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# Thematic Brief

# Social Protection



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### 1 Background

Today 55 per cent of the world's population has no access to social protection at all, at least 50 per cent does not have full coverage of essential health services, and progress in extending coverage is slow (ILO 2017b; WHO and World Bank 2017). These figures reflect widespread human suffering as workers and their families excluded from social and health protection cannot access health care when needed, and lack basic income security, in cases such as unemployment or other shocks to livelihoods, sickness, maternity, disability or old-age, as has been painfully exposed by the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. FAO 2020; ILO 2020b; 2020c).

Social and health protection are human rights and contribute to social and economic development. Their realization is key for the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (Agenda 2030), notably SDG targets 1.3 and 3.8, aiming for universal social protection systems, including floors, and universal health coverage. The ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation and other international social security standards call upon all countries to establish national social protection floors to guarantee effective access to health care for all and income security across the life cycle. By strengthening people's capacities and supporting them in navigating life and work transitions (among others through health protection, child benefits, maternity and parental benefits, unemployment protection, or old-age pensions), social protection contributes to inclusive growth, social cohesion and social justice.

However, this global political commitment to universal social protection and universal health coverage has not yet translated into sufficient action to make these rights a reality for all. The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a wake-up call alerting the global community to the urgency of accelerating progress in building social protection systems, including floors. Policymakers in developing countries should seek to the extent possible to design emergency crisis responses with a longer-term perspective in mind in order to strengthen social protection systems and decent work, including by supporting transitions from the informal to the formal economy.

This thematic brief outlines the “logic” of social protection, sketches the current state, and summarises key challenges and opportunities in a globalized world that is characterised by technological innovations, urbanization, interconnectedness of our societies and economies, international migration and climate change (United Nations 2020).

It thereby provides additional information on how social protection advances Agenda 2030 beyond the eradication of extreme poverty and material deprivation, and contributes to making growth more inclusive and fairer.

### 2 Definition of social protection

Social protection refers to the set of policies and programs aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their life cycles, with a particular emphasis towards vulnerable groups. Social protection can be provided in cash or in-kind, through **non-contributory schemes** providing universal, categorical, or poverty-targeted benefits (such as social assistance),

**contributory schemes** with social insurance being the most common form, and by building human capital, productive assets, and access to jobs.<sup>1</sup>

This basic definition emphasises that there is no one-size-fits-all model to build national social protection systems, including floors, as the focus is on the outcomes rather than the means. Depending on the national context and preferences, the most effective and efficient combination of benefits and schemes varies. Likewise, countries should consider different methods to mobilize the necessary resources. However, recognising that social protection is a human right, a rights-based approach calls for the development of national legal frameworks and the extension of legal and effective coverage to all.

### 3 Social protection in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals

Target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calls on countries to “implement nationally appropriate social protection systems for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable”. The reference to “floors” establishes the link to the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) (ILO 2012). According to the Recommendation, as the “ground floor” of national social protection systems, a social protection floor should comprise at least four basic social security guarantees: (1) access to essential health care; (2) basic income security for children; (3) basic income security for persons of working age who are unable to earn sufficient income; and (4) basic income security for older persons. Progress towards achieving SDG target 1.3 is measured by the proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women and newborns, work-injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable (indicator 1.3.1).

The role of social protection in Agenda 2030 goes beyond its contribution to ending poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG 1). It supports the realization of other SDGs, in particular the goals on health (target 3.8), gender equality (target 5.4), decent work and economic growth (target 8.5), reduced inequalities (target 10.4), as well as peace, justice and strong institutions (target 16.6). There are multiple channels through which social protection achieves these goals (FAO 2017; ILO 2014; 2017b; ILO and UNICEF 2019; UNICEF 2019). Higher income security stabilizes consumption and aggregate demand, allows people to take riskier decisions in establishing businesses or pursuing income-generating and productive activities, and facilitates job search that appropriately matches individual skills. Together with effective access to health care, this enables individuals to develop and preserve their human capital; it promotes productive employment and entrepreneurship and supports crisis response and recovery (as in the case of COVID-19) and structural changes in the economy, for instance a just transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Higher productivity, macroeconomic stability, and social cohesion all contribute to inclusive growth. In the longer run, better access to food and better nutritional status as well as higher school attendance will further contribute to a more productive and employable workforce that is able to navigate their lives also in uncertain times. This includes both transitions at the individual level, for instance related to work

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<sup>1</sup> This definition was established within the framework of the Inter-Agency Social Protection Assessment (ISPA) tools development; an initiative of the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) that brings together representatives of international organisations and bilateral institutions to enhance coordination and advocacy related to social protection.

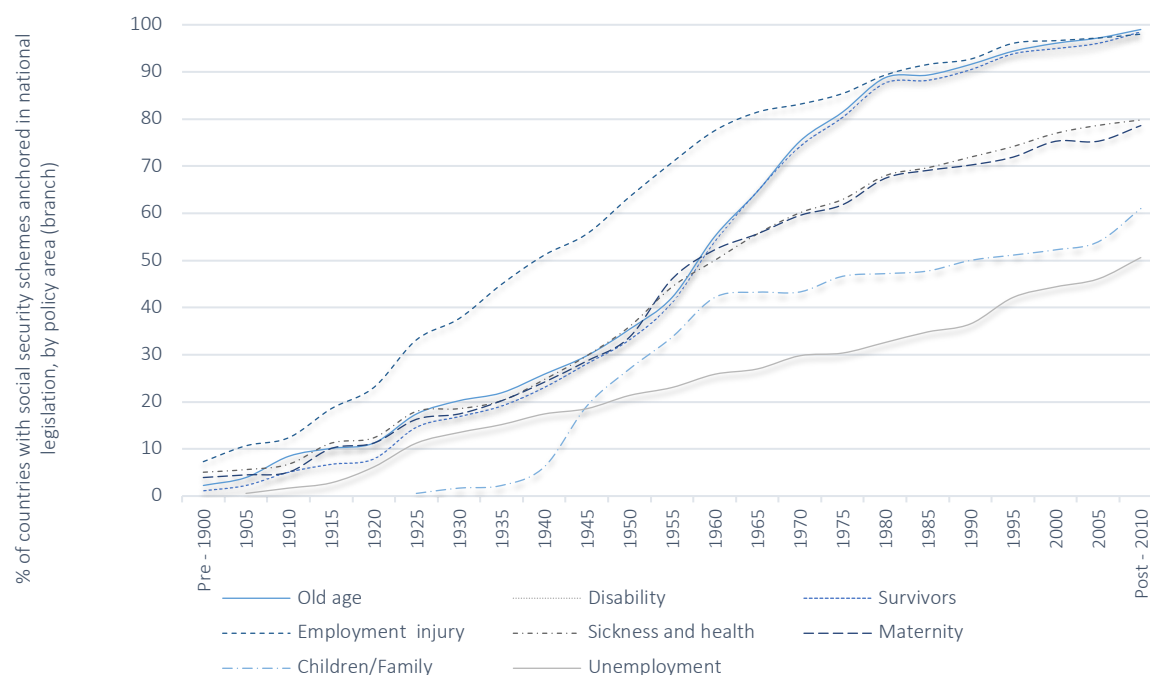
trajectories, as well as transformations at the societal level, for instance the transition to greener economies, digitalisation, or demographic changes (ILO 2017b).

Finally, social protection plays an important role in a forward-looking agenda that is not only concerned with achieving a minimum level of well-being for all individuals and societies, but also aims to equalize opportunities and to avoid the replication of existing inequalities. Reducing inequality is necessarily a matter of redistribution, risk sharing and solidarity across the entire society – not only vertical redistribution from rich to poor people, but also horizontal redistribution between healthy and sick people, between families with children and those without, women and men, workers and employers, and between people of working age and older persons.

#### 4 Current state of social protection

Over the past 100 years, the number of social protection schemes anchored in national legislation has risen, covering nearly all policy areas (see Figure 1). However, in some cases these schemes only cover a minority of the population. Furthermore, the extension of legal coverage does not automatically ensure that the population is effectively covered.

**Figure 1:** Development of social protection programmes anchored in national legislation by policy area, pre-1900 to 2020 (in per cent of countries)



**Notes:** The following areas are taken into consideration: health care, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, old-age benefits, employment injury benefits, family/child benefits, maternity benefits, disability/invalidity benefits and survivors' benefits, as defined in the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102).

**Sources:** ILO, World Social Protection Database; ISSA/SSA, Social Security Programs Throughout the World.

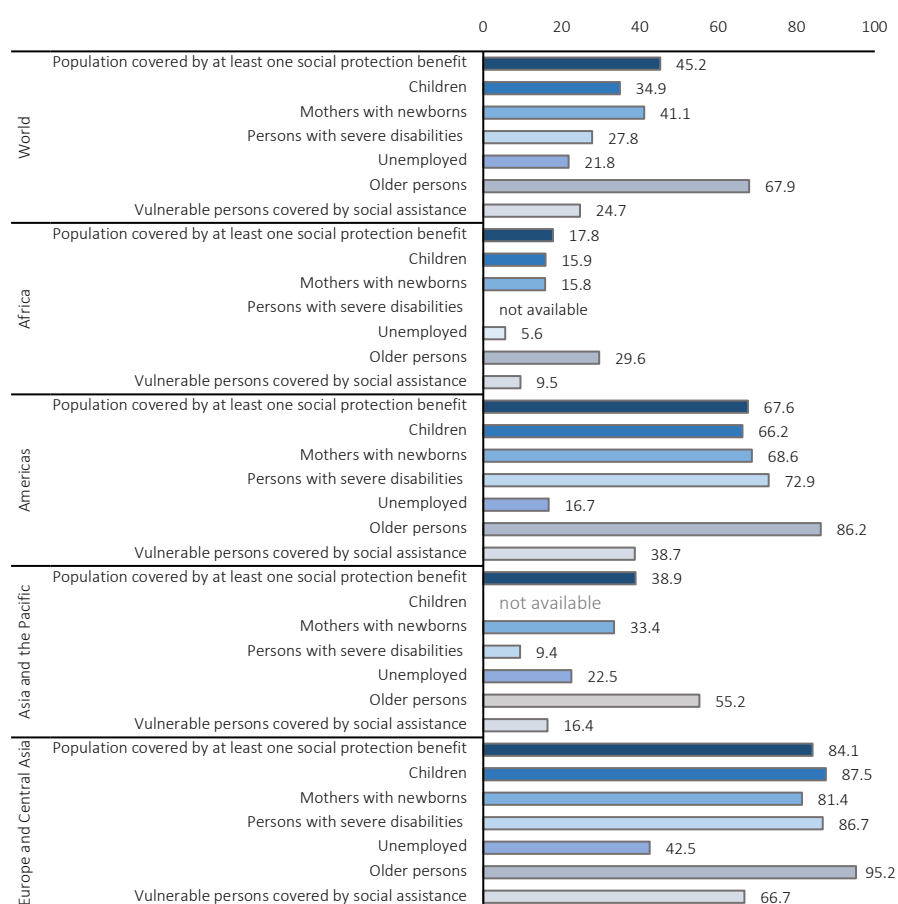
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According to the World Social Protection Report 2017-2019 (ILO 2017b), only 29 per cent of the world's population has access to comprehensive social protection systems, meaning in all areas over the life cycle. Only 45 per cent of the population has access to at least one social protection benefit. This means that 55 per cent of the population, or four billion people, are not covered at all (SDG indicator 1.3.1).

Coverage gaps vary systematically across world regions, between and within countries, and for different population groups. The global coverage rate of 45 per cent masks huge regional disparities, ranging from only 18 per cent in Africa to 84 per cent in the Europe and Central Asia region (Figure 2). There are also important disparities between countries belonging to the same geographical region. Figure 3 illustrates that there is indeed a positive correlation between a country's level of economic development and coverage rates. Nonetheless, it is also clear that there are huge differences in coverage rates for countries at similar levels of economic development. This indicates that even low- and lower-middle-income countries have the potential to progressively achieve higher levels of protection.

**Figure 2:** Effective social protection coverage with at least one social protection benefit, global and regional estimates by area and population group (percentage), most recent year available



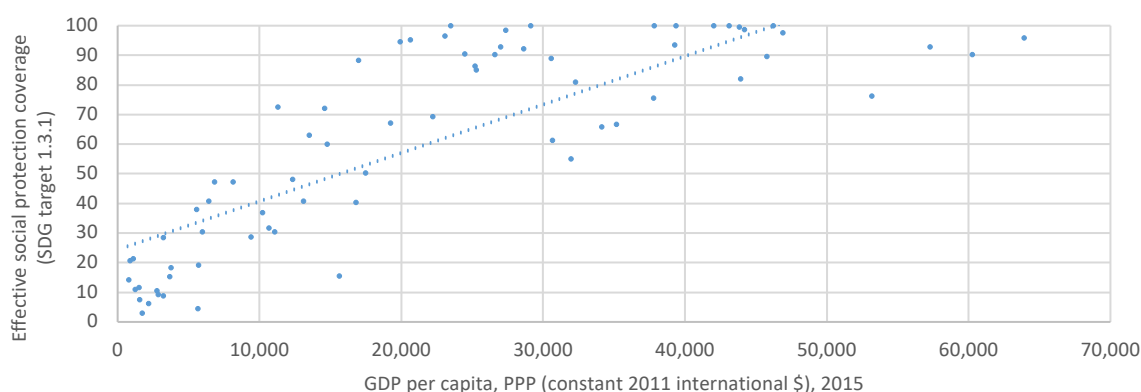
Notes: See World Social Protection Report 2017-2019 (ILO 2017b, 169).

Sources: ILO, World Social Protection Database, based on SSI; ILOSTAT; national sources.

Link: <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/RessourceDownload.action?ressource.ressourceId=54796>

Access to social protection benefits varies systematically across population groups. For example, health coverage is substantially lower for rural populations, with 56 per cent of the population excluded compared to 22 per cent of the urban population (ILO 2017b). Thanks to the significant extension of social pensions, nearly seven out of ten older persons have access to social protection. Yet, only every third child receives a child benefit, and only one in four persons with a severe disability receives disability benefits. Closing gender gaps and extending coverage to workers in the informal and rural economy, migrant workers, and self-employed workers to ensure adequate social protection for workers in all types of employment, including work mediated by digital platforms, deserves increased attention (FAO and ILO forthcoming; ILO 2016; 2018a; 2019).

**Figure 3:** GDP per capita (PPP, constant 2011 international \$), 2015, and effective social protection coverage with at least one social protection benefit according to SDG 1.3 (percentage)



*Notes:* SDG indicator 1.3.1: Population covered by at least one social protection benefit (effective coverage): Proportion of the population receiving at least one contributory or non-contributory cash benefit, or actively contributing to at least one social security scheme. Data available for 71 countries.  $R^2=0.668$ .

*Sources:* ILO, Word Social Protection Database, based on SSI; ILOSTAT; national sources and World Development Indicators (World Bank 2019).

Finally, in order to protect individuals and households from poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion, social protection benefit levels need to be adequate. However, SDG indicator 1.3.1 does not reflect the adequacy dimension. For instance, despite increasing coverage rates of older persons, in many countries the level of non-contributory pensions remains below the national poverty line.

Coverage and adequacy gaps are linked with insufficient investments in social protection. Taking already into account the effects of COVID-19, nearly US\$1.2 trillion would be needed in 2020 alone to close gaps in social protection floors<sup>2</sup> in developing countries, or 3.8 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Durán Valverde et al. 2020). Low-income countries represent US\$77.9 billion of this total financing gap, equivalent to 15.9 per cent of their GDP (Table 1).

<sup>2</sup> The following categories of social protection benefits were included in the costing: benefits for children, maternity and disability benefits, old-age benefits and health benefits.



Table 1. Annual financing gap in achieving SDG targets 1.3 and 3.8, by income classification, 2020 (billions of US\$ and percentage of GDP)

	Financing gaps	Per cent of GDP
Low-income countries	77.9	15.9
Lower-middle income countries	362.9	5.1
Upper-middle income countries	750.8	3.1
All low and middle income countries	1,191.6	3.8

Source: Durán Valverde et al. (2020).

## 5 The future of social protection: Challenges and opportunities

Profound societal transformations are underway, creating new challenges for the comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection of all individuals throughout their lives. In 2019, the Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019) considered the risks and opportunities created by technological advances, the greening of our economies and demographic changes. The 2020 World Social Report (United Nations 2020) highlighted technological changes, urbanization, migration and climate change as four “megatrends” that are closely linked to perpetuating and even exacerbating existing inequalities (UNDP 2019; ILO 2017b). These reports highlight the important role of social protection policies in ensuring a human-centred agenda for the future of work, and in preventing the deepening of inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlights the need for social protection to provide immediate responses to the crisis and accelerate a just recovery. Against this background, this section discusses challenges and opportunities for the extension of social protection related to a changing world of work, rural/urban divides, international migration, just transition and the importance of building robust social protection systems that can protect individuals, households, enterprises and societies over the life cycle, including in cases of large-scale shocks.

### Changing world of work

Discussions on the future of work have spurred debates about closing coverage and adequacy gaps for workers, particularly those in temporary employment, part-time and on-call work, temporary agency work or self-employment and work mediated by digital platforms (cf. ILO 2016). Women, young people and migrants are overrepresented in these forms of employment, further contributing to the deepening of inequalities (ILO 2016).

Higher levels of insecurity make strong and responsive social protection systems more important than ever, based on the principles of solidarity and risk sharing, which provide support to meet people’s needs over the life cycle and help them navigate life and work transitions (ILO 2016a; 2018a). The Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019) made a strong case for universal access to comprehensive and adequate social protection systems, including a social protection floor that guarantees at least a basic

level of protection to all those in need, complemented by contributory social insurance schemes that provide increased levels of protection. The Commission also cautioned that individual savings can only be a voluntary option to top up stable, equitable and adequate mandatory social insurance benefits. Research has also shown how the limited potential for risk sharing, redistribution and consumption smoothing exacerbates inequalities (Alfers, Lund, and Moussié 2017).

Recent policy innovations in different parts of the world demonstrate that social protection systems have a remarkable potential to adapt to changing realities and needs, for example by developing effective mechanisms that facilitate labour market transitions and ensure portability of rights and entitlements or alternative financing mechanisms (ILO 2018a; Behrendt, Nguyen, and Rani 2019). Thus, the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (2019) calls for universal, comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection systems adapted to the world of work, as a key element of human-centred policies for the future of Work.

### *Just transition*

The transition to greener economies carries many opportunities to reduce inequalities between and within countries. Recent estimates suggest that achieving sustainability in the energy sector and embracing the circular economy could create 24 million jobs (ILO 2018c). Furthermore, counteracting environmental degradation protects vulnerable populations and low-income countries that are typically disproportionately affected. At the same time, however, workers who depend on businesses or activities that have a relatively large carbon footprint are at risk of losing their livelihoods. It is estimated that approximately six million jobs will get lost (ILO 2018c).

Social protection systems support these structural transformations in several ways and thereby ensure that societies share the challenges and opportunities of these transitions more equally. Unemployment benefits help to smooth consumption in case of loss of livelihoods, as well as to take time to reskill and to find jobs that match their capabilities (Global Commission on the Future of Work 2019; ILO 2018c; Kangasniemi, Knowles, and Karfakis 2020).

### *Rural and informal economies*

Nearly half of the world's population, more than three billion people, live in rural areas. In many countries, rural areas play a significant economic role. Approximately 27 per cent of people in employment work in the agricultural sector, which amounts to nearly 900 million people around the globe in 2019 (ILO 2020a). In developing countries, agriculture accounts for approximately 60 per cent of total employment; nearly half of these workers are women (ILO 2020a). Employment in the informal economy remains pervasive, with more than 60 per cent of the world's employed population being in informal employment, and even more than 90 per cent of those employed in agriculture (ILO 2018b). Many of these workers and their families are among the 55 per cent of the global population who have no access to social protection at all. Extending social protection to rural workers is particularly urgent as rural areas are characterised by higher levels of poverty as well as higher exposure to risks throughout the lifecycle and due to the increasing frequency of extreme weather events.

Barriers to social protection in rural areas are manifold and often linked to widespread informality. Major bottlenecks that prevent access to social protection arise for instance from exclusion from legal coverage, low and volatile earnings and limited contributory capacity due to seasonality, remoteness of the work and living place, high labour mobility, as well as complex administrative procedures (Allieu and Ocampo 2019; FAO and ILO forthcoming). Measures to extend social protection to rural and informal economy workers take into account these factors and, for instance, adapt benefits, the determination and collection of contributions or administrative procedures accordingly as to facilitate the transition of workers and enterprises from the informal to the formal economy (ILO 2019; OECD and ILO 2019; FAO and ILO forthcoming).

### *Migration*

The facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people is one of the targets (10.7) of SDG 10 to reduce inequality. For migrants in destination countries, access to social protection is hampered by multiple factors, including lack of coordination between receiving and sending countries, non-portability of acquired social protection rights and benefits, non-equal treatment between nationals and migrants, and finally the fact that migrants tend to work in economic sectors and/or under work arrangements characterised by weak social security coverage.

The extent to which migration contributes to reducing inequalities in countries of origin, transit and destination is still debated and dependent on characteristics of the migrant and the sending and receiving countries (United Nations 2020). However, ensuring access to social protection for migrant workers and their families levels the economic playing field between national and migrant workers and supports fair labour migration, as pointed out by the Resolution concerning fair and effective labour migration governance (ILO 2017a). In addition, ensuring universal social protection in both host countries and countries of origin, and facilitating access to equal opportunities, can contribute to addressing some of the root causes of migration.

### *Lessons learned from COVID-19*

The COVID-19 crisis is a turning point. It has revealed once again the devastating consequences of systemic shocks for societies and economies, especially in the absence of universal and adequate social protection. The role of social protection has therefore been confirmed as an indispensable mechanism for delivering support to individuals during the COVID-19 crisis by providing access to health care and protecting against the massive losses of jobs and income resulting from the deepest economic downturn since the Second World War. By accelerating recovery through its positive contribution to consumption and aggregate demand, social protection can also act as a social and economic stabilizer (ILO 2020).

Many developing countries have introduced temporary social protection measures in response to the crisis in order to facilitate access to health care, protect jobs and mitigate income loss. However, recovery will only be sustained and future crises mitigated if countries are able to progressively build on or transform such temporary relief measures into comprehensive and shock-responsive social protection systems, including social protection floors, in line with human rights and international social security

standards, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2020a). This will also require increasing and sustaining fiscal space for social protection, as well as political will (ILO 2020). The policy response to the 2008 global financial crisis is a case in point, as many countries, after an initial but short-lived period of fiscal expansion, adopted austerity measures and approximately every fourth developing country reduced their expenditure even below pre-crisis levels (Ortiz et al. 2015). Under-investment in social protection systems, including public health care, meant that many countries were ill-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that the right lessons are learnt, and countries do not adopt fiscal consolidation measures as they emerge from the current crisis.

### *Designing inclusive social protection systems*

In order to be fully inclusive, social protection systems need to recognize and redress inequalities, ensure non-discrimination and respond to specific needs, promote equal opportunities more broadly, including access to quality health, education and care and promoting decent work.

For example, for persons with disabilities, effective access to social protection requires not only adequate disability benefits, but also addressing specific barriers (such as accessibility of information or physical accessibility) across all schemes and promoting decent work (ILO and IDA 2019). The recognition of gendered risks and vulnerabilities, such as different exposure to labour market risks or the unequal distribution of household responsibilities and (unpaid) care work between men and women are crucial for gender-responsive social protection systems (Lawson et al. 2020; SPIAC-B 2019; UN Women 2015; 2019) that do not reproduce existing inequalities and contribute to the transformation of societies and economies.

In this context, the disaggregation of results by sex, age, disability status, employment status, or geographical location is particularly essential to monitor progress towards achieving the SDGs.

### *Strengthening the investment case for social protection*

Despite the global commitment to achieving the SDGs, substantial, financing gaps remain. As mentioned above, a 2020 study conducted for 134 developing countries estimates that a social protection floor package would cost 3.8 per cent of the GDP of the included countries. For low-income countries only, the costs would on average constitute 15.9 per cent of their GDP (Durán Valverde et al. 2020). Many countries have already started to build their social protection floors, but increased efforts are required to extend fiscal space, close remaining financing gaps and fully guarantee the four basic social security guarantees as part of national social protection systems. In principle, national social protection systems should be financed by national resources.

Several options to increase fiscal space exist (such as through tax reforms or good governance of social security institutions) that go hand in hand with strategies to extend coverage and increase the level of protection (e.g. through better compliance). For instance, extending social protection to informal workers by adapting contribution payment mechanisms to their needs and realities expands the contribution base and therefore reinforces the sustainability of social protection systems. In addition to pointing out the different options that exist to increase fiscal space (Ortiz et al. 2019), the role of social protection in

promoting inclusive growth and social cohesion need to be further highlighted, for example by further studying the multiplier effects and returns to investments in social protection (FAO and UNICEF 2017; Mideros, Gassmann, and Mohnen 2016; Sanches and Carvalho 2019). Social protection is an economic and social necessity, particularly in a world where individuals feel that they face more and more uncertain life trajectories and widening gaps in access to resources and opportunities.

However, if national economic and fiscal capacities are insufficient, countries can seek international support to complement their own efforts to expand fiscal space (ILO 2012), with international financing playing a catalytic role to support domestic resource mobilization.

The COVID-19 crisis has increased the urgency of additional support from international financial institutions, bilateral development and humanitarian partners and other global financing mechanisms to ensure adequate country responses. The United Nations has launched the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund in response to the crisis in order to provide support in the form of grants. Initiatives from international financial institutions and development banks, in turn, include emergency financing in the form of loans by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through its Rapid Credit Facility, Rapid Financing Instrument and other financing instruments, as well as a fast-track facility for COVID-19 responses provided by the World Bank. Calls for a temporary moratorium on developing countries' external debt and a massive increase in the issuance of special drawing rights by the IMF are among the measures being proposed to increase developing countries' fiscal space (cf. Reinhart and Rogoff 2020; Ghosh 2020).

## 6 Policy recommendations

At the present juncture, social protection faces a double challenge. First, achieving SDG 1.3 by 2030 will only be possible if countries accelerate progress in the extension of social protection coverage, in particular for those furthest behind. Beyond extending coverage and comprehensiveness, monitored by SDG indicator 1.3.1, the adequacy of benefits and services needs more attention in order to achieve universal social protection and progressively achieve higher levels of protection. Second, and related to the first challenge, profound transformations and systemic shocks such as COVID-19 put at risk prior achievements or may hamper progress towards social protection for all. At the same time, however, nearly all countries in the world have resorted to social protection measures during COVID-19 to ensure that people could effectively access health care while supporting job and income security for those most affected. Against this background, building, strengthening and adapting social protection systems, including floors, along the following lines will simultaneously contribute to an agenda that is concerned with rising inequalities and aims to equalize opportunities:

- Build national social protection systems, including floors, that guarantee at least a basic level of social security for all over the life cycle, including effective access to health care and income security, and progressively achieve higher levels of protection;
- Accelerate progress towards universal social protection, ensuring universal access to comprehensive and adequate social protection for all;

- Ensure sustainable and equitable financing of social protection systems, and where necessary increase fiscal space for social protection, based on the principles of risk sharing and solidarity in financing, thereby reinforcing the social contract;
- Design inclusive social protection systems that are non-discriminatory, gender-responsive, and responsive to special needs, including for persons with disabilities;
- Ensure that social protection systems adapt to changing needs, are robust and responsive to systemic shocks and facilitate the profound transformations of our societies and economies.



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