

A photograph of several children sitting on the floor, wearing face masks. One child in the foreground is wearing a green mask with a cartoon character, while others are wearing white masks. They are in a crowded setting, possibly a school or community center.

Policy Brief  
**COVID-19 & Urgent Need for  
Child-Sensitive Social Protection**  
June 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is negatively affecting children's lives in a myriad of ways. Well-intentioned government containment and response efforts such as movement restrictions and school closures have disrupted education for more than 1.5 billion students,<sup>1</sup> leaving some of the most vulnerable children without nutritious school meals and at heightened risk of dropping out when schools re-open. It has overstretched health systems, diverting health resources and capacity to COVID-19 response and limiting children's access to critical primary health care and nutrition services that protect them against malnutrition and preventable deaths. It has significantly reduced or eliminated many parents' and caregivers' income earning opportunities, especially for those reliant on the informal economy and daily earnings, leading to reductions in the quantity and quality of meals for the poorest families, and forcing families to make risky choices in order to meet their basic needs.

Even before COVID-19 struck, 385 million children—one in five globally—lived in extreme poverty (less than \$1.90 a day) and 689 million—almost half of all children globally—were living in multidimensionally poor households.<sup>2</sup> Adding to this unacceptable situation, the UN estimates 42-66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis this year.<sup>3</sup> Pandemic-induced poverty is exposing women and girls in particular to increased risks, including an exponential increase in gender-based violence and a surge in unpaid care work.<sup>4</sup>

Resultant household duress has also increased children's exposure to violence, with prevention and containment measures placing millions of children at risk. World Vision estimates that in the next three months alone up to 85 million girls and boys worldwide may be exposed to physical, sexual and/or emotional violence while in quarantine,<sup>5</sup> with millions more at risk of child labour<sup>6</sup> and child marriage over the coming years as family livelihoods evaporate and economic crises ensue.<sup>7</sup>

## Child-Sensitive Social Protection (CSSP)<sup>8</sup>

Social protection is broadly defined as a set of public policies, programmes and systems that aim (1) to help poor and vulnerable individuals and households reduce their economic and related social vulnerabilities, (2) to help them cope with risks and shocks, and (3) to enhance their economic and social rights and status. As children's experiences with poverty and vulnerability are multidimensional, and malnutrition, disease, disrupted education, abuse and exploitation, violence and displacement affect children differently than adults. Social protection policies and programmes must be child-sensitive, addressing children's age- and gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities throughout the life cycle, maximising beneficial impacts and minimising the adverse effects on girls and boys in both development and humanitarian contexts. Social protection is composed of the following elements and examples of child-sensitive interventions include:

- **Social assistance** - non-contributory cash, vouchers or in-kind transfers (e.g., school feeding and fee waivers, child grants, nutrition vouchers) that can reduce child poverty and vulnerability, help ensure children's access to basic social services, and reduce the risk of child exploitation and abuse.
- **Social insurance** - contributory schemes providing compensatory support in the event of contingencies which support access to health care for children and their families (e.g., universal health care, parental level benefits, unemployment insurance schemes).
- **Social care services** - family support or alternative care for children provided to those facing social risks such as violence, abuse, exploitation, discrimination and social exclusion.
- **Labour market policies and regulations** – protection of families' access to resources, promotion of employment and support with their childcare role (e.g., ensuring minimum employment standards, parental leave for childcare).

Many of those most vulnerable and least able to weather the socio-economic impacts of this pandemic have the least access to social protection. Social protection is a human right and every child has the right to benefit from social security, including social insurance (CRC Art.26) and a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (CRC Art.27).<sup>9</sup> It is a critical policy tool for reducing and preventing poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion, and a fundamental element of the commitment to leave no one behind stated in the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>10</sup> It is also a key strategy for addressing the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. Yet a staggering two thirds of all children—more than 1.3 billion girls and boys—have no access to social protection, with only 16% with access in Africa, 28% in Asia and 66% in the Americas.<sup>11</sup> More than 50% of children enduring extreme poverty live in Africa and 35% live in South Asia, illustrating the fact that social protection is not reaching many of the children that need it most.<sup>12</sup>

Children in extreme poverty, fragile contexts, disaster-prone and conflicted-affected areas, the forcibly displaced, and those living in overcrowded urban informal settlements are being hardest hit by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and its response measures. Of the 79.5 million forcibly displaced around the world, nearly 26 million refugees and around half are children.<sup>13</sup> These children are affected by multidimensional and inter-generational poverty and at heightened risk of violence and exploitation. COVID-19 has a multiplier effect pushing them to the brink and further limiting their minimal access to routine primary health care, essential nutrition services, protection services and basic education. While parents and caregivers from these households may be aware of the risks of COVID-19 transmission, they are often least able to practice social distancing and other preventative measures or access protective equipment, and least likely to have access to income generating activities that reduce their likelihood of getting COVID-19. These deprivations and risks will have damaging

long-term impacts on children's development and social protection can play a key role in helping those most vulnerable mitigate the worst impacts of the disease and its indirect effects. Governments and the international community are responsible for fulfilling children's right to social protection and it is imperative that social protection support is inclusive, child-sensitive and available, so that the needs of the most vulnerable girls and boys are comprehensively met in a timely manner, regardless of their status.

As of 12 June 2020, 195 countries have planned or introduced social protection measures in response to COVID-19, mostly in the form of social assistance, including cash, voucher and in-kind transfers such as food distributions and school

feeding programmes.<sup>14</sup> In countries in conflict and fragile situations, governments introduced 57 social assistance measures, nine insurance and four labor market programmes; however, many of the most fragile countries, such as the Central African Republic, Syria, Yemen and Burundi, still have no national measures in place.<sup>15</sup> While the rapid growth of social protection response is a positive development, governments are not always able to rapidly and broadly deploy these response measures to meet household needs through their formal social protection systems. As a result, some of the most vulnerable groups (e.g., refugees, migrants) may lack awareness about their rights or be unable to access social protection.

## World Vision's Response

World Vision is committed to strengthening communities, and supporting local and national government systems and structures, as well as humanitarian actors for the effective implementation of social protection policies that improve children's well-being and fulfil their rights.<sup>16</sup> As part of its COVID-19 response, World Vision has reached more than 3.7 million people with food assistance and, where school closures have restricted children's access to school meals, World Vision has redesigned these programmes as take home rations.

Creating a pathway from and complementarity between humanitarian cash and voucher programmes to longer-term government-led social protection assistance strengthens the humanitarian-development nexus and overall resilience and social cohesion, and should be underpinned by humanitarian accountability and social accountability. World Vision's Citizen Voice and Action community-based social accountability programme is key to effectively implementing child-sensitive social protection, as it facilitates constructive dialogue between local governments and communities so as to improve both the quantity and quality of basic social services for

improving children's well-being.<sup>17</sup> In Bangladesh, through Citizen Voice and Action, vulnerable children and families learned about their right to access the government's social safety net programmes and successfully benefitted from the provision of primary and secondary education stipends. Between April and June 2020, World Vision complimented scale up of the government's social protection programmes with more than USD \$500,000 in multipurpose cash assistance transferred via mobile money (bKash) to meet COVID-19 related needs for 66,145 people, including 26,722 vulnerable children. To reach those who had not yet received government social protection assistance and to avoid duplication, World Vision worked with the national Cash Working Group and the national and local authorities.

World Vision also provides support to community-based social protection through financial inclusion, as informal community-based safety net mechanisms are essential for vulnerable households to cope with shocks and stresses. During the height of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, World Vision helped children start Destiny Savings Groups while out of school. These savings

groups enabled children to pool resources from the group's savings to purchase necessary school supplies and contribute to their education.<sup>18</sup> Their parents belonged to adult savings groups, Savings for Transformation (S4T), and wanted their children to reap some of the same benefits and develop new skills. Currently, members manage over 54,000 S4T groups present across 34 countries that accumulate and convert small amounts of cash into savings that groups can then lend to members as credit to support them in emergencies. S4T is

not just a tool to build resilience, but also to create pathways to empowerment and dignity for women, as 80% of the 1.3 million members are women who now have access to and control over their financial resources. Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, World Vision has developed an S4T Adaption Guide, as well as S4T and COVID-19 Technical Guidance, to support group members' functionality in the face of the pandemic. To date, World Vision has supported 2,696 S4T groups with this guidance.

## World Vision's Recommendations

**COVID-19 and the indirect impacts of government response measures threaten the immediate and long-term well-being of children, particularly those most vulnerable. In order to reach the most vulnerable, it is critical that all stakeholders collaborate to deliver child-sensitive social protection. Based on extensive experience working with children and families in crises, World Vision recommends:**

### Governments should:

- Ensure child-sensitive social protection measures such as cash-transfer schemes are established or enhanced, and are included and adequately funded in national response and recovery plans. These government social protection systems and mechanisms must reach the most vulnerable children and families, regardless of status.
- Increase capacity and coordination at all levels. The design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of child-sensitive social protection involves a wide range of development and humanitarian actors.<sup>19</sup>
- Support social accountability mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of national social protection delivery systems. Ensure the views of the most vulnerable girls, boys, women and men are included in those social accountability mechanisms to ensure they are inclusive. Promote greater alignment between social protection systems, national child protection systems, and education strategies and policies.
- Design or ensure existing national systems reinforce and strengthen community-based safety net systems.
- Build back better by establishing and extending child-sensitive social protection measures to reduce future poverty and vulnerability, and promote inclusive growth. This includes adequately funding these measures in national response and recovery plans and ensuring all children are registered at birth, as formal identity is critical for developing an effective social protection system.

### UN agencies and NGOs should:

- Ensure that key local stakeholders, such as informal community-based structures, grassroots organisations and faith-based organisations, are included in response planning to help identify contextualised solutions for the most vulnerable children and families.
- Fill critical gaps in national social protection systems. In collaboration with national and local authorities, conduct outreach to vulnerable children and families and facilitate humanitarian multipurpose cash assistance, vouchers and/in-kind transfers to those excluded from national social protection systems due to capacity limitations, location, political, legal or other reasons, but also ensure coordination and effective referral into national systems. This is especially important where displaced populations cannot access nationally led initiatives.<sup>20</sup>
- Systematically engage with children on issues affecting them and their communities including the establishment of robust and multi-lingual complaints and feedback mechanisms.
- Ensure adherence to Child Protection Minimum Standards and globally recommended practices including the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, the INSPIRE strategies for ending violence against children, and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action's technical note on the protection of children during the coronavirus pandemic.

## Donors should:

- Support national governments to adapt, strengthen and scale up inclusive child-sensitive social protection that meets the needs of the most vulnerable children and families.
- Where national systems do not exist, rapidly scale up funding to humanitarian programmes to meet lifesaving needs for the most vulnerable.
- Provide flexible funding and allow implementing agencies to adapt programming to accommodate needs in rapidly changing local contexts.<sup>21</sup>
- Coordinate humanitarian and development financing to support an inclusive and coherent response that supports social assistance transfers to meet the immediate needs of the most vulnerable girls, boys and their families and communities while also assisting them to achieve sustainable development outcomes and resilience in the longer term.

<sup>1</sup> Figure from late April 2020. According to UNESCO, as of 22 June 2020, 1,089,749,858 learners (including children, youth and adults) remain affected. UNESCO, "COVID-19 Impact on Education," accessed 23 June 2020. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> & World Vision, "Policy Brief: COVID-19 & Disruptions to Education", May 2020, <https://www.wvi.org/publications/policy-briefing/coronavirus-health-crisis/policy-brief-covid-19-disruptions-education>

<sup>2</sup> ILO and UNICEF, "Towards Universal Social Protection for Children: Achieving SDG 1.3", 2019. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---soc\\_sec/documents/publication/wcms\\_669336.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_669336.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children", 2020. [https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420\\_Covid\\_Children\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women", 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

<sup>5</sup> World Vision, "COVID-19 Aftershocks: Perfect Storm", 2020. [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks%20FINAL%20VERSION\\_0.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks%20FINAL%20VERSION_0.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> ILO and UNICEF, COVID-19 and Child Labour: a Time of Crisis, a Time To Act, 2020. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms\\_747421.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_747421.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> World Vision, "COVID-19 Aftershocks: Perfect Storm", 2020. [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks%20FINAL%20VERSION\\_0.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks%20FINAL%20VERSION_0.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, "Briefing Paper: Child Sensitive Social Protection", 2017. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56588879e4b0060c6b607883/t/59f9b821e31d1932688d7524/1509537833016/CSSP+Briefing+Branded.Final\\_01112017.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56588879e4b0060c6b607883/t/59f9b821e31d1932688d7524/1509537833016/CSSP+Briefing+Branded.Final_01112017.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> UN, Convention of the Rights the Child, 1989. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> ILO, "World Social Protection Report 2017-19", 2019. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_604882.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_604882.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> ILO and UNICEF, "Towards Universal Social Protection for Children: Achieving SDG 1.3", 2019. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---soc\\_sec/documents/publication/wcms\\_669336.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_669336.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> ILO and UNICEF, "Towards Universal Social Protection for Children: Achieving SDG 1.3", 2019. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---soc\\_sec/documents/publication/wcms\\_669336.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_669336.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, "Statistical Yearbook", 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

<sup>14</sup> Gentilini U. et al, "Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures", updated on 4th of June 2020. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/590531592231143435/pdf/Social-Protection-and-Jobs-Responses-to-COVID-19-A-Real-Time-Review-of-Country-Measures-June-12-2020.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Gentilini U. et al, "Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures", updated on 4th of June 2020. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/590531592231143435/pdf/Social-Protection-and-Jobs-Responses-to-COVID-19-A-Real-Time-Review-of-Country-Measures-June-12-2020.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> World Vision, "Transformational Development", 2017. <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/Transformational%20Development%20Policy.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> World Vision, 2020. <https://www.wvi.org/publications/disaster-management/covid-19-chance-empower-citizens-through-social-protection>

<sup>18</sup> World Vision, 2015. <https://www.wvi.org/emergencies/article/new-destiny>

<sup>19</sup> Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, "Briefing Paper: Child Sensitive Social Protection", 2017. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56588879e4b0060c6b607883/t/59f9b821e31d1932688d7524/1509537833016/CSSP+Briefing+Branded.Final\\_01112017.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56588879e4b0060c6b607883/t/59f9b821e31d1932688d7524/1509537833016/CSSP+Briefing+Branded.Final_01112017.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Increasing Links Between Humanitarian Cash and Social Protection for An Effective Response to The Covid-19 Pandemic <https://socialprotection.org/system/files/FINAL%20Increasing%20links%20between%20social%20protection%20and%20humanitarian%20cash%20in%20COVID-19%20response.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Collaborative Cash Delivery Network, 2020, [https://a32c7e8e-1b5e-4cca-a913-6e85a831e8f3.filesusr.com/ugd/79d5cf\\_f7cf7126b2044135a42ef89e4a583e46.pdf](https://a32c7e8e-1b5e-4cca-a913-6e85a831e8f3.filesusr.com/ugd/79d5cf_f7cf7126b2044135a42ef89e4a583e46.pdf)

World Vision is undertaking the largest humanitarian response in its 70-year history to limit the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact on vulnerable children and their families, aiming to reach 72 million people, half of them children, over the next 18 months and raising US \$350 million to do so. Response efforts will cover 70 countries where World Vision has a field presence, prioritising scale up of preventative measures to limit the spread of the disease; strengthening health systems and workers; supporting children impacted by COVID-19 through education, child protection, food security, and livelihoods; and advocating to ensure vulnerable children are protected. For more information, read World Vision's [COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan](#).



[www.wvi.org](http://www.wvi.org)

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision serves all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

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