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BUILDING A BETTER WORLD: THE CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY OF COVID-19

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Social Protection, Covid-19, and Building Back Better^{*†}

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Abstract The Covid-19 pandemic has brought sweeping changes for economies and societies, with the most devastating consequences for individuals and groups with pre-existing vulnerabilities. As attention shifts from addressing urgent humanitarian needs to long-term response, 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 article 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. Based on a secondary literature review, we argue that planning must anticipate the possibility of an enduring pandemic and that the expansion of social protection should not be limited to a short-term response. Rather, Covid-19 presents a necessity and opportunity to establish firm foundations for more comprehensive social protection systems for years to come, including leveraging greater domestic expenditure and international assistance.

Keywords Covid-19, social protection, build back better, continuum of response, systems.

1 The implications of Covid-19 for alleviating poverty and vulnerability

The Covid-19 pandemic has 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 and achievements to reduce poverty, hunger, and other forms of ill-being (e.g. FSIN 2020; Sumner, Hoy and Ortiz-Juarez 2020). The number of people falling into extreme monetary poverty due to the pandemic is projected to range from 49 million (Mahler *et al.* 2020a) to as many as 419 million worldwide (Sumner *et al.* 2020). The rise in poverty may be even higher when considering multidimensional poverty,



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with simulations indicating that 490 million people may fall into multidimensional poverty (OPHI and UNDP 2020).

Economic forecasts reflect how rapidly the crisis has escalated, as well as the differentiated consequences of the pandemic for regional and national economies, with the extent of projected contractions varying for different parts of the world. 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 International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects growth to be -0.6 per cent in 2020 for Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam (IMF 2020b).

While provision of basic needs in the wake of sudden and unanticipated shocks traditionally sits within the remit of short-term humanitarian response, social protection – a regular medium- to long-term safety net to enable people to manage threats to livelihoods – has been a core response to Covid-19 and its socioeconomic consequences (ILO 2020a: 2). By July 2020, 200 countries and territories across the world had introduced 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.*).

Innovative programming in recent years has enabled social protection in different contexts to scale up assistance in response to large covariate shocks that affect groups of households, communities, regions, or entire countries. The rapid response within established social protection programmes for managing the impacts of what is an acute and unanticipated shock, places Covid-19 social protection responses squarely within the shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) agenda (O'Brien *et al.* 2018). Shock responsiveness in social protection is facilitated by targeting systems and contingency funding that provide programmes with the ability to respond more quickly to acute needs in a crisis than conventional humanitarian responses.

Despite Covid-19 being 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 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 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 pandemic,

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 2020c). 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 those populations who were already the furthest behind due to various existing disadvantages, exclusions, and forms of marginalisation. 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). 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.

Based on secondary literature review, this article looks ahead and considers how social protection can offer support and be supported in building back better from the Covid-19 pandemic. It 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. In doing so, we bring into focus components that have long been part of efforts to strengthen social protection, including continuum of response, fiscal space, administrative capacity, strong accountability, cross-sectoral linkages, and ensuring inclusion and equality.

2 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 that cover substantial parts of the population, offer harmonised support, and are well coordinated.

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. 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.

Box 1 Scaling up social transfers in Ethiopia through the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)

In Ethiopia, the immediate response to Covid-19 included planning of 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 Behavioural Change Communication sessions with one-to-one consultations. In urban areas, beneficiaries were allowed greater access to savings opportunities; in rural areas, the benefit value was increased. These measures were in place for three to six 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.

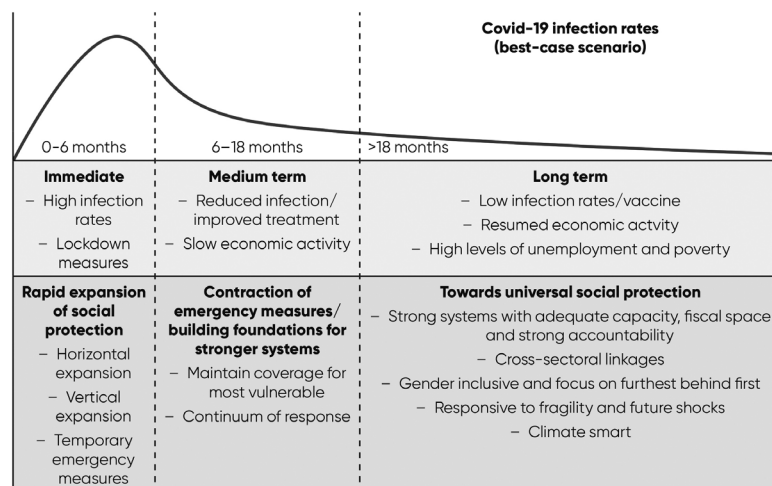
Source Based on Gentilini *et al.* (2020).

There are many unknowns in thinking about the future, including when the vaccines will be deployed at scale, particularly to the poorest and most hard-to-reach populations. 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.

We consider two scenarios, with different assumptions about how the pandemic unfolds in the medium and long term and therefore different implications for social protection needs and capacities in relation to building back better.

Both scenarios reflect that in the immediate term, many countries experienced rapid spread of the virus with public health measures focusing on reducing the infection rate, and economic and social policy interventions aiming to mitigate the effects of such measures. In low- and middle-income countries, the effects of restrictions on movement, the loss of employment, and income insecurity are compounded by inadequate health systems, high population densities in urban areas, rural-urban migration, large informal economies, and high reliance on export-oriented markets, putting people at greater risk of contracting Covid-19 and losing livelihoods (Vaziralli 2020; Siwale 2020).

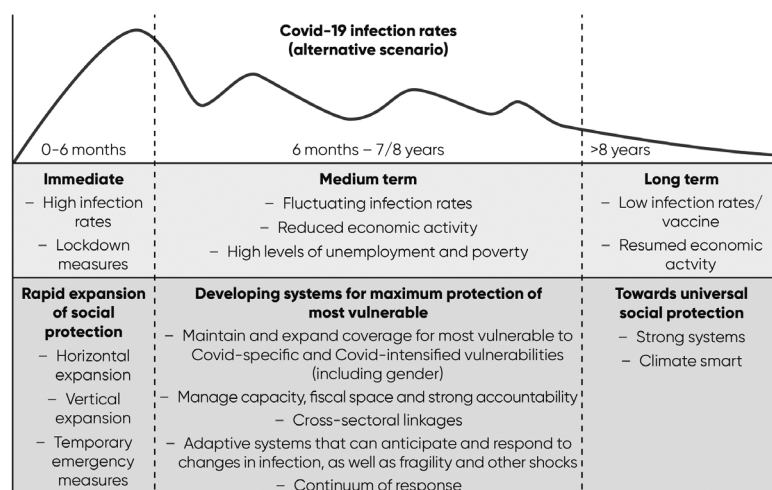
Figure 1 Immediate, medium-, and long-term social protection response to Covid-19: best-case scenario



Source Authors' own.

The abrupt and unprecedented disruption to lives and livelihoods 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 (Box 1). Programme extensions through horizontal and vertical expansions⁴ enable rapid coverage and delivery of benefits. As noted above, most countries have adopted at least one social protection measure in response to immediate needs

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



Source Authors' own.

(Gentilini *et al.* 2020). By 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.

As we move into the medium- and long-term phases of the Covid-19 crisis, it is vital to consider different options for how the pandemic unfolds further and what its implications are for social protection in building back better.

Figure 1 shows the best-case scenario, which assumes an accelerated timeline for Covid-19 therapies and prevention within the first 18 months of the pandemic, 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 vaccines 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. 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. Given the time it takes to develop, trial, approve, and manufacture a widely available and effective vaccine, a more conservative scenario that assumes a longer medium-term phase before a vaccine is found and made widely available is deemed more probable (McDonnell *et al.* 2020).

2.1 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 while keeping the virus suppressed.

Economic activity will resume but restrictions on movement, sub-nationally, 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. The continuing lack of work, depletion of food stocks, and disrupted 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 dominated many discussions in the initial months of the pandemic, 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, this means that the measures 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 by and large focuses on the ability of a social protection system to temporarily scale assistance up and down following a shock, either by increasing the level of assistance for existing beneficiaries or by expanding coverage to non-beneficiaries affected by the shock. This has created opportunities for using social protection to deliver a continuum of assistance by integrating the delivery of humanitarian assistance into its system.

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 (McDonnell *et al.* 2020), and that the best-case scenario is too optimistic. Instead, it is more likely that the development of a vaccine that is effective for the large majority of the population may take many years, 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. Crucially, systems and programmes will have to be flexible to respond to increases in infection rates in sub-national and localised areas.

This scenario presents 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. Instead of focusing on building back better, this scenario may necessitate a focus on striving for maximum coverage of the most vulnerable and may require a continuum of response for

Box 2 Strengthening social protection systems by expanding coverage to vulnerable groups

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 much 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).

much longer (Box 2). 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.

2.2 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 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 (Box 3). 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

Box 3 Social protection for informal workers in Vietnam

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).

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.

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 be 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.

3 How to get there

At least for the time being, the pandemic 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). There is an opening to push for badly needed reforms and investments to deepen and extend the reach of social protection, even though many countries will face contracting economies, dampening fiscal space. This section examines both how social protection may contribute to building back better, and how the Covid-19 crisis may be seized as an opportunity to further build social protection systems. Doing so brings into focus long-standing areas of work within social protection and ways of 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 building back better with social protection include establishing a continuum of response, adequate fiscal space, and administrative capacity; strong systems of accountability so that the most vulnerable are more likely to be included; and cross-sectoral linkages so that sectors such as health and education can augment the social protection provision (e.g. Robalino, Rawlings and Walker 2012; UNICEF 2020b).

3.1 Offering a continuum of response

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. Building on existing best practice and lessons learned around the continuum of response from humanitarian aid to social protection, new short-term social assistance measures should build on and improve existing national administrative and delivery structures of social protection systems (ILO 2020a).

Clearly, different social protection contexts exist. Even when countries have government-led or -supported social protection programmes, this does not indicate their potential to become shock responsive. 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, as experience from previous crises shows (Ulrichs and Slater 2016).

Ultimately, 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 context dependent. Over time, the protracted nature of the Covid-19 crisis may mean that schemes may be scaled down in terms of the amount and intensity of support that they provide but cover a larger number of people.

3.2 Creating fiscal space

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 (Box 4). For example, public debt exceeds 80 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) 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

Box 4 Finding fiscal space during the economic squeeze

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).

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 by Khan Mohmand *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*) 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 investment 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 (ILO 2020a). The World Bank Group is deploying up to US\$160bn in long-term financial support in 2020 and 2021 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 funds 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.

3.3 Strengthening administrative capacity

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 International Labour Organization (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 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. At the same time, such innovations should be implemented with care and avoid excluding already marginalised groups, such as through digital exclusion (Strohm and Goldberg 2020). Similarly, earlier lessons regarding strengthening administrative capacity for social protection have highlighted that this should not result in simply reallocating staff, such as moving social workers away from provision of statutory social services to administration of cash transfers, or relying on vast cadres of community volunteers (Kardan *et al.* 2017). Instead, increased demand for social protection should be met through a cadre of well-trained staff with the support of volunteers as appropriate and with strong horizontal and vertical coordination (*ibid.*).

3.4 Establishing accountability mechanisms

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 so 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 Khan Mohmand *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) outline, it also encompasses identifying tools to enable citizen engagement, and political processes that empower citizens to monitor state performance. A wide range of tools exists 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.

3.5 Creating 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 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).

Buttressing social protection through cross-sectoral linkages is significant not only as a response to Covid-19 but as an enduring way of strengthening resilience to other large covariate shocks and stressors, including climate. The incorporation of climate considerations in social protection systems, programmes, and projects was patchy before the pandemic. Yet, a scalable safety net with national coverage must be coupled with policies and investments in the other foundation stones of building back better: public goods such as infrastructure, education, and health systems. Linking the implementation of social protection programmes with a range of complementary support and services can help to strengthen climate resilience as a defining challenge of the twenty-first century.

3.6 Ensuring inclusion and equality

Covid-19 and its socioeconomic consequences do not affect everyone equally. Mobility restrictions, and economic contraction coupled with identification requirements for accessing support and services means that marginalised groups such as migrants and ethnic minorities are likely to see their disadvantaged positions exacerbated by the pandemic (World Bank 2020). The Covid-19 response has disproportionately affected women and led to the reinforcement of gendered roles and responsibilities (Nesbitt-Ahmed and Subrahmanian 2020; see also Nazneen and Araujo, this *IDS Bulletin*). 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, disproportionately, carry

the burden of such work (*ibid.*). Social protection in a post-crisis period must therefore reverse new patterns of exclusion and inequality and address long-standing ones.

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). Widely excluded from social protection, yet highly vulnerable to the continued economic fallout from Covid-19, 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. Much of the support provided to informal workers may be inadequate, marred by design and implementation issues, and its duration only lasts three to six months (WIEGO 2020b). As noted by the ILO, social protection support to informal workers will be vital during medium-term recovery (ILO 2020b). A return to pre-pandemic prioritisation of target groups may mean that informal workers will lack support when it is most needed (WIEGO 2020a), highlighting that the expansion of social protection to informal workers in the immediate response needs to be maintained into the future to ensure inclusion of a group that is particularly vulnerable to economic shocks.

4 Towards more effective social protection during and after the pandemic

The unprecedented scale and global impact of Covid-19 should serve as a wake-up call for governments and multilateral organisations to accelerate 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 ensuring the most vulnerable and furthest behind are prioritised. 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 also 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 sustainability of systems, and inclusion and sensitivity as the bedrock of social protection provision.

It also means that social protection needs to be shock responsive to flex horizontally by reaching more households and vertically by increasing cash transfer amounts, offering a continuum

of response. 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 so that those in need are not left without support when emergency measures are scaled back.

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. This includes understanding the nexus between humanitarian and social protection, and building and facilitating a continuum of response. In addition, efforts to build social protection systems must be fully cognisant that the social and economic impacts of Covid-19 will be experienced and felt unequally across the globe and within communities, and hits those who are already poor and marginalised the hardest. Those planning social protection responses must be alert to these unequal effects so as to avoid entrenching such inequalities. Context will determine pathways to and processes 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.

Finally, the enormity of the Covid-19 crisis and its 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 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – and even to be willing to increase their funding commitments to ensure there is some prospect of meeting those 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.

Afterword

This article builds on an earlier paper that is publicly available, and that was developed in the early months of the Covid-19 crisis from April to June 2020 (Lind, Roelen and Sabates-Wheeler 2020). Clearly, many things have changed since then that have a bearing on the content of this article. Fluctuations in Covid-19 infection rates around the world have given credence to the 'alternative scenario', emphasising the need for social protection to maintain its response to the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences in an adequate and appropriate manner in the medium to long term. This is particularly pertinent as while the number of social protection interventions continued to increase into the third quarter of 2020 – totalling more than 1,200 measures that were either announced or implemented by mid-September – the large majority of these interventions were only short term and have come or will soon come to an end (Gentilini 2020).

Meanwhile, global and regional economic assessments and forecasts continue to show the daunting scale of the crisis and

impacts that are likely to last for many years to come. India has suffered its first technical recession since independence, with its Central Bank projecting the economy to shrink by over 9 per cent this year. In the Middle East and Central Asia, the IMF Regional Economic Outlook indicates that five years from now, countries in the region could be 12 per cent below the GDP level suggested by pre-crisis trends (IMF 2020a). In sub-Saharan Africa, an estimated 50 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty since the beginning of 2020 – the largest single year change ever recorded in absolute or percentage terms (UNICEF 2020a). Thus, even though developments in vaccines and therapeutics provide hope that the health consequences of the pandemic will be curbed soon, the impacts on poverty and livelihoods will take longer to address.

Notes

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- † This article was presented at two learning events with representatives of Irish Aid, Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs and their civil society partner organisations, as well as at a meeting of the European Union Social Protection Coordination Group. We thank participants at these events for the rich discussion and feedback that has helped to shape our thinking. We also thank two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments. Finally, we thank Aileen O'Donovan, Policy Lead for Social Protection for Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs, who was closely involved in developing the research and analysis from the very start.
- 1 Jeremy Lind, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 Keetie Roelen, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 3 Rachel Sabates-Wheeler, Professorial Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 4 O'Brien *et al.* (2018: iv) define horizontal expansion as 'the temporary inclusion of a new caseload into a social protection programme, by either extending geographical coverage, enrolling more eligible households in existing areas, or altering the enrolment criteria'. They define vertical expansion as 'the temporary increase of the value or duration of an intervention to meet beneficiaries' additional needs'.

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