Save the Children

POLICY BRIEF

REAFFIRMING THE NEED TO REALIZE THE RIGHT OF ALL CHILDREN TO SOCIAL PROTECTION TO #PROTECTAGENERATION

Recommendations for the 2020 High-Level Political Forum

Save the Children

This policy brief highlights new research from Save the Children on the impact of COVID-19 on child poverty and makes recommendations to governments, multilateral financial institutions, the UN system, civil society and other stakeholders ahead of the 2020 High-Level Political Forum, 7-16 July 2020 under the theme, "*Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.*" The recommendations focus on the role of social protection in addressing the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic and form part of Save the Children's global campaign to #ProtectAGeneration[i] to ensure that the global recovery from COVID-19 is inclusive, just, sustainable and protects children's rights around the world.

Background

As highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's policy brief, children are at risk of becoming the biggest victims of the COVID-19 pandemic.[ii] While the pandemic presents an unprecedented public health crisis for the global community, the immediate shock to the global economy and the projected long economic recession will adversely impact the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Addis Ababa Agreement and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and crucially, children's rights.

A growing body of evidence from the current pandemic and experiences from past epidemics and disasters indicate that the impact on child poverty and children's rights will be profound, particularly for girls and the most marginalized and deprived. The combination of a global pandemic and the economic equivalent of the Great Depression threatens the wholesale reversal of progress achieved over the last 20 years across the SDGs and a range of child outcomes, including child survival, nutrition and education. Failure to prevent the reversal of these hard-earned gains represents not only a setback for human development, but an erosion of children's rights.

The 2020 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is an opportunity for the global community to commit to driving transformative change for our children and our children's children, guided by the principles and the commitments in the Sustainable Development Goals of **universality, collaboration, human rights, interconnectedness and the commitment to Leave No One Behind.** As the world recovers, it will be critical to scale up implementation and investment in sustainable development, and to commit to the SDGs as the framework for recovery.

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New data: COVID-19, poverty and children's progress toward the SDGs

New research by Save the Children and UNICEF reveals that, without urgent action, the number of children living in monetarily poor households across low- and middle-income countries could soar by 101-106 million children by the end of 2020 alone.[iii]

Children are disproportionately affected by poverty, representing half of all people living in extreme poverty worldwide despite making up less than one third of the global population.[iv] 586 million children – almost 1 out of 3 children in low- and middle-income countries – lived in monetarily poor households before the pandemic hit.[v] These children already faced higher risk of death before the age of five and of malnutrition stunting their physical and cognitive growth and development.

A large body of scientific research confirms that a child who is deprived during childhood is more likely to be deprived as an adult, reinforcing the inter-generational transfer of poverty. Rising poverty in the wake of to COVID-19 will increase the number of children drawn into this intergenerational cycle.

Living in poverty also increases protection risks for children, including risks of early marriage and life-threatening early pregnancy, being forced into child labor and missing out on education. A recent study by ILO and UNICEF found that a 1 percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7 percentage point increase in child labor as households use every means available to survive.[vi]

Mortality rates for children growing up in the poorest households were two to three times higher than for children in the wealthiest homes before the pandemic. These trends are now projected to worsen significantly.[vii] COVID-19 is already exacerbating existing inequalities,[viii] and the effects will be felt disproportionately by the poorest and most marginalized groups of children, including those with disabilities, adolescent girls, refugees, migrants and internally displaced children.[ix]

Children experience poverty differently from adults and with greater intensity due to higher rates of deprivation across multiple indicators.[x] Living in poverty can also increase risk to children's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. The projected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on multidimensional poverty (SDG 1: No Poverty) will have serious knock-on effects across the SDGs, including on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health & Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions).

The need to redouble efforts to realize the right of *all* children to social protection

Social protection systems *help individuals and families especially the poor and vulnerable cope with crises and shocks, find jobs, invest in the health and education of their children, and protect the aging population.*

Despite these deeply worrying trends there is a clear, evidence-based solution to tackling the problem: redoubling all of our efforts to deliver on the internationally agreed fundamental right of every child to benefit from social protection. The realization of this right, as set out in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and reinforced in many other international and regional agreements,* will be essential if we are to protect every child from the rising poverty levels resulting from the COVID pandemic and to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals.†

COVID-19 has sparked an unprecedented global expansion of social protection. As of 12 June 2020, 195 countries and territories have 'planned, introduced or adapted' social protection programs in response to COVID-19.[xi] Social assistance (non-contributory transfers in cash or in-kind) accounts for most of the social protection response and, within that, by far the most

* The right to social protection (or social security) is explicitly outlined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Articles 26 and 27 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and other international and regional agreements.

† Target 1.3 of the SDGs requires countries to "*implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable*". Social Protection Floors consist of four basic guarantees, including: access to universal health and maternity care; basic income security for children (alongside access to nutrition, education care and other necessary goods and services); basic income security for those of working age unable to earn a sufficient income; and basic income security for the elderly.

commonly used measure has been the use of cash transfers.

Despite the spotlight COVID-19 has put on the scale of existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, the likelihood of increasing child poverty and need to build back more resilient, most measures that have emerged in response to the pandemic are timebound. Without commitment to invest in sustainable, nationally owned and led social protection systems, children growing up in the poorest and most marginalized households will be left more vulnerable to future shocks as countries enter COVID-19 "recovery".

The number of children covered by social protection was already unacceptably low before COVID-19. Globally just 35% of children were receiving any form of child or family benefit, falling to 28% in the Asia and Pacific region and 13% in sub-Saharan Africa.[xii] Even for children that are "covered", the level of support can be well below what is needed to meet basic needs and often erodes over time through inflation.

Save the Children strongly supports the progressive realization of Universal Child Benefits,[xiii] so do international human rights agreements, and an ever-increasing body of evidence. Research has shown that means-testing too often fails to identify the children most in need,[xiv] and that universal systems may be the most effective way to ensure no child is left behind.[xv] While this is particularly true in countries where data on household income is unreliable, the findings apply globally. A recent analysis of poverty-targeted programmes across low-and middle-income countries found that even the best missed intended recipients, with exclusion errors of at least 44%.[xvi]

Many governments are currently considering social protection schemes and pathways to delivering universal child benefits. Context-specific design and implementation will be critical. Recognising this, the Overseas Development Institute and UNICEF recently published a checklist for policy-makers on Universal Child Benefits Realization in Practice.[xvii]

This practical guidance adds to a wide body of evidence that **income transfers for children are an investment in their human capital development.** Existing evidence, including from Nobel-prize winning Economist James Heckman shows **substantial returns on investment** and benefits for the wider economy.[xviii]

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Evidence and experience: Investing in social protection for children makes sense

Social protection is widely and increasingly recognized as one of the most effective approaches in the fight against poverty, reducing existing inequalities and promoting human development by empowering children and families as agents of change. Given the particular and unique needs of children, child-sensitive social protection is an important component of any effective social protection system. It is a well-proven approach to help realize the rights of children, help families out of poverty, and to cope with stresses and shocks – enabling families to invest in their children's development and well-being, and to withstand financial shocks. Save the Children's experience and a substantial evidence base show that it makes sense to invest in children through income support to their caregivers.

Cash transfers can help reduce child mortality – Based on evidence in both humanitarian and non-humanitarian settings, cash transfers can result in fewer children dying from preventable causes by providing direct income support to households. In Mexico and Brazil, cash transfers reduced the number of young children dying by 9 to 11 percent, while a combination of cash and food transfers in Niger led to a substantial reduction in infant death rates.[19]

Cash transfers during infancy can prevent chronic malnutrition – When combined with simple complementary interventions, such as information sessions on child health and feeding practices, cash transfers can be used to achieve significant reductions in chronic malnutrition (stunting). Save the Children has successfully pioneered this approach in several countries, including Nigeria and Myanmar,[20] among others, helping policy makers reduce the global burden of malnutrition at scale.

Cash transfers can increase children's access to education – Putting money into the hands of families ensures they can not only feed their children, but also prioritize their children's education. There is substantial rigorous evidence from cash transfer programs globally that they increase the number of children able to attend school, even when that was not the main objective of the program.[21]

Cash transfers can reduce various forms of harm to children, including child marriage and child labour – Although few cash programs are specifically intended to address child protection issues, the evidence nevertheless shows that cash transfers to families can help reduce risk factors and harm through by resulting in lower cases of early marriage and child labour.[22]

There are also many ***co-benefits*** that come with ensuring children are covered children by social protection. For example, if targeted from birth, experience from Save the Children has found cash transfers can lead to an increase in birth registrations vital for accessing future services. Our work in Nigeria found that children benefitting from maternal and child cash transfers were more likely to be vaccinated (even though it was not a requirement of receiving the transfers). If mobile money platforms are used, it also offers a way to increase financial inclusion of poor households, giving them access to financial services.

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At this year's HLPF, we call on governments in their critical role as duty-bearers for child rights, as well as multilateral financial institutions, UN agencies, civil society, academia and the private sector to **recognize the central role of social protection in meeting the commitments to the SDGs and the pledge to Leave No One Behind.** The world cannot risk the 2020s becoming a "lost decade" for children with unprecedented reversals in human development in place of the progress we promised.

Save the Children calls for:

- As a matter of urgency, **scale up coverage of social protection for children and families**. Coverage of these programmes must be gender-responsive and include the most marginalized and deprived, progressively working towards universal child benefits over time.
- Strong support from governments and donors for social protection policies and programmes. These interventions should be **explicitly designed to address not just poverty, but hunger, nutrition, food security, increased risks of violence and abuse caused by the pandemic, and to strengthen child protection systems** as well as avoid unintended harms.
- **Governments** to support **removal of user fees for health and nutrition services** for the duration of the crisis, particularly for the most marginalized and deprived.
- **Donors, the UN system and civil society, including local partners, to work together to support urgent humanitarian responses in other contexts** (where social protection does not yet exist or is unable to expand sufficiently), building on existing Humanitarian Response Plans, to ensure that families in fragile, conflict-affected and vulnerable situations are able to survive.
- **Routine measurement of child poverty and recognition of child poverty as an explicit priority area** in national poverty reduction strategies (NPRS), policies and programmes to eliminate poverty in all its dimensions. Without knowing how many children are living in poverty, we cannot assess SDG progress or understand the impacts of different policies and programs.
- **Tracking, not just of national or global averages, but the pace at which gaps between socioeconomic groups in society** are changing over time. Survey and other data should be used to report on inequality and gaps in progress among the poorest and most marginalized groups regularly and transparently. Reporting on inequality trends using disaggregated data should be an important part of Voluntary National Reviews when considering the progress made towards the pledge to Leave No One Behind.
- Support to the many existing calls to establish a functioning **Global Social Protection Fund** to provide temporary finance to the world's poorest countries to enable them to build nationally-owned and financed social protection systems.

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[i] For more information on the campaign, see: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/save-childrens-global-response-plan-covid-19-protecting-generation-children
[ii] United Nations, "Policy Brief: Impact of Covid-19 on Children," 15 April 2020. Available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_children_16_april_2020.pdf
[iii] For more information, please see: UNICEF and Save the Children (2020) https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2020/children-in-poor-households-to-soar-by-millions-covid-1
[iv] UNICEF (2019) https://www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty
[v] Op cit. UNICEF and Save the Children.
[vi] ILO, UNICEF (2020) COVID-19 and Child Labour: A Time of Crisis, a Time to Act
[vii] Roberton, T. Carter, E., Chou, V., et al "Early estimates of the indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and child mortality in low-income and middle-income countries: a modelling study (May 2020). Available at: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X%2820%2930229-1/fulltext
[viii] United Nations, "Policy Brief: Impact of Covid-19 on Children," 15 April 2020. Available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_children_16_april_2020.pdf
[ix] See, for example, Save the Children's live research tracker on the impacts of Covid-19 on children at: https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2020/the-changing-face-of-covid-19-a-live-tracker-of-its-impact-on-children; UNDP, "COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery", June 2020. Available at: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/covid-19_and_human_development_0.pdf.
[x] UNDP, "The 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index" (2019), Available at: http://hdr.undp.org/en/2019-MPI
[xi] Gentilini, U (2020) https://www.ugogentilini.net/?p=920
[xii] Op. Cit. (2019) ILO-UNICEF.
[xiii] In their fullest form UCBs may be defined as the provision of regular, non-contributory income transfers to caregivers of children from birth to the child's 18th birthday, without any means test and without behavioural conditions attached.
[xiv] Kidd, S., Daniels, L. M., Gelders, B., Athias, D. and Cretney, M. (2020) Investing in the future: A universal benefit for Sri Lanka's children. Colombo: UNICEF.
[xv] Kidd, S. and Athias, D. (2020) Hit and Miss: An Assessment of targeting effectiveness in social protection *with additional analysis*. Development Pathways Working Paper.
[xvi] Kidd, S., Daniels, L. M., Gelders, B., Athias, D. and Cretney, M. (2020) Investing in the future: A universal benefit for Sri Lanka's children. Colombo: UNICEF.
[xvii] UNICEF, ODI (2020) Universal child benefits: Policy issues and options.
[xviii] Thome, K., Taylor, J. E., Filipski, M., Davis, B. and Handa, S. (2016) The local economy impacts of social cash transfers: a comparative analysis of seven sub-Saharan countries. Rome: FAO.
[19] Harman, L. (2018). The Role of Cash Transfers in Improving Child Outcomes: The Importance of Child-Sensitivity and Taking a 'Cash Plus' Approach. London: Save the Children.
[20] Tasker, M. and Harman, L. (2020) Investing in Early Years: The importance of protecting children through comprehensive social protection during the critical first 1,000 days of life. *Global Social Policy*, Vol 20(1), pp.21-25.
[21] Bastagli, F., Hagen-Zanker, J., Harman, L., Barca, V., Sturge, G., Schmidt, T. with Pellerano, L. (2016). Cash Transfers: What does the evidence say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features. London: ODI.
[22] Op. Cit. Harman, L. (2018).