

# SPACE Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19: Expert advice helpline



## SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE COVID-19 RECOVERY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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INPUT FROM EXPERTS ON THE SOCIAL PROTECTION APPROACHES TO COVID-19: EXPERT  
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This note on recovery was developed alongside others – most importantly a [Strategy Decision Matrix](#) and a [Delivery System Decision Matrix](#) – as a tool used to structure an independent and unbiased analysis of COVID-19 response options. It does not necessarily represent FCDO or GIZ own views or policies.

### KEY MESSAGES

COVID-19 has triggered a global economic slowdown and it seems **unlikely there will be a rapid rebound in growth and a V-shaped economic recovery**. Other scenarios appear more likely, the worst being an L-shaped recession with growth not recovering for several years.

The pandemic has **exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities ('COVID-19-intensified')** and created **new vulnerabilities ('COVID-19-specific')**.

**Social protection measures have been widely used to help address economic impacts but have varied in type and coverage** (e.g. cash transfers have reached 8 percent of people in low vs 87 percent in high income countries); many measures are temporary and a large proportion of newly poor and vulnerable remain excluded.

**Governments can address existing and new social protection needs while 'building back better'** with a focus on inclusive and resilient long-term systems. Such efforts should be proactive and systematic, understanding current and future risks and enhancing social protection systems accordingly, rather than reactive 'fire-fighting' of each individual shock.

**The pandemic presents a narrow opportunity for bold reforms.** These will require attention across governance, coordination, administrative structures and capacities, and delivery systems, together with sustained political will to deliver the necessary fiscal space.

Yet clearly **trade-offs will be necessary, given the depth and scale of social protection needs, and the levels of investment required**.

Our recommended priorities for the medium term – defined loosely as the period from the present day to the end of 2022 – include the following:

- **Continue to build more comprehensive social protection systems** and joined up approaches within the sector (across social assistance, insurance and labour markets) and with humanitarian response. Identify new sources of finance while ensuring current financing is maintained in the face of intensified competition for limited funds.
- **Progressively expand social assistance coverage** to include both pre-existing and newly poor and vulnerable populations, and ideally create a broader base of *potential* beneficiaries, to facilitate expansion and contraction in response to future crises.

- **Strengthen social insurance coverage** including through progressive formalisation of informal workers.
- More strongly base the duration and generosity of social assistance on an assessment of needs, to strengthen social and economic outcomes.
- Proactively **prioritise the most vulnerable**, particularly women and girls, people with disabilities, older people and other groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic.
- Pay particular attention to **investing in delivery systems**, including 'building blocks' such as information systems and mechanisms for targeting (e.g. registration and enrolment), payments and accountability, accompanied by capacity strengthening of local actors.
- **Increase investment in preparedness** to address future hazards. This will enable more efficient and effective support for population groups to withstand the distinct – but frequently overlapping – phases of shock cycles.
- Incorporate **climate considerations** into social protection systems, including the extent to which social protection can help people to *adapt to* climate shocks and *mitigate* risks in the face of changing climates and weather patterns.
- Renew attention to **multidimensional needs**, particularly those emerging from the impacts of COVID-19, including linkages to employment opportunities.

## 1 PURPOSE

This paper analyses the potential contribution of social protection in supporting poor and vulnerable populations over the medium term – defined loosely as the period from the present until end 2022. The decade prior to COVID-19 witnessed an increasing global focus on social protection, a phenomenon illustrated by the inclusion of social protection as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. Over the past six months, social protection has been at the forefront of responses to COVID-19, with many governments invoking social assistance and other measures as short-term buffers to the immediate impacts of the pandemic. While effective implementation of existing initiatives remains an urgent priority, it is now important for governments and others to consider the role of social protection amidst a global economic slowdown and an expected prolonged recession in many regions and countries. This paper explores what role social protection can and should play over the medium term, as governments seek to steer their economies through recession and into a recovery. It outlines the opportunities, challenges and potential trade-offs which social protection actors will face over the medium term.

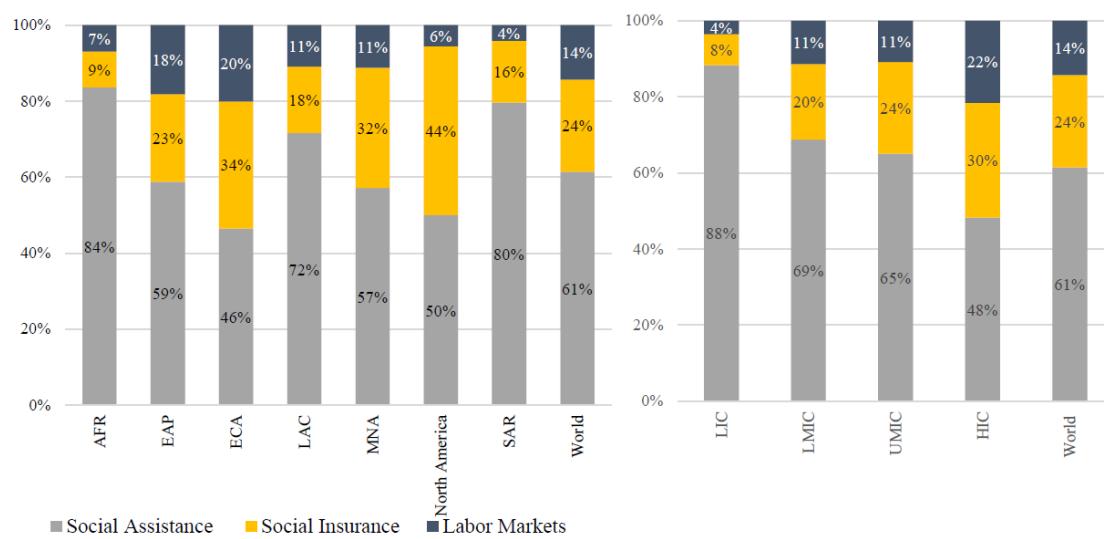
## 2 INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 presented governments around the world with a unique set of challenges. The pandemic is a covariate shock unlike anything experienced in recent decades. The speed of impact has been swift and extremely high percentages of countries' populations are affected. There have also been rapid declines in both supply (e.g. reduced productivity and disruptions in service delivery through lockdowns and social distancing measures) *and* demand (e.g. from shops, manufacturers, travellers, hotels and restaurants). The dimensions of the impacts of the pandemic include health (e.g. increased mortality and morbidity), economic (e.g. job/livelihood

loss or reduced earnings<sup>1</sup>, and some supply shortages), and social (e.g. negative coping mechanisms, disruptions to services such as education, immunisation and other healthcare).

**Social protection measures have been widely used by governments to help address these impacts.** As of September 2020, a total of 212 countries and territories have planned or put in place over 1100 social protection measures in response to COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Social protection responses by governments have included social assistance (non-contributory measures such as cash transfers), social insurance (such as unemployment benefits or paid sick leave) and labour market policies and programs (including wage subsidies). The estimated additional global social protection coverage from COVID-19 responses is almost 1.9 billion people, over 1.3 billion of whom (around 17 percent of the global population) are being reached with cash transfers (Gentilini et al, 2020a).

While nearly all countries have provided some form of social protection response, there has been significant regional<sup>3</sup> and country variation in the type of measures adopted, as illustrated in Figure 1.<sup>4</sup> Much of this variation has been driven by four key factors: (a) percentage of the population working in the formal versus the informal economy; (b) level of political will; (c) fiscal space; and (d) very importantly, the programmes and capacities that existed prior to COVID-19 and could be readily built on. Many low- and middle-income countries have supported individuals and households primarily through social assistance due to a lack of other options, given very high levels of informality and under-developed social insurance and labour market 'automatic stabilisers' (such as unemployment insurance and wage subsidies). For more nuanced and emerging analysis on regional and country experiences, see Box 1.



**Figure 1. Composition of social protection responses to COVID-19 by region and income level of country.**

Source: Gentilini et al, 2020a. Notes: AFR = sub-Saharan Africa; EAP = East Asia Pacific; ECA = Europe and Central Asia; LAC = Latin America and Caribbean; MNA = Middle East and North Africa; SAR = South Asia Region; LIC = Lower Income Country; LMIC = Lower Middle-Income Country; UMIC = Upper Middle-Income Country; HIC = High Income Country

<sup>1</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, more than two-thirds of the immediate spike in extreme poverty is directly associated with national lockdown measures (Teachout and Zipfel, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Gentilini et al, 2020a.

<sup>3</sup> For regional analyses published to date, see United Nations, 2020a; United Nations, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020; WFP, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed analysis, by programme type, see Gentilini et al, 2020a; ILO, 2020.

Governments have sought to reach affected populations by maintaining routine coverage of social protection programs (sometimes with variations in timing and/or 'vertical expansion' to provide higher levels of assistance) and by 'horizontal expansion' of social protection coverage. With the group of people affected by COVID-19 representing a high percentage of national populations, existing social protection programs have been adapted to facilitate easier access – such as through relaxed eligibility requirements or strengthened on-demand enrolment for social assistance, and extension of benefits to new categories (e.g. self-employed) for social insurance. New social protection programs have also been introduced, often leveraging existing systems, to cover populations previously not supported. This has raised considerable challenges, but also generated much innovation, as we have documented in our SPACE guidance notes on [rapid registration of caseloads](#) and [payments](#)<sup>5</sup>.

However, despite the seemingly large global increase in social protection coverage due to COVID-19 responses, there are significant differences across – and within – regions and income groups. As an example, Figure 2 illustrates the regional variation for a sample of 55 countries where data exists for coverage of social assistance cash transfers: the differences both pre- and post-COVID-19 are notable. For example, in the sample of countries, only 8 percent of the population are reached in low-income countries versus 87 percent in high income countries. Low coverage is particularly notable in Africa and Middle East and North Africa regions, where only 13 percent and 19 percent are reached respectively, compared to 66 percent in both East Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and Caribbean regions. Variations in coverage would also be significant if the data were disaggregated at country level.

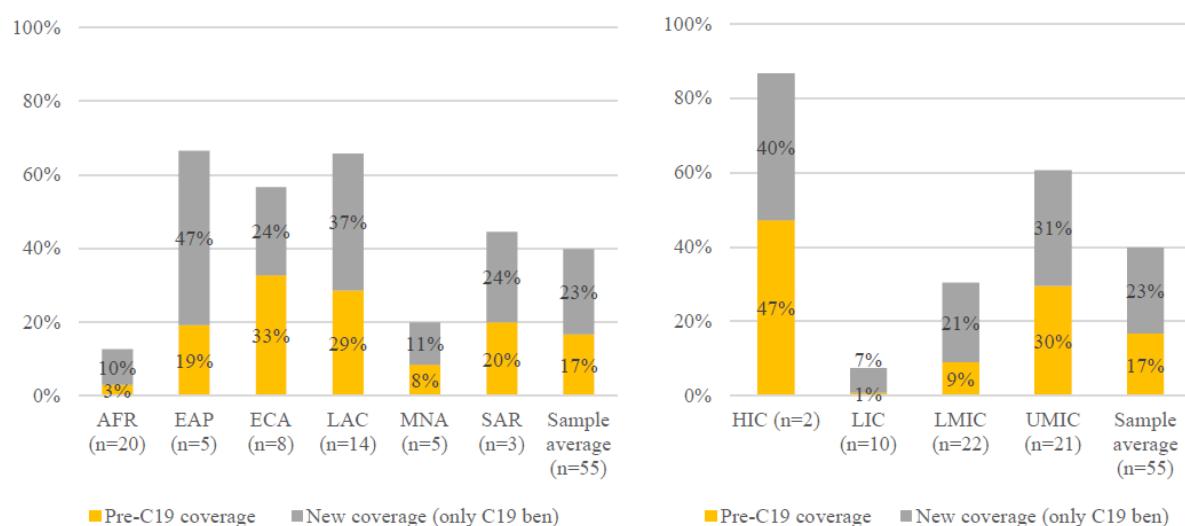


Figure 2. Coverage of cash transfers as a percentage of the population, before and after the onset of COVID-19. Source: Gentilini et al, 2020a. Notes: AFR = sub-Saharan Africa; EAP = East Asia Pacific; ECA = Europe and Central Asia; LAC = Latin America and Caribbean; SAR = South Asia Region; LIC = Lower Income Country; LMIC = Lower Middle-Income Country; UMIC = Upper Middle-Income Country; HIC = High Income Country

The new needs presented by COVID-19 have also led many governments to provide higher levels of support ("Adequacy"). This has been in recognition of the fact that a large number of people in need have no or limited complementary sources of income or informal support from others (who are also in similar conditions), and therefore require more support than is usually

<sup>5</sup> On these topics, see also Palacios and Johnson 2020 [here](#) and Gelb and Mukherjee 2020 [here](#).

the case (i.e. prior to COVID-19). This has been done by: (i) providing a higher level of transfer than exists in their routine social assistance programs; or (ii) providing support for a longer period or more frequently<sup>6</sup>. However, the extent to which these measures adequately mitigate the risks facing vulnerable populations is variable – an issue discussed further in section 4 – and the temporary nature of many measures raises questions as to what next for those who remain very vulnerable.

#### Box 1: REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES TO COVID-19

For nuanced analysis of regional (and country) responses to date, beyond the global focus of mapping led by the World Bank (Gentilini et al, 2020a) and the ILO's Social Protection Monitor (ILO, 2020), the following resources are already available:

- Southern and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, by UNICEF. Accessible [here](#).
- Asia and the Pacific, by the United Nations. Accessible [here](#).
- Middle East and North Africa / Arab States Region, by the United Nations. Accessible [here](#)
- Latin America and the Caribbean, by the World Food Programme. Accessible [here](#) (in Spanish)
- High income countries, by the OECD. Accessible [here](#)

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 3 discusses the implications of a prolonged economic crisis with an emphasis on social protection needs. Section 4 analyses the resulting opportunities, challenges and trade-offs for social protection over the medium-term.

## 3 A PROLONGED ECONOMIC CRISIS and SOCIAL PROTECTION NEEDS

COVID-19 has triggered a global economic slowdown, driven by reduced commodity prices; the collapse of tourism; reduction in remittances; and disruption to light manufacturing (Pfister et al, 2020). Economic forecasts from the [IMF](#), [World Bank](#) and [OECD](#) recently converged towards predictions of a 4.9–6 percent contraction in global GDP in 2020, although these estimates may soon be further revised. Debt levels were high prior to the onset of COVID-19, and the pandemic risks a protracted debt crisis for many countries, notwithstanding some actions already taken by donors and multilateral agencies.<sup>7</sup>

It seems unlikely there will be a rapid rebound in growth and a V-shaped economic recovery. Despite a lifting of the first wave of lockdowns, a state of economic uncertainty persists amidst an assortment of mitigation and containment measures and various predictions on whether and when a vaccine will be widely available. Other economic scenarios appear more likely, the worst being an “L-shaped recession” where growth does not recover for several years (and thus creates the shape of an L); a long period between decline and recovery (creating a U

<sup>6</sup> Note that measures that have been adopted to bring forward future payments or waive waiting periods are useful, but zero-budget (ultimately leaving a gap in the future). This has been a problem e.g. for early withdrawal of pension payments.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020.

shape); and a double dip recession, where the economy recovers and then falls into recession again (creating a W shape). While we do not attempt to predict which of the scenarios will transpire, each will clearly have prolonged and devastating impacts for hundreds of millions of poor and vulnerable people in developing countries.

Economic contraction will place significant financial and capacity constraints on all governments, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Many governments are already facing depreciated exchange rates, and substantial declines in tax revenues will pose serious fiscal restrictions. Countries will see financial sector tightening, and bilateral aid will likely reduce as the economies and budgets of donor countries are affected negatively by the crisis. It has been estimated that sub-Saharan Africa will require an estimated increase in net ODA flows of approximately \$40–50 billion per annum over 2–3 years (a doubling of current flows) to navigate a path through the crisis without exposing public finances to excessive stress.<sup>8</sup> In parallel, many countries and regions will continue to experience increasing intensity and frequency of natural disasters, together with ongoing mega trends such as climate change, conflict, demographic bulges and migration – these will in turn compound the prolonged supply- and demand-side implications of COVID-19 at national level.

An array of bleak projections across social and economic dimensions threaten national and international development goals and point to intensified social protection needs. It is estimated that COVID-19 will result in up to 100 million people falling into monetary poverty<sup>9</sup>, although the World Bank notes that this projection likely underestimates need and heterogeneity of impacts at country level<sup>10</sup>. Oxford Policy Management predicts that 20 years' worth of development gains in African countries are at risk (Henstridge and Lee, 2020), and the ILO projects that 10 percent of the global formal workforce (305 million people) will lose their jobs. Women's jobs – both formal and informal<sup>11</sup> – appear to have been particularly hard hit, with women estimated to be 1.8 times more likely to have their jobs cut or lose their income if self-employed.<sup>12</sup> People with disabilities, already disproportionately excluded from the workforce, will be especially vulnerable to the adverse economic and social impacts of the pandemic. Progress on infant mortality will be put back by between five and 15 years, and deaths from malaria are predicted to increase back to pre-2000 levels<sup>13</sup>. An additional 10,000 children could die each month during the first year of the pandemic due to a projected 14.3 percent increase in wasting<sup>14</sup>, and the number of people facing acute food insecurity is estimated to double to 265 million.<sup>15</sup> COVID-19 could result in the loss of over half a year's schooling, which would cause children to lose the equivalent of \$872 per year from future earnings, a loss of over \$10 trillion in earnings over their lifecycle<sup>16</sup>. Post-crisis austerity measures may have further serious and direct consequences for children and the services that they benefit from, such as health and education (Tirivayi et al, 2020).

Global prognostications on GDP losses are not particularly insightful in predicting poverty changes at country level because they do not adequately capture the nuanced impacts of

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<sup>8</sup> Adam et al, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, 2020a.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank 2020b. "The assumption of distribution-neutral impact of growth on poverty is a reasonable one to make under the current circumstances, which is a total absence of actual consumption or income data on impacts in developing countries. But there are good reasons to expect that the actual impacts are going to be highly skewed against certain groups".

<sup>11</sup> Casale, D & Posel, D. 2020.; Tefera, G.A, Bundervoet, T. and Wieser, C., 2020.

<sup>12</sup> McKinsey Global Institute, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> World Health Organisation, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF, 2020b.

<sup>15</sup> WFP, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> World Bank 2020d.

COVID-19 on livelihoods and structural transformation.<sup>16</sup> They are calculated on the assumption of a uniform impact across the consumption distribution (see Panel B in Figure 3) at country level and across locations, implying that those in need (post-COVID-19) will be those who started out closest to the poverty line. However, microsimulation analysis by SPACE ([Wylde, 2020](#) – see Panel A in Figure 3) and partners shows a strong heterogeneity in terms of whose consumption has fallen and by how much – primarily depending on people's livelihoods. See a visual example from Ethiopia in Figure 3.

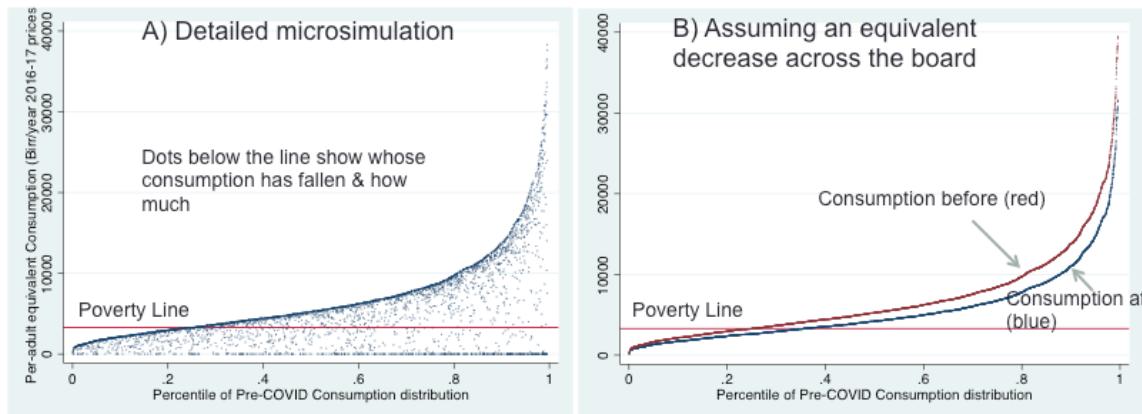


Figure 3. Estimates of Pre- and Post-COVID-19 Consumption (and Poverty) using different methods, Ethiopia. Source: [Wylde, E. 2020. Social Protection and Humanitarian Cash/Food Responses to COVID-19: Needs, Coverage, and Gaps.](#)

The combined social and economic impacts of the pandemic are both exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities ('COVID-19-intensified') and creating new vulnerabilities ('COVID-19-specific') (Devereux et al, 2020). Prior to COVID-19, a large proportion of poor and vulnerable people were not covered by social protection, and transfer levels were already frequently inadequate (World Bank, 2018; ILO 2017). Increases in poverty, vulnerability and exclusion will result in greater social protection needs than existed prior to COVID-19, although the country level effects will vary. Sectors and livelihood groups will be impacted differently, as will men and women. Many of the external and internal shocks are more likely to impact those who were better off to begin with (e.g. earning remittances from abroad or wages from manufacturing jobs), while some of the chronically poor (e.g. subsistence farmers with little market integration) will be relatively protected. Even within livelihood groupings, recessions will not hit equally. Some will lose all their income due to unemployment; others will see a small reduction.

## 4 OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES and TRADE-OFFS

This section focuses on *how* governments can address social protection needs while "building back better" with a focus on long-term systems. COVID-19 can act as a catalyst to create social protection systems that are comprehensive, resilient, adaptive and inclusive. This means not returning to the pre-pandemic status quo (Lind et al, 2020), and it also involves being proactive and systemic (United Nations 2020c). Governments should shift from reactive 'fire-fighting' of each individual shock to understanding current and future risks and enhancing social protection systems accordingly. This requires attention across a raft of issues, including governance, institutional coordination, administrative structures and capacities, and delivery

systems, together with sustained political will to deliver the necessary fiscal space (Lind et al, 2020).

The depth and scale of future social protection needs, and investment required, will clearly involve trade-offs, but the pandemic presents a narrow opportunity for bold reforms. Governments will of course need to consider competing urgent priorities within the social protection sector and across other sectors, such as strengthened health systems and maintaining essential services. But social protection can play a crucial role within the broader mix of high priority public policies, and COVID-19 creates a window of opportunity to introduce reforms and measures which might otherwise struggle to build momentum or achieve national consensus.<sup>17</sup> There will be important trade-offs to consider, which will vary according to local contexts, including [value for money](#) of different initiatives and prospects for sustainability. Careful attention is required to ensure previous investments and gains in social protection are protected while shortcomings brought to the fore by COVID-19 are incrementally addressed.

Many governments already recognise that social protection is an investment and not a cost and are gradually working towards the scale of expenditure of OECD countries (where public spending on social protection averages 20 percent of GDP: OECD, 2020). Substantial evidence demonstrates that social assistance has positive impacts on productivity and incomes in “normal” times: cash transfers generate multiplier effects significantly greater than one (FAO, 2016). There is also a wealth of data regarding the extensive benefits of cash transfers in areas such as health, education, nutrition, and gender and social inclusion. In line with Keynesian principles, the productivity impacts will be amplified during a recession through the contribution of social protection – both contributory and non-contributory – to fiscal stimulus. A strengthened humanitarian and social protection nexus is also critical. Humanitarian systems will continue to play a central role in many countries, as they are often the only systems with the capacity to respond quickly and with accountability to affected populations. Humanitarian crises and climate-related shocks will continue to recur. The pandemic presents an opportunity to begin or accelerate efforts to combine humanitarian and social protection systems (focusing on joint outcomes and leveraging each other’s capacities<sup>18</sup>) while gradually moving towards a situation in which separate humanitarian structures are not needed in most contexts and for most types of shocks – recognising that this could take a decade or more in some countries.

The following sub-sections outline a framework by which to assess social protection options over the medium term – a timeframe loosely defined for current purposes as between the present (over six months since the onset of the pandemic) and the end of 2022. While the implications of COVID-19 for many countries will likely extend beyond the coming two or so years, the timeframe has been selected as one in which social protection actors can focus their attention on both addressing current and emerging needs and laying the foundations of longer-term reforms. The framework for the discussion is based on dimensions which include ‘coverage’, ‘adequacy’, ‘comprehensiveness’ (aligned with the tenets of universal social protection) and others which are drawn from SPACE’s technical tools (building on prior literature on shock responsiveness of social protection systems) – the [Strategy Decision Matrix](#) and [Delivery System Decision Matrix](#).

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<sup>17</sup> For example, notwithstanding many contextual differences to the present day, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and 2008 Global Financial Crisis catalysed the introduction of many social protection reforms or measures that were not previously considered financially or politically feasible.

<sup>18</sup> See SPACE’s analysis on [Identifying Practical Options for Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection in the COVID-19 Response](#).

## 4.1 Coverage – reaching affected populations

Prior to COVID-19, a large proportion of regional and country populations, and poor and vulnerable people in particular, were not covered by social protection. Coverage levels were characterised by substantial regional variation, with just 17.8 per cent of the population in Africa being covered by at least one cash social protection benefit, compared to 38.9 percent in Asia and the Pacific, 67.6 percent in the Americas, and 84.1 percent in Europe and Central Asia (ILO, 2017). Coverage of the poorest households is often markedly low. For instance, social assistance programmes covered just 18 percent of the poorest quintile in low-income countries and less than half (43 percent) in lower-middle income countries (World Bank, 2018). In fragile and conflict-affected countries, the benefit incidence for the poorest quintile for all social protection was only 14 percent (Ovadiya et al, 2015). Social insurance coverage is often even worse than social assistance – given extremely high levels of informality in most lower-income countries.

### 4.1.1 Social assistance

Horizontal expansion of social assistance in response to COVID-19 has reduced some of the gaps in coverage, but a large number of measures are only temporary and many of the newly poor and/or vulnerable remain excluded. While the aggregate number of new social protection measures introduced in response to COVID-19 appears impressive, many of the intended beneficiaries of these schemes (such as women and people with disabilities) are often confronted with systemic challenges to access them (United Nations 2020c). Countries that lacked strong programmes and delivery systems as a foundation before the crisis were further constrained in their ability to expand coverage; this commonly led to approaches with limited geographical reach, which were often complemented by humanitarian programming.

Looking ahead, social assistance coverage needs to be expanded to include both pre-existing and newly poor and vulnerable populations. For instance, while there are additional needs in both urban and rural areas, it is in urban areas that the increases are greatest. Some of the newly poor may also have been relatively better off before COVID-19, and/or may have been informal workers who had no social protection. The pandemic has visibly demonstrated the gaps within countries' social protection systems: their inability to cater to expanding – and constantly evolving – needs. Addressing coverage gaps is therefore not a matter of changing the targeting criteria, it is about progressively extending coverage, which will require a combination of political will, fiscal space, and sufficiently mature social protection systems.

Expansion in coverage should ideally include the creation of a broader base of potential beneficiaries, allowing social protection systems to expand in the event of a crisis and then contract thereafter. This is a practical step towards an approach which recognises that universal coverage can involve provision of social protection (or other measures) to address certain risks or contingencies faced by some population groups *when and if the need arises, acknowledging we are all potential beneficiaries*.

But developing mature systems takes time, and where there are fiscal and administrative constraints to more substantial investment in social protection in the short to medium term, vulnerable groups should be prioritised accordingly. That said, it is recognised that countries commonly have many different potential categories of vulnerability, sometimes representing a large proportion of the population. Prioritisation will therefore involve choices and trade-offs. In fragile and conflict-affected states, the baseline of low coverage will make it particularly important to identify priorities for expansion.

#### 4.1.2 Social insurance

Regions with more advanced social insurance systems were able to draw heavily on those mechanisms in response to COVID-19, as illustrated by Figure 1. Prior to COVID-19, coverage of social insurance programs was 60 percent in high-income countries but only 2 percent in low-income countries (World Bank 2018), driven by factors including structural, legal, regulatory, finance and capacity constraints, and high levels of informality. Where social insurance *does* exist, its effectiveness is often hindered by the inadequacy of measures such as unemployment insurance, sick pay, and furlough entitlements, and where formal sector workers receive relatively low payment rates (OECD, 2019).

Social insurance coverage should therefore be strengthened, including through progressive formalisation of informal workers. This can be cost-effective in the event of subsequent shocks: Future localised lockdowns may be especially difficult for certain industries (such as tourism or garment workers), and formalisation and enhanced social insurance coverage can mitigate risks for informal or unprotected workers. Suggestions for reform include those by the ILO ([here](#) and [here](#)) and [WIEGO](#). However, these reforms are complex and take time. There is still quite limited experience with extending social insurance to informal workers, and the extent to which both workers and employers will be able to pay contributions in the medium term will be particularly constrained in light of the global economic contraction. It follows that social assistance will still likely be required to address short term needs, even when social insurance reforms are in train.

## 4.2 Adequacy – addressing needs

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, social assistance transfer levels were already frequently inadequate. Many pre-COVID-19 social protection beneficiaries were still highly vulnerable due to the insufficient level of transfers received and the lack of tailoring to their individual and household needs (e.g. household size and structure; age, gender and disability-related needs). On average, pre-COVID-19 social assistance transfer levels were approximately 20 percent of the amount needed to close the poverty gap in low-income countries; in lower-middle-income countries, the figure was approximately 50 percent (World Bank, 2015).

The short duration of many COVID-19-specific social protection measures is also concerning. Data on 92 cash transfer programs globally shows an average duration of just 3.3 months (Gentilini et al, 2020a). Judgements on adequacy will therefore depend in part on whether cash transfer responses to COVID-19 are one-off initiatives or are extended in recognition of the prolonged nature of the crisis (as some countries in Latin America, Central Asia and elsewhere have started doing: Gentilini et al, 2020a).

Although it is too early to assess the generosity of social protection responses to COVID-19, per capita expenditure sheds some light on this issue, and is highly variable, ranging from \$4 in low income countries to \$695 in high income countries (Gentilini et al, 2020a). Per capita funding from international organisations for COVID-19 responses is estimated to be higher for those living in richer middle-income economies and lower for those living in countries with higher poverty rates.<sup>19</sup>

Over the medium term, limitations in the duration and generosity of social assistance will undermine its effectiveness in achieving social and economic outcomes. This applies to both

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<sup>19</sup> Centre for Disaster Protection, 2020a.

pre-existing transfers as well as COVID-19-specific measures. Anecdotal evidence from a number of countries SPACE has worked with between April and September 2020 suggests that governments have often proposed transfer sizes based on the amount of funding available given desired coverage, rather than on a specific assessment of needs facing households. While this may be a common practice, it will likely weaken effectiveness which may in turn undermine the case for providing transfers. To improve the adequacy of social assistance, the size and duration of transfers should ideally be based on a specific assessment of needs; these will evolve and change over time, with adjustments to be made accordingly. Analysis on needs and the modelling of transfer levels required to achieve a certain impact can be used to advocate for funding allocations from donors and finance ministries. That said, there will likely be ongoing trade-offs between 'adequacy' and 'coverage' dimensions, especially where fiscal space is limited.

### 4.3 Addressing multidimensional needs through comprehensive approaches

There has been a growing emphasis over recent years on supporting the multidimensional needs of social protection beneficiaries by layering or linking to additional measures – what we refer to as 'comprehensiveness'.<sup>20</sup> These have included health, childcare, behavioral change, psychosocial support, and protection initiatives. The gradual growth of such approaches is in part a recognition of the evidence that there are limitations in the extent to which social assistance can achieve longer-term and second order impacts related to social outcomes (Roelen et al, 2017). Another area of growth prior to COVID-19 has been economic inclusion programmes, which are multidimensional responses which aim to address a range of economic and social constraints, usually through a combination of cash or in-kind transfer, skills training or coaching, and access to finance (Partnership for Economic Inclusion, 2020a and 2020b).

However, comprehensiveness has been limited in many COVID-19 responses, despite the pandemic bringing to the fore a range of important issues such as public health capacity, mental health<sup>21</sup>, gender-based violence<sup>22</sup>, education, childcare, and agriculture supply chains<sup>23</sup>, among others. The constrained response is perhaps due to the trade-offs faced by actors in social protection and other sectors and the complexities of multisectoral programming, which have resulted in an overall prioritisation of limited financial and human resources on maintaining routine social protection and adapting existing programmes or creating new ones.

Over the medium term, renewed attention is needed by governments to identify and address multidimensional needs, particularly those emerging from the impacts of COVID-19. There are opportunities for social protection systems to support citizens with such needs through better linkages with relevant sectors and other support services. A growing evidence base can be drawn on to help countries better understand the constraints that social protection beneficiaries face, and how to most effectively and efficiently address those needs – for instance through the leveraging of existing systems (including and beyond social protection) (Roelen et al, 2017).

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Roelen et al, 2017. We are not referring here to the concept of a comprehensive social protection system which addresses all risks throughout the lifecycle.

<sup>21</sup> Bartuska and Marques 2020.

<sup>22</sup> UNDP, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Seyfert and Farhat, 2020.

Stronger efforts are also required to link social protection beneficiaries with economic opportunities, including employment, particularly in urban areas that have been hard hit by the pandemic. Access to social protection must also be seen as a critical component of livelihood and employment support programmes in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>24</sup> The trend towards urbanisation had not been met by a wide availability of formal jobs in secondary and tertiary sectors. As a consequence, urban and peri-urban informal economies have grown, frequently characterised by low-income and precarious forms of employment, and an absence of social protection, thereby exacerbating the risk of poverty. Over the medium term, there is a need to design and implement policies which support the re-establishment of livelihoods and decent jobs in both the informal and formal economies, and across urban and rural contexts. Social assistance programmes which incorporate economic inclusion elements can play a role in these efforts, but the needs are substantial and beyond the scope of that instrument, notwithstanding its potential agility. In the longer term, integrating social protection within wider policy goals to promote the structural transformation of economies with a focus on employment creation, adherence to and promotion of basic labour standards, and decent work, will be critical.

Comprehensively addressing the social and economic needs of social protection beneficiaries in the wake of COVID-19 is clearly an expansive agenda which presents many challenges. Aside from the fiscal constraints, it is particularly important to be aware that these issues are broader than just social protection and require buy-in and commitment from other sectors. Moreover, even where there is political will and fiscal space, the complexities of coordination across sectors will pose ongoing challenges even in well-functioning contexts and systems, alongside the need for adequate capacity at all levels of government.

#### 4.4 Gender and social inclusion

Recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on the role of social protection in promoting gender equality and women and girls' empowerment. Carefully designed and implemented social protection programmes have been shown to support gender equality and empowerment across a range of outcomes, including greater access to education and health services for adolescent girls, better access to and control over income and assets, increased decision-making by women, and changes to the unequal division of labour in the household (Holmes 2019). However, prior to COVID-19, there was limited attention to incorporating gender dimensions in shock responsive social protection (Holmes 2019), and the same is true of other intersecting risks and inequalities, such as disability, age, ethnicity etc.

The impacts of the crisis on women and girls across their life course, as well as on people with disabilities and older people, have not been adequately considered in social protection responses to COVID-19. This is despite evidence that the pandemic is likely to widen existing inequalities, including by gender, socio-economic status and race, among others. As noted earlier, women's jobs and livelihoods have been particularly hard hit. In addition, as a result of persistent inequalities and discrimination, women and other vulnerable groups are typically marginalised in terms of decision-making power and agency, and this reduces the likelihood that their needs will be visible and met in the pandemic response effort. There is also an increased risk of frequency and severity of violence against women and violence against children, as families cope with stressors of economic insecurity, quarantines and isolation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Heintz and Razavi, 2012.

Future programming should specifically take these risks and vulnerabilities into account as part of improved efforts to proactively prioritise the most marginalised and address extreme inequality (United Nations 2020c). One potential strategy widely advocated by social protection and gender equality actors is to link gender and social inclusion (GESI) programmes with COVID-19 responses efforts.<sup>25</sup> More broadly, there are many opportunities to address exclusion and marginalisation within the social protection sector, including addressing gender disparities in wages and benefits, in access to economic opportunities, and in unpaid care work. To support women's diverse needs across the lifecycle, establishing strong linkages between social protection and social services – such as health, childcare, education, and gender-based violence support services – is essential. These efforts are not without significant challenges though, with implications for cost, complexity and coordination. In addition, when gender and intersecting inequalities are not well considered or integrated into social protection programming, there may be unintended negative impacts on women and girls (Holmes 2019).

## 4.5 Timeliness

While there is room for improvement in the timeliness of many routine social protection programmes, the delivery 'timeline' of COVID-19 responses in many countries was inadequate. The predictability of social protection is an important factor in its effectiveness. Of 195 social protection measures analysed by the World Bank, 26 were still at the planning stage as at July 2020 (Gentilini et al, 2020b). Some measures have also been announced and cancelled due to lack of feasibility. Such extensive delays in implementing social protection measures in response to COVID-19 have likely been too significant to truly counteract the negative coping strategies of many individuals and households in the face of the pandemic's impacts on their livelihoods.

Even where responses were relatively swift, vulnerable groups often missed out on receiving payments in a timely manner. This was the case even in high income countries. In the US, for instance, a one-off transfer which was intended to be provided to most US households was received first by those with bank accounts, then months later (by cheque) for those without. Overall, the support was received by only 58.6% of adults with incomes at or below the federal poverty level. There were also disparities in receipt by race/ethnicity and family citizenship status. It has been estimated that up to 12 million eligible people were at risk of not receiving the payment, many of whom may not have been aware that they were eligible or had difficulty applying online for the transfer (Holtzblatt and Karpman, 2020).

A key factor driving the delays and lack of timely responses across countries has been a lack of preparedness. Over the medium term, investments should be initiated in developing stronger 'building blocks' for delivery of routine systems, as well as systems that can respond to shocks. This includes robust identification and Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, inclusive Social Assistance Information Systems and accessible Government to Person (G2P) payment systems<sup>26</sup>. Responses were relatively faster in countries that had previously invested in such building blocks. While investing in systems can pose fiscal and administrative challenges, there are opportunities to take steps over the medium term that are not cost-intensive – provided other factors such as adequate capacity and political will are in place. These include, for instance, improving the regulatory environment that affects the development and deployment

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<sup>25</sup> See for example, UNICEF 2020c, World Bank 2020c.

<sup>26</sup> See: SPACE publications on [registration](#) and [payments](#); Gentilini et al, 2020a; Palacios and Johnson, 2020.

of mobile money and financial services, and establishing effective coordination, data sharing and/or interoperability across key actors, including protocols for data protection.

## 4.6 Accountability

Prior to COVID-19, there was a steadily growing recognition of the importance of accountability in social protection, although evidence of comprehensive and effective approaches was scant. Many actors have recognised that accountability can strengthen the prospects of quality delivery of programmes and also help build better relations between citizens and the state (Ayliffe et al, 2018). Most programmes contain some form of accountability such as audits, spot checks, and grievance redress mechanisms, but the evidence on whether accountability mechanisms have improved programmes or had effects on human development and other outcomes remains limited – partly as these are often implemented as ‘tick-box’ exercises (Browne, 2014; Ayliffe et al, 2018). There is also little evidence of accountability mechanisms being embedded in broader processes enabling civil society (as rights holder) to hold government (as duty bearer) to account.

Accountability has been limited across many countries and regions in the responses to COVID-19. Looking ahead, greater emphasis is needed on accountability in routine programmes, including measurement of the extent to which different accountability mechanisms lead to desired changes. There is also a need for better preparedness to address such issues on a rapid and wide scale in response to future shocks – particularly as this is when routine mechanisms are put to test, and the risks imposed by unaccountable systems are exacerbated (corruption, conflict, etc.). There are many potential opportunities, including linking with humanitarian actors<sup>27</sup>, civil society and local actors who can support such functions – while also ensuring respect for Humanitarian Principles where possible/relevant. However, there are challenges as well, and in particular there is no single blueprint for effective accountability mechanisms. Each must be grounded in contextual analysis and be appropriate for the types of citizen concerns and the level at which social protection programming decisions are taken (Ayliffe et al, 2017) – while guaranteeing transparency and participation in the process<sup>28</sup>.

## 4.7 Preparedness

Countries that invested prior to COVID-19 in more comprehensive systems and in making their social protection systems more responsive to shocks have navigated the turbulent seas more smoothly over recent months. For example, the Philippines, Malawi, Pakistan and many countries across the Caribbean had invested in preparedness activities in the wake of previous shocks over recent years. Many other nations had not made the same investments, perhaps due to a lack of political will or limited fiscal space, or insufficient understanding of the importance of preparing for shocks.

COVID-19 has demonstrated unequivocally that investing in preparedness to address future hazards should be a high priority for governments, with commensurate allocation of human and financial resources. The impacts of COVID-19 will likely be prolonged: the ongoing occurrence of some shocks, together with the arrival of further shocks in future, whether economic, health, natural or otherwise, will create a scenario of multiple colliding shocks and

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<sup>27</sup> See SPACE's analysis on [Identifying Practical Options for Linking Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection in the COVID-19 Response](#).

<sup>28</sup> See the Open Government Partnership Guidance on this [here](#).

stressors (Lind et al, 2020). Those countries with prepared systems will be able to more efficiently and effectively support their citizens to withstand the consequences of the distinct – but frequently overlapping – phases of shock cycles (see Figure 4).<sup>29</sup> An excellent source for practical step-by-step guidance and learning materials on shock responsive social protection has been created by [TRANSFORM](#) (see Section 3 especially). Recognising the timeframe considered by this paper, and that many countries will face funding and capacity constraints, the [TRANSFORM](#) manual presents a number of ‘building blocks’ which can be tackled incrementally as circumstances allow. SPACE has also produced a succinct guidance note on [preparedness actions across the delivery chain](#).

Climate considerations should also be explicitly incorporated into social protection systems. This involves considering the extent to which social protection can help people *adapt* to climate shocks (e.g. strengthen people’s capacity to withstand extreme shocks without external financial assistance) and *mitigate* the risks in the face of changing climates and weather patterns (e.g. improving the capacity of beneficiaries to provide food and nutrition for their families) (Lind et al, 2020). This includes social protection providing timely and effective responses to climate-related (and other) shocks. If done effectively, incorporating climate considerations could enable governments to protect their previous sectoral investments in reducing poverty, vulnerability and exclusion, and help safeguard systems and beneficiaries from the threat of global climate shocks (Lind et al, 2020; WFP 2019; Bowen et al, 2020). There is an opportunity for social protection to capitalise on the growing momentum to ‘build back sustainably’ and there are avenues for climate finance which could potentially be tapped. However, over the timeframe envisaged by this paper, efforts will likely need to be modest, such as identifying a number of opportunities to integrate climate as a variable in the design of social protection measures (e.g. ‘climate-smart targeting’).

A more prepared system is more likely to deliver timely and predictable support – a crucial ingredient for effective responses to multiple and overlapping shocks. There is a growing body of international evidence accruing on national social protection responses to COVID-19 and the opportunities afforded by early action. Governments should document domestic lessons and leverage all emerging evidence over the medium term – these should be viewed as an opportunity to learn and re-calibrate.

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<sup>29</sup>The key stages of a shock are stylised in Figure 4, illustrating that the beginning of a new stage does not necessarily mean the end of the previous. Clearly, this stylisation will differ according to the type of shock (e.g. a protracted crisis). Figure 4 also illustrates how different shocks often overlap within a country and follow distinct patterns (e.g. recurrences) over time – meaning any strategy to address these needs to look across different shocks and their cycles in the short, medium and long term.

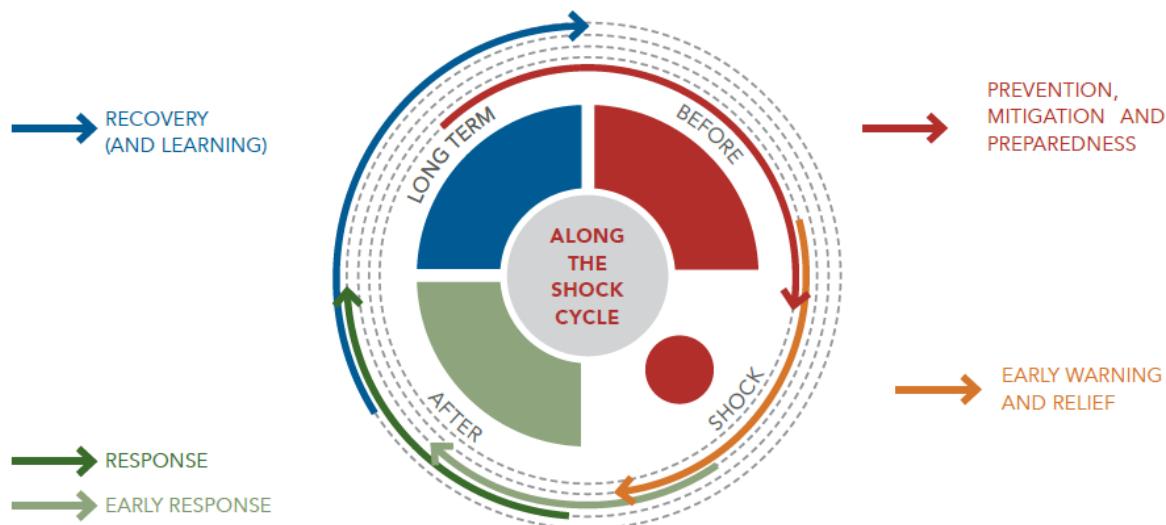


Figure 4. A stylised illustration of the patterns of shock cycles. Source: TRANSFORM, 2020; building on WFP work in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Particular attention should be paid to investing in delivery systems, including information systems and mechanisms for targeting (e.g. registration and enrolment), and payments. Some countries have responded to COVID-19 by successfully leveraging the capacity, resources and systems that exist beyond an individual social protection programme, including online registration and the use of data in existing databases on non-enrolled households. Similarly, there have been many advances in payments, with digital government-to-person (G2P) payments taking great strides forwards in several countries. But there have also been many constraints, and the medium term presents an opportunity to iron out flaws and develop sustainable systems to address issues such as interoperability across registries/databases, data protection concerns, and the politicisation of registration/targeting. This cannot be done in a vacuum, and the role of broader systems beyond social protection will become increasingly critical – with ID and Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems at the forefront.

Capacity strengthening will also be crucial to effective delivery systems, and this extends beyond the public sector; the potential roles of local actors in strengthening social protection systems should always be considered. Local actors include national and sub-national entities and can include civil society organisations, government, private sector actors, and communities themselves. The opportunities for local actors to engage include: helping to set the priorities and design of policies and programmes (rather than following a design and then consult model); participating in communications (evidence suggests that drawing on trusted local individuals leads to positive behaviour change and can help to avoid the spread of rumours and misinformation); contributing to advocacy and accountability efforts; and supporting processes related to targeting, beneficiary identification, and the design of appropriate payment mechanisms, among others.

There can be challenges and risks in working with local actors, however, as noted in this briefing by SPACE. Incentive structures, power imbalances and social norms can in some circumstances undermine a human rights approach. Due diligence is therefore applicable in all situations where local actors are involved (and particularly in fragile and conflict affected states), including those which do not involve transfer of money between organisations. Extending engagement with local actors beyond community leaders to a wider cross section of

community members can help to overcome perceptions of bias and susceptibility to corruption.

## 4.8 Ownership and sustainability

The attention given to government ownership of social protection was growing prior to COVID-19, and the pandemic has underlined the importance both of it and of governments building a more comprehensive and joined-up approach to social protection. This means coherence across sectors (including social protection and humanitarian response), within social protection (social insurance, social assistance, labour markets), and within individual components of social protection (e.g. within social assistance). Multi-sectoral coordination is important to this coherence, including robust collaboration with humanitarian Cash Working Groups, as well-established coordination mechanisms can be leveraged to create a more holistic approach to addressing needs across sectors in future crises. Improving governance and institutional coordination is a common and significant challenge across many countries, particularly where there are capacity constraints. That said, while often labour-intensive, it can nonetheless reap significant dividends where implemented effectively.

There is also a need for many countries to develop an enabling environment for other social protection reforms. While usually not a priority in the immediate aftermath of a shock, establishing the requisite laws, policies, and financing plans to support a strengthened social protection system are important ingredients for a stronger and more coherent system. These processes are not costly per se, although they can absorb significant amounts of officials' time if not carefully planned and executed. There are important trade-offs to consider before launching a process to improve the enabling environment. In contexts of limited capacity (including fragile and conflict affected states) and in the wake of a crisis, it may be preferable to focus on planning, designing, implementing and monitoring priority measures, and postpone the updating of a policy or strategy until there is genuine scope to engage in the substance.

In the strengthening of expanded social protection systems, consideration should be given to building a wider national social contract between citizens and the state. This includes consideration of where and how civil society organisations can and should play a role in the development of schemes and programmes. Governments who receive concessional or grant financing will have more ownership where they allocate a greater share of domestic resources to social protection systems. Actions by the state to broaden the proportion of citizens who benefit from social protection can also strengthen (or help create) the social contract and increase the acceptability and willingness for governments to increase their spending levels accordingly (Pritchett 2005; Sen 1995). This will nonetheless require trade-offs, particularly over the medium term as many governments will need to steer their economies through recession, and the notion of a strengthened social contract needs to be balanced carefully against dimensions such as adequacy and coverage outlined above.

New sources of finance will be needed for strengthened investment in social protection, while ensuring that current financing is maintained in the face of intensified competition for limited funds. While coverage has been increasing globally, many programs are heavily donor-funded, particularly in Africa (World Bank 2018). Expanded domestic revenue mobilisation efforts should ideally be used to generate new resources, although it is recognised that the prospects of this are slim – particularly in most low- to middle-income contexts. Where new revenue sources are contemplated, care must be taken to ensure that regressive financing models (e.g. the use of consumption taxes) are avoided as these are likely to place more pressure on vulnerable social groups. For international agencies, greater consideration should be given to

directing finance to countries where poverty, vulnerability and exclusion have or will increase most because of COVID-19. Current patterns show that countries with the greatest economic losses have received the most assistance (Centre for Disaster Protection, 2020) rather than where poverty will be felt the most, a trend that might help to manage the economic fallout but will not efficiently or effectively tackle the increases in poverty. Robust evidence on the impact of social protection and unmet needs can be used to advocate for protecting existing financing and securing additional resources.

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