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The Global Coalition to End Child Poverty

## **A CALL TO ACTION FOR GOVERNMENTS TO EXPAND CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO CHILD-SENSITIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19**

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*COVID-19 threatens to push millions more children into poverty and deprivation across the world, risking lasting negative impacts on them and wider society. While governments have been putting in place short-term social protection measures to protect their citizens from the immediate economic impacts of the pandemic, this Call to Action explains why governments must maintain and scale up their investments in child-focused and child-sensitive social protection to avoid failing an entire future generation.*

### **COVID-19 pandemic threatens to push millions of children into poverty, reversing decades of progress**

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are nothing short of catastrophic for many millions of children across the world. **As many as 117 million more children could be pushed into poverty by the end of 2020<sup>1</sup>**, as a result of lost livelihoods and decreased economic activity, adding to the 586 million children already in poverty.

For children, the experience of poverty goes beyond just a lack of income, as it manifests itself in malnutrition, poor health, poor education and exclusion. 644 million children were already living in households that were “multi-dimensionally poor”: deprived in terms of living standards, health and a basic education<sup>2</sup>. Around half a billion people are expected to fall into multidimensional poverty as a result of the pandemic<sup>3</sup>, setting poverty levels back by over nine years.

The impacts of the pandemic are also being experienced differently among girls and boys, with girls and women particularly vulnerable to increased violence, abuse and increased care and domestic work burdens.

Strict lockdown measures and increased deprivation are also exposing more children to the harmful risks brought about through negative coping mechanisms used to supplement family income. For example, increased child labour, early marriage, and sexual exploitation, including the online sexual exploitation of children<sup>4,5</sup>. All of these have devastating long-term impacts on children's health and wellbeing.

By any measure, the poverty impacts of this crisis are expected to be without precedent and threaten to undo progress made in the past decade. If left unaddressed, these impacts will store up substantial future problems not just for children and caregivers, but also for wider society<sup>6</sup>.

## Reaching children with social protection is a proven approach for tackling a wide range of deprivations, yet continued gaps in coverage and adequacy risk lasting damage

Government social protection schemes, when targeted at children and their caregivers, enable families to protect their children from monetary poverty and other deprivations they face throughout their life course, especially when combined with access to complementary services<sup>7</sup>. Evidence shows not just improved outcomes in health, nutrition and education, but when designed appropriately, social protection can be effective at reducing gender-based violence, and address some of the key drivers of child marriage for adolescents<sup>8,9</sup>.

Social protection has been at the forefront of COVID-19 responses in [over 190 countries](#). Many governments have introduced new measures and expanded existing programmes - by scaling up coverage, making it easier to enroll and receive assistance, or by providing increased benefits to address the new vulnerabilities caused by the pandemic. However, the majority of these measures involve only temporary payments<sup>10</sup>, despite the projected long-term impacts of the crisis.

### Box 1: The right to social protection is well established and agreed in international human rights

The right to social protection (referred to in some countries as social security or social welfare) has been recognised for many years as an international human right, agreed by governments across the world. As far back as 1948, governments agreed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights that each person has a right to social security and a right to an adequate standard of living. The right to special care and assistance during maternity and childhood was also given special mention.

This basic fundamental human right has since been reinforced in multiple global and regional agreements, including by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

In 2012, almost every government, national employers' organisation and trade union federation in the world agreed to the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, which included a guarantee of basic income security for children, at least at a nationally defined minimum level, providing access to nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services.

More recently, governments across the world agreed the UN Sustainable Development Goals, with a commitment to building "nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all".

In addition, while a number of initiatives have sought to protect and meet the needs of children during the pandemic (e.g. through providing alternatives to free school meals or short-term family benefits) huge gaps have remained. These gaps in coverage and adequacy are not new: even before COVID-19, around [two thirds of children worldwide did not have access to social protection](#) measures, rising to as much as 85 percent of children in the Africa region.

To avoid storing up lasting damage to children and wider society, it is imperative for governments to hold back the spiraling levels of poverty and deprivation that children are set to face in 2020 and beyond, and to disrupt the intergenerational transfer of poverty. Now is the time to urgently expand social protection measures for children, their parents and caregivers - and to build stronger national systems that can be scaled up to mitigate future crises.

## Why is it so important that children in particular benefit from social protection?

There are compelling economic, social, moral and legal arguments for prioritizing children as governments build stronger and more comprehensive social protection systems:

- **Even before the pandemic, children were disproportionately affected by poverty and deprivation.** Children are already twice as likely to be living in economic poverty as adults. For them, the experience of poverty is both deeper, and multidimensional, with lifelong consequences for their health, nutrition, education, safety and future earnings.
- **Investing in children's wellbeing right from their earliest years, and until they become adults, can lead to major and sustained benefits both for themselves, for their own children, and the wider economy.** These benefits range from better health, nutrition, education, and improved future earnings and productivity, to strengthened household resilience and livelihoods. All of these enable a safer and more nurturing environment for future generations of children.
- **The international community has long agreed that every child has a right to social protection - and we have been failing to deliver this human right for too long.** The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history - proclaims every child's right to social security and an adequate standard of living.



## **A Call to Action to extend social protection to every child**

In the wake of COVID-19, countries all over the world are facing additional financial pressures that could threaten the resources allocated to social protection measures. In many parts of the world, budgetary allocations were already far too little to begin with, yet such measures are needed now more than ever - for children, caregivers and wider society.

The crisis makes it incumbent on governments to recognize not only the immediate, urgent needs of the most affected and vulnerable groups - but also to appreciate the longer-term economic and social benefits of investing in our human capital through child-sensitive social protection. It is crucial that the response to the pandemic avoids austerity measures that would leave a lasting negative legacy on future generations.

2020 marks a moment in history where we have the opportunity to either continue leaving behind those most in need, or to come together and build a better future for all. Investing in social protection systems that effectively address the multiple and varied needs and risks that children face throughout their childhood is key to this. Without it, we will fail to interrupt the intergenerational transfer of poverty whereby children who grow up poor and deprived of their rights are unlikely to reach their potential in later life - making it harder in turn for their own children to break out of the same cycle.

Given the above, we call on all countries to make stronger and deeper commitments in the following three areas of expanding coverage and access to child-focused and child-sensitive social protection; mobilizing significant resources to maintain and increase spending for social protection; and ensuring social protection systems are responsive to shocks and the needs and rights of marginalised groups. Each of these are explained further below:

### **1. Progressively expand child and family benefits towards universal coverage, while ensuring all other social protection schemes are child-sensitive**

To build back better and address the social protection coverage gap, countries must protect current investments in social protection and scale up further to expand child benefits, moving progressively towards universal coverage. In doing so, particular attention should be given to ensuring the most deprived and socially excluded groups and children (whether due to disability, race or ethnicity, gender, family status, displacement or any other form of exclusion) are reached first.

Child benefits provide direct financial relief for families in the form of cash or tax transfers and have been proven to drive down poverty rates and help children flourish. Yet, across countries, many existing programmes reach only a small portion of the population or inadvertently exclude eligible households, including those without birth registration or a permanent home. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many countries introduced, adapted or expanded their social protection programmes. Those which had already near-universal schemes were able to reach wider populations quickly and effectively.

For instance, in Argentina, the Universal Child Allowance programme provided an increase of \$3,100 pesos (about US\$47) for its current beneficiaries. Similarly, in Mongolia, the government increased the Child Money Programme monthly benefit by five times from MNT 20,000 per month to MNT 100,000 for a duration of 6 months.



While such expansions are essential for children and their families to meet immediate needs, governments must also provide for increased benefits to remain in place and be built into their social protection systems and national budgets.

Beyond this, governments should strengthen their social protection strategies and plans to respond to children's rights and public demand for more comprehensive coverage, as part of a renewed social contract between the state and its citizens. Beyond expanding coverage of children and their caregivers specifically, governments should make sure that all other forms of social protection are also child-sensitive, as not all social protection programmes take into account their impacts, including unintended consequences, on children (see Box 2).

## 2. Mobilize significant resources to maintain and increase spending for social protection, specifically addressing the gaps that exist for children and their caregivers

In order to protect and expand the coverage of child- and family benefits, governments will need to take determined steps to mobilize resources. Even before COVID-19, national spending on social protection in many parts of the world was inadequate and inconsistent with Target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals of achieving “substantial coverage” of the poor and vulnerable by 2030 through nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all.

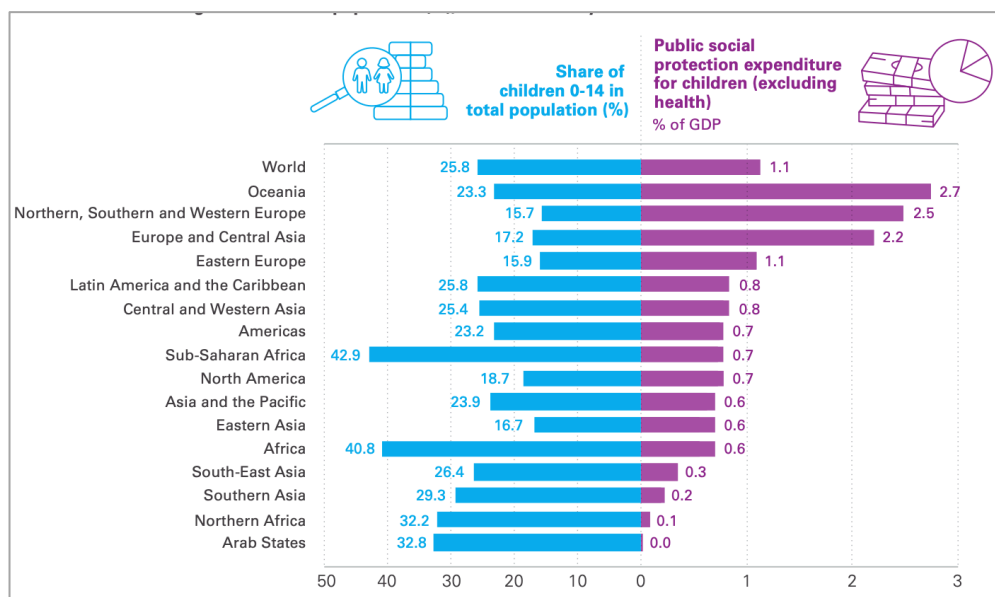
As the Figure shows, investments in social protection for children remained below 1 percent of GDP in many parts of the world, including in those regions where child poverty remains extremely high and where children represent a substantial share of the total population.

We therefore call on all governments to protect and expand government spending on social protection by reviewing and scaling up levels of investment, in order to address the specific gaps that exist in coverage and adequacy, especially for the needs of children, their parents and caregivers.

### Box 2: Principles of child sensitive social protection

Child-sensitive social protection encompasses policies and programmes that address or at least recognize and respond to the specific patterns of children's poverty and vulnerability. It also recognizes the longer-term developmental benefits of investing adequately in children. In practice this means:

- **Avoiding any negative impacts** (such as public works programmes which have led to child labour, affected school attendance and interfered with infant care and feeding practices)
- **Maximising the positive impacts** (e.g. by protecting pregnant women and addressing the different needs and risks for girls and boys throughout their childhood; and by linking benefits to health and education systems, so that with the income support they receive, children and families have access to essential services and information for decision-making)
- **Listening to and acting on the views of children and their caregivers** when designing, monitoring and evaluating social protection measures, to ensure that programmes continue to effectively meet their needs and respond to their concerns
- **Making special provision to reach children who are particularly vulnerable and excluded**, including children without a home or registration, with no parental care, and those who are marginalized within their families or communities due to their gender, disability status, race or ethnicity, HIV status, or other factors.
- **Measuring the impacts of social protection both at household level, and within the household** - for children of different ages, both girls and boys, and paying attention to those with special needs and the effects of gender inequalities or social exclusion.



**Figure:** Public social protection expenditure (excluding health) on children (percentage of GDP) and share of children aged 0-14 in total population (percentage), latest available year.  
**Source:** ILO (2017). World Social Protection Report 2017-19. Geneva: International Labour Office.

As noted above, investments in social protection should not be viewed as a financial burden or cost, but rather an essential investment in a country’s human and economic development - as well as a key measure for tackling the major social and economic costs of inequality<sup>11</sup>.

There are number of options to expand fiscal space for child-sensitive social protection programmes, even in the poorest countries - through reallocating public expenditures, increasing tax revenues, managing or restructuring existing debt, and aid, among others<sup>12</sup>.

While governments are the custodians responsible for investment in national social protection systems, we know that there are a number of countries that will still struggle to finance an adequate expansion in coverage<sup>13</sup>. We firmly believe that vulnerable children, their parents and caregivers in these countries must not be left behind. We therefore encourage a renewed focus on calls for a Global Social Protection Fund, - calls that have been made for a number of years by the UN’s Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food and on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights<sup>14</sup>, and by a large number of civil society leaders and academics<sup>15</sup>.

A Global Social Protection Fund should ensure that those countries least able to finance their own universal child benefits can start to put measures in place, or expand existing measures, including in response to the impacts of COVID-19, until they are able to fully finance them from national resources. In addition to providing a temporary source of additional financing to invest in national social protection systems, such a Fund should offer complementary technical assistance, enabling countries to expand their capacity for domestic resource mobilization, including fair and progressive taxation, strengthening the social contract between the state and its citizens - including the youngest in society.

### 3. Ensure social protection systems are responsive to shocks and the needs and rights of marginalised children

Last but certainly not least, COVID-19 has revealed just how critical it is for governments to already have comprehensive social and beneficiary registries and identification and payment mechanisms in place for when large shocks hit. Having these and social protection programmes designed to be shock-responsive provide a basis for quickly identifying and reaching those people most affected by major shocks, which are set to increase in future given ongoing insecurity and the climate crisis. Ensuring a timely response can help prevent children and caregivers engaging in negative coping mechanisms that cause harm to children.

Social protection systems are also about ensuring that no-one is left behind, regardless of who or where they are. This means that, as the world invests more in such systems, decision-makers must make an even greater effort, country by country, to include and respond to the specific needs and human rights of marginalized people and excluded groups - recognizing and helping to reduce gender inequalities; meeting the needs of people living with disabilities; ensuring that children and young people are not left invisible; and responding to all other forms of social and economic exclusion.



# Endnotes

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## About the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty

The Coalition is a network of like-minded organizations concerned at the devastating effects of poverty in childhood on children and societies. The Coalition promotes the need for countries and development actors to explicitly focus on child poverty and the solutions to it in national, subnational, regional and global policies, budgets and monitoring systems.

Coalition participants share a vision of a world where all children grow up free from poverty, deprivation and exclusion. Working together through the Coalition, as well as independently, Coalition participants aim to support the recognition of child poverty and the practical actions to alleviate it.

