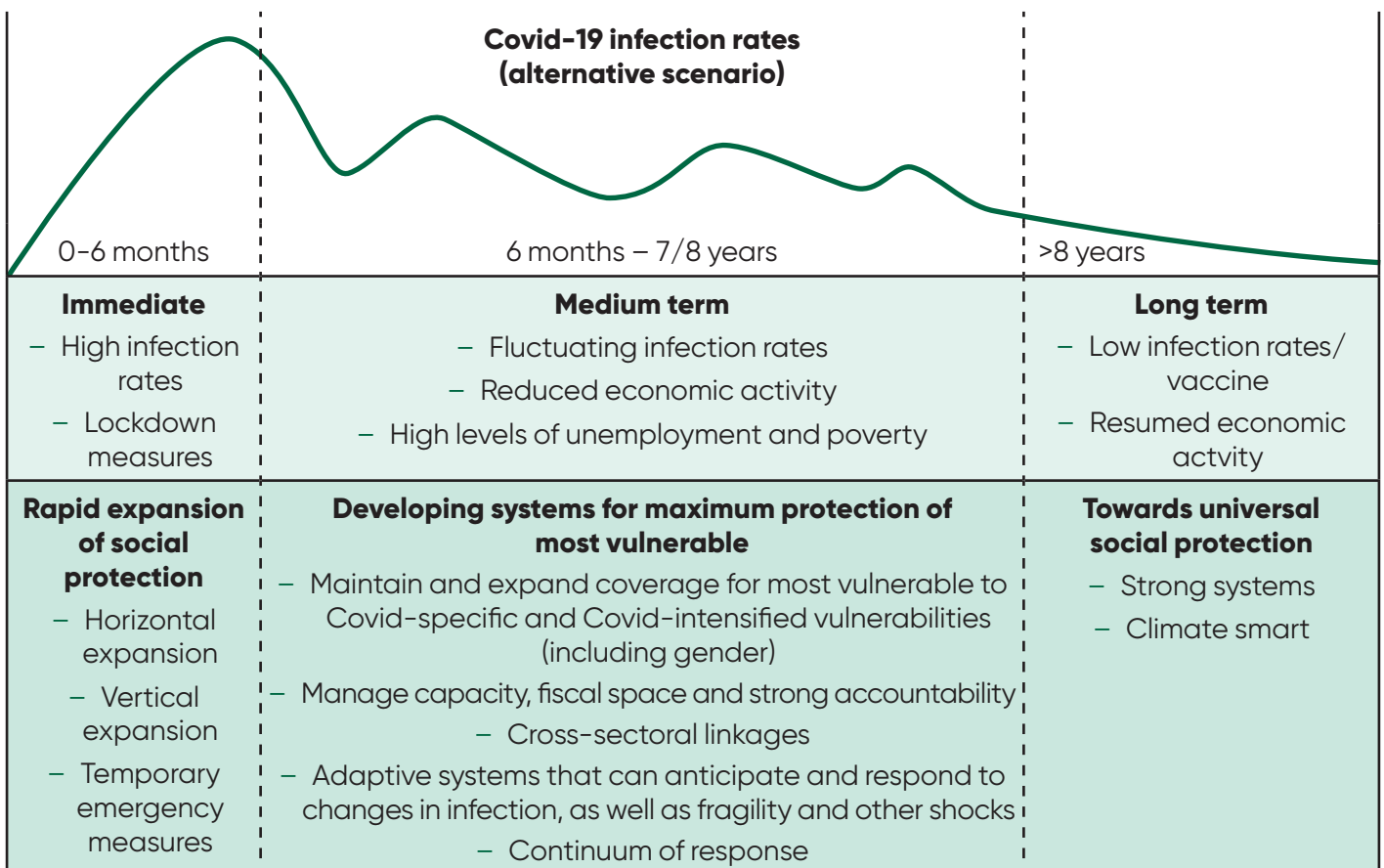
¹ See *Governance and Building Back Better* (Khan Mohmand et al. 2020) for expanded discussion on these themes.

Figure 1 Immediate, medium- and long-term social protection response to Covid-19: Best-case scenario



Source: Authors' own

Figure 2 Immediate, medium- and long-term social protection response to Covid-19: Alternative scenario



Source: Authors' own

The reality will likely lie somewhere along the continuum and will inevitably differ by country and context.

Much of the debate about policy responses to Covid-19 appears to be premised (either explicitly or implicitly) on events resembling the best-case scenario. A more conservative scenario that assumes a longer medium-term phase before a vaccine is found and made widely available is deemed more probable.

Immediate response

At the height of the Covid-19 crisis, when countries experience high numbers of confirmed cases and deaths, public health measures focus on reducing the infection rate, while economic and social policy interventions aim to mitigate the effects of such measures. In many countries, lockdown measures restrict movement, prevent people from going to or finding work, and cause unemployment and income insecurity.

These concerns are compounded in low- and middle-income countries, given mostly inadequate health systems, high population densities in urban areas, rural-urban migration, large informal economies, and high reliance on export-oriented markets (Vaziralli 2020; Siwale 2020). Across the continuum of scenarios, we expect this period to last up to six months, in line with



The abrupt and unprecedented disruption to lives and livelihoods in the Covid-19 crisis has required countries to quickly scale up existing social protection programmes and/or design new programmes to patch existing gaps in social assistance, which in some countries are considerable.

In **Ethiopia**, the immediate response to Covid-19 included various actions. The rural Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) prepared a directive for regions to adjust programme activities to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. The key actions proposed for regions were: (1) to provide beneficiaries with three months' cash and/or food transfers in one go; and (2) to find alternative approaches to activities that required large gatherings, such as waiving or minimising public works, and replacing community social and behaviour change communication sessions with one-to-one consultations. In urban areas, beneficiaries were allowed greater access to savings; in rural areas, the benefit value was increased. These measures were in place for 3–6 months. Smaller schemes at regional and municipal levels also included food transfers and prolonged leave for government employees who were at high risk of infection.

Based on Gentilini *et al.* (2020)

how the Covid-19 curve has evolved up to now in different countries.

The abrupt and unprecedented disruption to lives and livelihoods in the Covid-19 crisis has required countries to quickly scale up existing social protection programmes and/or design new programmes to patch existing gaps in social assistance, which in some countries are considerable. Programme extensions through horizontal and vertical expansions enable rapid coverage and delivery of benefits.

As noted above, the large majority of countries across the world have adopted at least one social protection measure in response to immediate needs (Gentilini *et al.* 2020). Cash assistance is the default response of government-led safety nets; 71 countries have a programme in place,

36 of which are initiatives to cope with Covid-19. An estimated 59 per cent of cash transfer measures are new programmes in 89 countries, with cash transfer programmes more than doubling in coverage in response to the pandemic (*ibid.*).

By 12 June 2020, 15 countries in sub-Saharan Africa had introduced social protection responses to Covid-19 (*ibid.*). In countries with more limited infrastructure to support cash payments, as pertains in many fragile and conflict-affected settings, in-kind support through direct distribution of food can provide relief to the poor.

Medium-term response

The phase of medium-term response can be characterised by growing control over infection rates, lower community transmission, health systems being better able to cope and lockdown measures largely being relaxed. During this period, the focus shifts from immediate crisis management towards continuing efforts aimed at economic and social stabilisation, as well as supporting livelihood recovery.

Economic activity will resume but restrictions on movement, nationally and internationally, may still be in place. Some may be able to return to work; others will continue to struggle due to lack of demand or disruptions in supply chains that they were employed in. With continuing lack of work, depletion of food stocks and disrupted supply and food chains will cause deepening levels of poverty and the growing spread of hunger. This medium-term phase presents a critical juncture for social protection.

In the best-case scenario – which appears to dominate many present discussions on economic and social recovery from Covid-19 – this phase is expected to last roughly 12 months, at which point a vaccine is identified and widely deployed in ways that effectively build immunity and enable a turn to post-pandemic efforts. The assumption is a linear evolution of the pandemic, with effective systems to manage periodic outbreaks and

rising caseloads in hotspots.

In terms of social protection, measures that were put in place or expanded in response to the immediate crisis may be scaled back to pre-crisis proportions, much in line with the rationale of SRSP. SRSP focuses, in particular, on the ability of a social protection system to scale assistance up and down following a shock, either by increasing the level of assistance for existing beneficiaries or by expanding coverage temporarily to non-beneficiaries affected by the shock.

These measures can be in response to different types of covariate shocks, including natural or humanmade hazards, as well as situations of protracted crises. The focus on building social protection systems in contexts of recurring humanitarian crises and climate-related shocks has led to a recognition of the overlap in mandate, institutions and target groups between the 'humanitarian' and the social protection sector. This has created opportunities for using social protection to deliver a continuum of assistance by integrating the delivery of humanitarian assistance into its system.

Building on existing best practice and lessons learned around the continuum of response, new short-term measures to extend social assistance should build on and improve existing national administrative and delivery structures of social protection systems. This effort is pointed to in the Irish Aid (2017) *Social Protection Strategy*, and links to the Grand Bargain and commitments following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. Where necessary, the extension of social protection through humanitarian cash transfers must complement and strengthen national social protection systems (ILO 2020a).

Clearly, different social protection contexts exist. Even when countries have government-led or -supported social protection programmes, this in itself does not indicate their potential to become shock responsive. Winder Rossi *et al.* (2017) look at the potential of social protection programmes in different

contexts to integrate crisis response and resilience-building components. They developed a typology which highlights that, although social protection programmes or systems exist that are institutionalised within state structures, they might not yet be flexible enough to adapt in the case of a crisis. Depending on existing capacity, it might make more sense to first strengthen the core protective functions they provide to routine recipients, before aiming to add shock-responsive elements to them (Ulrichs and Slater 2016).

The ambition is to build national social protection systems that can scale and flex to respond to any new emerging crisis, but the way and speed at which these will be built will be hugely context dependent. The protracted nature of the Covid-19 crisis may mean that schemes are reshaped to expand horizontal support but contract with respect to vertical support. In other words, in line with best practices in developing a continuum of response, schemes may be scaled down in terms of the amount and intensity of support that they provide but cover a larger number of people.

Informal workers are a large group who stand to win or lose from shifts in vertical versus horizontal coverage in the move from short- to medium-term response. Widely excluded from social protection, yet highly

Acknowledging that informal workers, among others, had a reduced capacity to earn an income because of Covid-19, the government in **Vietnam** put in place various income support packages. Eligible households received a monthly allowance of between VND 500,000 (US\$21) and VND 1,000,000 (US\$43), depending on their poverty status. This support was approved for a period of three months (until the end of June 2020).

Source: Based on Gentilini *et al.* (2020)



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vulnerable to the continued economic fallout from Covid-19, a return to pre-pandemic prioritisation of target groups may mean that informal workers will lack support when it is most needed (WIEGO 2020a). As noted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), support to informal workers and the economy – such as through social protection – will be vital during medium-term recovery (ILO 2020b). The short-term horizontal expansion of social protection has been greeted with enthusiasm regarding the potential for such expanded measures to stay in place in the medium- to long-term (Tirivayi *et al.* 2020). Nevertheless, much of the support provided to informal workers may be inadequate, marred by design and implementation issues, and only lasting 3–6 months (WIEGO 2020b).

In the alternative scenario, the medium-term recovery phase is expected to last much longer, with the pandemic continuing to unfold in a non-linear way, with smaller and larger outbreaks happening in different places over many years. Virologists and epidemiologists, in part based on their experience of other communicable diseases and coronaviruses, caution that vaccine development – and therefore the ability to reduce and manage infection rates – may be a long way off, and that the best-case scenario is too optimistic. Instead, it is more likely that vaccine development may take 7–8 years (or longer), meaning that governments and international organisations must prepare for a protracted

period during which the risk of wider transmission of the virus remains, necessitating ongoing constraints on mobility and economic activity, as well as high levels of poverty and vulnerability.

This creates a conundrum for social protection. The need for support will be greater for much longer, yet the resources and capacity to deliver such support will also be under strain for a longer period. Instead of focusing on building back better, this scenario may necessitate a focus on striving for maximum coverage of the most vulnerable and require a continuum of response for much longer. Some aspects that may be categorised as 'long term' in the best-case scenario will need to be addressed in the medium term if this phase is of a more protracted nature. This entails elements of systems strengthening, such as building and strengthening capacity, fiscal space and accountability to the greatest extent possible.

It should aim to do so in the most inclusive manner, with a focus on gender, given the pandemic's implications for the care economy and women's work (as detailed in *Gender Equality and Building Back Better* – Nazneen and Araujo 2020). Establishing and strengthening cross-sectoral linkages, especially between social protection and the health and social care sectors, will be vital for keeping infection rates as low as possible and curtailing worse outbreaks. Crucially, systems and programmes will have to be flexible to respond to increases in infection rates in sub-national and localised areas. It may also mean that more ambitious objectives for universal and 'smart' forms of social protection may be pushed into the longer term.

Social protection and building back stronger in the long term

In the long term, once effective therapy and prevention regimes are in place and deployed at scale, economic activity is likely to rebound and the movement of people



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and goods will accelerate. Employment and income-generating opportunities can be expected to pick up again, but against a backdrop of severely depleted resources and intensified levels of poverty and inequality. It is in this phase that social protection contributes to building back better and/or that social protection is built back better. Clear momentum exists for investing in more comprehensive systems that will also include previously excluded groups, such as workers in the informal sector and other less visible groups in the 'missing middle'. Complementary efforts are needed to safeguard basic social protection functions: food security and basic needs provision.

A future with a protracted and/or enduring Covid-19 pandemic means that returning to normal is not an option and necessitates different ways to adapt and strengthen both states and societies. Public expenditure on social assistance was very limited across developing countries before the crisis, even more so in countries experiencing various forms of fragility and conflict. By one estimate, low-income countries annually spent US\$247m on social assistance, compared to US\$50bn in middle-income countries and US\$488bn in high-income countries (Gentilini *et al.* 2020). This uneven spread is likely to be compounded as the Covid-19 crisis unfolds.

Across the range of scenarios, investments and support are required to construct systems that afford greater resilience and inclusion. In keeping with the clear purpose of social and economic betterment that is the core

of building back better, governments and international organisations must ensure they re-establish the momentum for change, as signalled in the Irish Aid (2017) *Social Protection Strategy* and linked to the Grand Bargain and commitments following the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

While acknowledging pressures on resources at national and international levels, governments have an opportunity to prioritise social protection expenditures as they revisit and review national budgets. The foundations must be anchored in national legal and policy frameworks that prioritise long-term poverty reduction, and financed in an equitable and sustainable manner. Complementary efforts at the international level must address what will be highly uneven efforts at building back across the globe, with the aim of protecting food security and basic needs. This could include finding ways of connecting proposals for green recovery packages (OECD 2020) with innovative financing for social protection as a key contribution to resilience-strengthening in the long term.

In **Sri Lanka**, UNICEF is advocating for emergency universal child, disability and old-age benefits in order to offer support to the most vulnerable. It is doing so with the prospect of economic recession as a result of Covid-19 and against a backdrop of limited coverage by and capacity within existing social protection schemes. The establishment of categorical cash transfer schemes could be implemented relatively quickly and easily within existing infrastructure, reaching the large majority of the population. In addition to responding to the immediate and medium-term consequences of the crisis, the establishment of these types of benefits can also help to strengthen a social protection system 'that is more capable to help avoid, mitigate, withstand and recover from crises in the future'.

Source: Based on Daniels (2020)

How to get there

This section assesses the structural conditions and challenges that are expected (and which in the poorest countries already exist to a degree even in 'normal' times) and need to be addressed to ensure that social protection builds back better, and that social protection itself can be built better. At least for the time being, the crisis has dispelled deeply held beliefs that constrained coverage of social protection programmes to the poorest of the poor, an option of last resort that was inaccessible to a large proportion of the population that included many who were poor or had other vulnerabilities (Lavers 2020). For governments and their social and development partners, there is an opening to push for badly needed

reforms and investments to deepen and extend the reach of social protection. At the same time, many countries will face contracting economies, dampening fiscal space.

This section examines how to build back better in terms of the requirements for strengthening systems, improving cross-sectoral linkages, ensuring inclusion and gender sensitivity, and making social protection 'climate smart' and thus resilient to future stressors and shocks. It brings into focus long-standing areas of work within social protection and their importance in responding to Covid-19.

Strengthening systems

Strong social protection systems:

[represent] the idea that social protection instruments can be integrated into a more comprehensive system of policies and programmes that not only tackle poverty and vulnerability over the life cycle, but also strengthen pro-poor and inclusive economic growth and social development. (EC 2015: 9)

Key components for achieving this include fiscal space, administrative capacity and strong accountability, among others (Robalino *et al.* 2012; UNICEF 2020a).

Without doubt, addressing **fiscal capacities** is at the top of the agenda to maintain momentum for social protection. The rapid expansion of social protection is happening in countries that face existing substantial fiscal constraints, including debt burdens, and which lack the room for manoeuvre to sustain responses to the longer-term nature of Covid-19.

For example, public debt exceeds 80 per cent of gross domestic product in Egypt, Mozambique, Pakistan, Sudan and Zambia (WFP 2020: 6). Bilateral and multilateral development assistance provides, on average, 55 per cent of social safety net financing in most African countries (Calderon *et al.* 2020). Yet, not only is the need for social protection greater, and could be for some time to come, but state fiscal capacities to fund social assistance programmes will be less.

Thus, a legacy of the crisis could be the need to identify ways of linking new instruments for taxation at the global and national levels (including implementing tax laws already in place, as detailed in *Governance and Building Back Better* – Khan Mohmand *et al.* (2020)) with fiscal expansion supporting deeper and wider social assistance for the furthest behind. International finance and multi-year commitments are necessary to maintain the adequacy and reach of social protection systems over the medium to longer term.

In addition to the G20 moratorium on the bilateral debt of low-income countries, it is essential to consider extending debt relief beyond 2021 as part of a wider raft of financing measures to sustain social protection responses in low-income countries. Political will is indispensable to ensure that the requisite fiscal space is created for large-scale investments in social protection, both in the short term and over a longer period of economic uncertainty and contraction unleashed by the pandemic.

Various development banks and international development cooperation agencies have pledged US\$1.35tn to assist countries to tackle the health and socioeconomic effects of the crisis. The World Bank Group is deploying up to US\$160bn in long-term financial support over the next 15 months to help countries protect the poor and vulnerable from the pandemic, support businesses and bolster economic recovery (Calderon *et al.* 2020).

Yet, thus far, only a limited proportion of global commitments have been allocated to countries, mostly in the form of concessional and non-concessional loans. It is critical that pledged support reaches countries, and that a further stimulus is planned that allows for sustained social protection support at scale.



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The case of **Zambia** highlights the double predicament in terms of finding fiscal space for expanding social protection. The increased need for social protection plays out against high levels of public debt, which pre-dated the crisis, and falling levels of domestic revenue and foreign exchange due to falling prices in key commodities such as copper. The mining sector has already lobbied for a stimulus package to cushion the effects of the pandemic. Availability of fiscal resources will necessitate access to international emergency funds, as well as a restructuring of debt and – in the long term – diversifying the economy away from its dependence on copper.

Source: Based on Siwale (2020)

The crucial job of implementation will depend on state and sub-national political **administration**, which already function minimally with extremely restricted capacities. According to the ILO: 'Building government capacities to provide social protection to their populations is essential for long-term recovery strategies, especially in contexts of protracted fragility' (2020a: 7). Administrative capacities are well-worn in many lower-income countries, and at times altogether missing in some fragile settings. Covid-19 accentuates these



The establishment of strong accountability mechanisms is key to well-functioning social protection systems, and investments in such systems after the pandemic should be directed in such a way as to promote accountability.

deficits as capacity is spread even thinner in a crisis.

Building back from Covid-19 in the medium to longer term is an opportunity to scale up innovations and build capacities that could ensure the continued provision of basic assistance to a wider population in need long after the pandemic is over. The opportunity in the Covid-19 crisis includes expanding the accessibility and use of digital technologies, such as promoting e-payments.

The establishment of strong **accountability** mechanisms is key to well-functioning social protection systems, and investments in such systems after the pandemic should be directed in such a way as to promote accountability. This entails accountability from a social justice perspective, with governments being held accountable for upholding citizens' rights (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2017); and from a financial point of view, with governments being held accountable for using funds transparently and appropriately (Browne 2014).

As outlined in *Governance and Building Back Better* (Khan Mohmand *et al.* 2020), it also encompasses identifying tools to enable citizen engagement, and political processes that empower citizens to monitor state performance. A wide range of tools exist for implementing accountability, ranging from complaints and grievances to financial audits (*ibid.*). Covid-19 may exacerbate the need for strengthening accountability mechanisms because the speedy introduction of new measures as part of the immediate response poses challenges to transparent forms of implementation.

Cross-sectoral linkages

The need for social protection to link to and across sectors is well established (Roelen *et al.* 2017). The multidimensional nature of needs and vulnerabilities requires social protection interventions to provide more integrated forms of support (such as through 'cash plus' models) or to be coordinated with other services. The Covid-19 pandemic exemplifies the need for a cross-sectoral response, with people in and



The multidimensional nature of needs and vulnerabilities requires social protection interventions to provide more integrated forms of support or to be coordinated with other services.

at risk of poverty being less able to protect themselves against the risk of infection or to withstand the health and economic consequences of contracting the virus. Although the risk of infection will substantially reduce in the long term, this group is likely to bear the brunt of any remaining risk.

One could draw a parallel with HIV-sensitive social protection, referring to interventions that support those who are affected by HIV, either by reducing their risk of infection or supporting them to manage the health and socioeconomic implications if infected (Miller and Samson 2012; Tirivayi *et al.* 2020). While Covid-19 is unlike earlier pandemics, lessons can also be learned from the SARS, MERS and Ebola epidemics, which all highlight the need to combine health and social protection interventions so that people can take action towards prevention and adequate treatment (ILO 2020c; Wiggins *et al.* 2020).

Ensuring inclusion and gender sensitivity

Covid-19 and its socioeconomic consequences do not affect everyone equally. Marginalised groups such as migrants and ethnic minorities are likely to see their disadvantaged positions in terms of access to income and services exacerbated by the pandemic (World Bank 2020). Vulnerable and marginalised groups are at risk of being excluded from social

protection at the best of times. People with disabilities, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and people from ethnic minorities or who belong to other marginalised groups tend to have great difficulties in accessing support. The large increase in need that has followed Covid-19 and the rapid pace at which measures to prevent its spread have been put in place are likely to make exclusions more likely. Social protection in a post-crisis period must therefore reverse new patterns of exclusion and inequality and address long-standing ones.

Measures that were put in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19 have disproportionately affected women and led to the reinforcement of gendered roles and responsibilities (Nesbitt-Ahmed and Subrahmanian 2020; see also *Gender Equality and Building Back Better* – Nazneen and Araujo 2020). Unpaid care work has become more important due to school and childcare services being closed, basic health services having become unavailable, and (in some instances) greater need for health care. Women are disproportionately carrying the burden of such work (*ibid.*).

In all contexts, gender equality and inclusion of women in the response, in line with SDG 5, will be critical in order not to risk backsliding on limited rights gained and jeopardizing the attainment of the SDGs as a whole (UN 2020: 6). Experiences from previous crises (including the global financial crisis in 2007–08) highlight the need to maintain a continuous focus on gender sensitivity.²



Social protection in a post-crisis period must reverse new patterns of exclusion and inequality and address long-standing ones.

² Various social protection measures in response to such earlier crises were found to be gender blind or discriminatory as they were focused on sectors that predominantly included men (Tirivayi *et al.* 2020).

Social protection plans and emergency economic schemes need to take a gender perspective that accounts for unpaid care by women, and the specific constraints women entrepreneurs and women in the informal sector face (UN 2020).

Lack of engagement with gender in social protection risks setting back progress on gender-sensitive social protection, particularly when seeking to establish new interventions or scale up existing ones to offer much-needed relief from economic fallout and its adverse consequences. Practical recommendations include making support unconditional (Özler 2020), integrating childcare (Roelen *et al.* 2019) and expanding support to the informal sector (WIEGO 2020a).

Making social protection climate smart

The need for social protection to be climate smart takes on a new dimension in the face of a very different global shock. The Covid-19 pandemic has unmasked how vulnerable national social protection programmes and projects are to large covariate shocks and stressors. The incorporation of climate considerations in social protection systems, programmes and projects was patchy before the pandemic. A few efforts, such as Ethiopia's Climate Smart Initiative, sought to ensure that climate was incorporated in all aspects of design, planning and delivery of the PSNP.

Climate change adaptation is a co-benefit of social protection actions to address food insecurity, vulnerability and poverty, rather than the motivation for such responses. Yet, a well-designed and well-implemented national safety net can simultaneously address pressing socioeconomic problems stemming from the pandemic, while helping



If governments are to fully harness the potential of social protection to contribute to strengthening climate resilience, decision-making processes must consider climate as a critical variable.

to strengthen climate resilience as a defining challenge of the twenty-first century.

In essence, strengthening climate resilience means building people's capacity to: (1) withstand extreme events without the need for external assistance by preventing the depletion of household assets; and (2) actively manage their livelihoods so they are able to provide food and nutrition for their families in the face of a range of possible future climate risks and changing weather patterns (see also *Food Systems and Building Back Better* – Ebata, Nisbett and Gillespie 2020).

If governments are to fully harness the potential of social protection to contribute to this task, decision-making processes must consider climate as a critical variable. Otherwise, it is unlikely that social protection programmes will fulfil their adaptive potential or capitalise on mitigation opportunities. Furthermore, ignoring climate in decision-making may inadvertently contribute to maladaptation, increasing the vulnerability of chronically food-insecure people to climate hazards. A scalable safety net with national coverage needs to be coupled with policies and investments in the foundation stones of building back better: public goods such as infrastructure, education and health systems.

Towards more effective social protection during and after the pandemic

The long-term nature of Covid-19 should serve as a wake-up call for governments and multilateral organisations, a road map for accelerating efforts to strengthen social protection systems now and for years to come. States and societies will both pull through the pandemic. But how will they look on the other side?

Responses now and in the coming months and years can lay the groundwork to build back better, as well as putting the furthest behind first in line with the vision and commitments of *A Better World* and the Irish Aid (2017) *Social Protection Strategy*. The reality is that social protection, while it had expanded in the poorest countries in recent years, was woefully inadequate in its coverage and reach, with many left behind even before the arrival of Covid-19.

Social protection is an investment not only in basic welfare but in a cohesive, productive and well-functioning society. Building back better is about getting back to basics, but also getting the basics right to begin with. This includes operating systems that promote transparency and accountability to citizens, firming up the fiscal base to ensure the



Crucially, building back better means re-engaging with and accelerating the positive changes that were moving ahead in the field of social protection before the pandemic and ensuring that provision for the most poor and vulnerable is given priority when building back.

sustainability of systems, and inclusion and sensitivity as the bedrock of social protection provision.

Social protection needs to be shock responsive to flex horizontally by reaching more households and vertically by increasing cash transfer amounts. At the same time, governments, along with their development and social partners, should advance a reform agenda to expand the reach and adequacy of social protection systems.

Crucially, building back better means re-engaging with and accelerating the positive changes that were moving ahead in the field of social protection before the pandemic – building and facilitating a continuum of response, and understanding the nexus between humanitarian and social protection – and ensuring that provision for the most poor and vulnerable is given priority when building back.

The social and economic impacts of Covid-19 will be experienced and felt unequally across the globe and within communities. Efforts to build back better must be fully cognisant that the pandemic will have unequal effects, hitting those who are already poor and marginalised hardest, and could widen pre-existing inequalities. This is something that those planning social protection responses must be alert to, to avoid entrenching such inequalities. Attention to global, regional and within-country disparities in poverty and provision are key to building back better and programming effectively to put the furthest behind first.

The enormity of the response requires a heavy dose of realism, but is also a rallying call for higher-income countries to remain faithful to their global commitments to the SDGs – and even to be willing to increase their funding commitments to ensure there is some prospect of meeting the targets.

Investments in social protection are a way of trying to maintain progress on multiple SDG targets. This was true before the pandemic but will be even more significant in a forthcoming period of rupture and recovery from the virus.

At regional and country levels, continued commitments are required to build social protection systems that deliver better to a wider section of the population that is highly vulnerable. Context will determine the pathway to and process of how these systems are built, with some conflict-affected and fragile states leaning on humanitarian platforms to plant the seeds of future social protection systems.

Other countries will be able to revisit the structures and systems in place before the pandemic and ensure they are fit for purpose,

with the objective of building back better. Thus, during the forthcoming period in which Covid-19 will continue to reshape poverty, inequality and vulnerability, the pathways to 'a better world' – as the framing vision of Ireland's international development policy – will vary.

However, social protection will play a critical role, both in the near term and in the uncertain years ahead. Following its current strategy – but also with careful adaptation, and context-specific interventions and responses – Ireland has a constructive role to play and a positive contribution to make: both in terms of its bilateral support and also as an international actor with the potential to advocate for, and influence, the policies and approaches of the multilateral and bilateral development assistance community.

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Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton, BN1 9RE, United Kingdom +44 (0)1273 606261 ids.ac.uk

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