



## ROLE OF SOCIAL PROTECTION IN RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*COVID-19 is a global health emergency with immediate as well as longer-term social and economic implications. Human rights based social protection measures represent a critical tool for facilitating access to health care, protecting people against poverty and ensuring the satisfaction of basic economic and social rights, and contributing to the realization of Sustainable Development Goals 1 (target 1.3) and 3 (target 3.8).*

### THE MEASURES SHOULD BE DIRECTED AT:



#### ***I. ENSURING ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES AND SUPPORT TO PEOPLE IN ADOPTING NECESSARY PROTECTIVE MEASURES***

**Social protection plays a key role in enabling access to affordable health care and avoiding hardship. The immediate responses may include:**

- **Making sure that all people, including the most vulnerable and marginalized, can obtain necessary health services.** It is important to facilitate access to health care by reducing out-of-pocket payments for patients, including by introducing universal health coverage schemes. Measures can include free access to services, introducing or expanding mobile services to serve hard-to-reach populations, free access to health insurance schemes for all participants of existing cash transfer programmes, waiving eligibility requirements (including citizenship documentation), or creating exemptions from co-payments or fees for specific services.
- **Ensuring access to clean water and medical supplies,** including masks, gloves, disinfectant hand gel, as well as contraceptives.
- **Facilitating physical distancing policies** by ensuring basic goods and services remain accessible for all, in particular for high risk groups and people in self-isolation.
- **Adapting delivery mechanisms of social protection programmes in line with physical distancing requirements** such as waiving requirements for in-person visits to social protection offices, introducing or scaling up electronic payments or applications for benefits.
- **Ensuring adequate paid sick leave, sickness benefits or other income support** in cases of sickness, quarantine and self-isolation.



#### ***II. ENSURING INCOME SECURITY AND ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL GOODS AND SERVICES AND PROTECTING HUMAN CAPABILITIES AND LIVELIHOODS.***

### ACTIONS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- **Providing cash transfers to meet basic needs.** This can include establishing or scaling up cash transfer programmes, family leave policies, paid sick leave, unemployment benefits, partial unemployment/short-time work benefits; pensions or child grants ensuring that all vulnerable households are adequately protected regardless of their employment status; and considering delivery of humanitarian cash transfers through social protection systems or, expansion of social transfer coverage through humanitarian cash transfers.
- **Delinking cash transfers from the formal sector to cover as well workers in the informal economy.**
- **Ensuring access to basic supplies, services, and food security through in-kind support in addition to cash transfers,** through: adapting distribution mechanisms of school meals where schools are closed; delivery of food and basic supplies to individuals, in particular to older persons, persons with disabilities, persons in self-isolation; responding to childcare, eldercare, maternity and sexual and reproductive health needs.
- **Extending or introducing gender-responsive family friendly workplace policies** to flexibly respond to caring responsibilities, including in employment guarantee schemes/public works programmes.
- **Children should be at the centre of any social protection scheme.** Cash transfers directed at families with children, including of children with disabilities, are effective in the protection and fulfilment of children's rights, including their rights to life, health and education. Continuous investment in children's education and development is necessary.



### *III. PRIORITIZING THE MOST VULNERABLE*

The Leave No One Behind pledge is a central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals and should also guide response measures to COVID-19. Social protection measures in the COVID-19 response that contribute to gender equality and protect the poorest and the most marginalized first are necessary. All these measures should be developed and implemented through a participatory process. The responses may include:

- **Conducting comprehensive national and local vulnerability and needs assessments** to better understand the specific needs, risks and barriers that different groups face using disaggregated data on the basis of sex, gender and other grounds of discrimination such as ethnicity, age, etc.
- **Adapting and continuing entitlements and services delivery**, introducing measures to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including adequate social service responses, case management and referrals to ensure that vulnerable and at-risk groups are not neglected or harmed.
- Facilitating access to credit or distribution of productive inputs to **ensure the continuity of small- and medium sized enterprises**.
- **Devising targeted measures to support small-scale farmers**, especially women, with financial support, access to credit, land, seeds, natural resources, and technology to ensure their livelihood and to protect everyone's right to food.
- **Putting in place measures aimed at providing immediate support to satisfy people's specific dietary needs**, including through the provision of food and nutrition assistance and livelihood, especially for the most marginalized, including women, persons with disabilities, older persons, children, and ethnic minorities.
- **Social protection measures should be gender-sensitive and take into account women's unequal burden of unpaid care work**. Older women are especially at risk. The unpaid care work they perform throughout their life obstructs their ability to access formal employment and therefore contributory social security or decent wages. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, women's unpaid care work has increased with the closure of schools and the impact of the health crisis, as the care of children, the sick and older persons falls more heavily on them.
- **Effective cooperation with local and national civil society and social partners is necessary** for reaching the most vulnerable.



### *IV. MOBILIZING SUBSTANTIAL DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCING TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE FISCAL SPACE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROTECTION.*

COVID-19 has highlighted the critical role of **adequate investments in public health systems** and in **comprehensive social protection programmes**. The investments are crucial in **responding effectively to global health pandemics**, and in counteracting multiple, intersecting forms of inequality, including deep inequalities of income and wealth.



### *V. ENSURING CONTINUED AND COORDINATED DELIVERY CAPACITIES OF SOCIAL PROTECTION AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS RESPONSE PROGRAMMES*

**Coordinated measures that allow social protection systems to continue to operate effectively during the pandemic are necessary. The following measures are recommended:**

- **Ensuring that contingency plans and adaptation measures are put in place**, including continuity of financial services or scaling up of infrastructure capacities (e.g. information and communication technologies, and health infrastructure).
- **Ensuring coordination of the responses of the public sector, social protection providers, civil society and humanitarian actors**; information and assessments of needs and responses should be shared freely, and existing social protection delivery mechanisms for channelling humanitarian aid should be used where advantageous.



**VI. DESIGNING CRISIS RESPONSE MEASURES ALSO WITH A VIEW TO STRENGTHENING SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN THE MEDIUM- AND LONG-TERM**

Actions taken in response to the COVID-19 crises should aim, besides meeting immediate short-term needs, on building structures that contribute to early recovery and the extension of social protection systems in the medium to longer-term. Actions to consider:

- **Building on and improving existing national administrative and delivery structures of social protection systems to implement crisis response measures.**
- **Developing short-term emergency measures with a view to extending social protection coverage** and protecting people from longer-term impacts of the pandemic as well as future shocks.
- **Investing in specific social protection measures that mitigate the negative impact of unemployment on youth**, with attention to the situation of young women. Social protection can support youth in their search for decent jobs, in accessing further education and in unlocking their full potential.
- **Social and economic policies should promote equality between women and men.** Childcare, for example, should be guaranteed as a social protection measure and the benefits level for social pensions for older women must ensure an adequate standard of living.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE:



- **Social Protection Interagency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B), Joint Statement on the Role of Social Protection in Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic**, available at: [https://www.ilo.org/secsoc/press-and-media-centre/statements/WCMS\\_740551/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/secsoc/press-and-media-centre/statements/WCMS_740551/lang-en/index.htm)
- **Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Statement on the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and economic, social and cultural rights**, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cescr/pages/cescrindex.aspx>