

Submission by Save the Children in response to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights call for inputs on rights of the child and inclusive social protection

Save the Children is responding to the questions in the call for inputs drawing on good practices as well as evidence from the organisation's programmes, policy and advocacy engagement across regions on child-sensitive and shock-responsive social protection. Save the Children defines child-sensitive social protection (CSSP) as "*public policies, programmes and systems that address the specific patterns of children's poverty and vulnerability, are rights-based in approach, and recognise the long-term developmental benefits of investing in children*". To realise the right of every child to social protection, we advocate for the progressive implementation of Universal Child Benefits (UCBs) ⁱⁱ.

Q1: What social protection systems are in place for children in your country?

Save the Children operates in over 100 countriesⁱⁱⁱ. We are working to tackle the low rates of access by children to appropriate child sensitive social protection – with only 25% of children covered in any way. Save the Children, ILO and UNICEF are developing a jointly managed Universal Child Benefit (UCB) Tracker, which will be launched in 2023. It will track social protection coverage for children, including child benefits, across all countries where information is available. We would be happy to share the Tracker and related analysis as soon as it is ready.

Q2: What are the main gaps and challenges to children's enjoyment of social protection in law, policy, and practice in your country and the impacts on children's rights?

As countries and households around the world continue to feel the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis fueled by the war in Ukraine, Save the Children estimates that that 774 million children around the world are both living in multidimensional poverty *and* exposed to high climate risk ^{iv}. Most children facing the **dual threat of poverty and high climate risk** live in lower income countries, with more than three-quarters living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Calls to expand and strengthen government social protection measures are now almost universally accepted as a way to protect people, including children, and support local economies. Despite this, **social protection coverage for children remains very low**. According to the ILO's Global Social Protection Report 2020-22 ^v, only 1 in 4 children (26.4%) receive any social protection benefits globally, with significant regional disparities (ranging from 82.3% of children in Europe and Central Asia, to 12.6% in Africa) ^{vi}. 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. A key part of the challenge is that over 60% of the world's working population are employed in the informal sector with no legal employment contracts and low and irregular incomes^{vii}. This not only exacerbates income insecurity but also restricts their right to participate and access contributory social protection arrangements, including for their children.

Currently, only a very small proportion of public spending is targeted towards social protection for children. On average, this ranges from just 0.1 to 1.2% of GDP in low-income countries and high-income countries respectively. Spending on social protection for children varies between regions, with countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia spending the most, at more than 1% of GDP. By contrast, social protection expenditure on children accounts for just 0.1% and 0.4% of GDP in Arab States and Africa respectively^{viii}. These levels of investment are entirely out of proportion to both the level of need and the substantial economic and social returns that greater investment in children would achieve.

In the context of growing vulnerabilities and increasing needs for social protection to have meaningful outcomes for *all* children, we must also ensure that CSSP programmes and policies are gender-responsive. The different norms, roles and responsibilities attributed to different genders at different ages drive differences in vulnerability, poverty and access to and control over resources, services, programmes and opportunities. In turn, these differences create inequalities that can be perpetuated, even in regard to the way people access and benefit from social protection programmes, influencing the final impact on child development outcomes. Some examples of our work in Nepal, Nigeria, India and DRC and recommendations on how to ensure gender equality is promoted in CSSP design and implementation can be found here: [Making Child-Sensitive Social Protection Gender-responsive | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#). When thinking about how countries can ensure more effective social protection for all children, it is also important to recognise that programme adaptations should be made to meet the needs of children with disabilities, who can be among the world's most vulnerable children. A universal child disability benefit would play a particularly important role in breaking down barriers to accessing assistive devices, education, skills development and livelihood opportunities^{ix}.

Q3: What are the good practices initiated by the Government to ensure that social protection benefits the rights of children in your country?

One of the best-evidenced and most immediately effective responses is to provide a minimum level of income in the form of cash transfers direct to families - such as in a Universal Child Benefit system. Although cash alone is not sufficient to sustainably reduce poverty, it is a necessary foundation. When provided alongside access to basic services (cash plus), including health, education and protection, the impacts are even more profound, and with complementary interventions, cash transfers can be transformational in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Evidence shows that such support can help **reduce child mortality**, prevent chronic **malnutrition**, increase access to **education**, and **reduce risks to children's protection** – including family separation, child, marriage and child labour.^x

Save the Children is partnering with other agencies and supporting governments to make their social protection schemes more child sensitive by asking questions^{xi} such as:

- What are the most common and severe forms of childhood deprivation in your context (by age group)?
- What are the main social protection schemes (if any) attempting to address these key challenges?
- To what extent are they able to address these childhood deprivations (directly or indirectly)?
- What evidence is there about their impacts on children?

Our work spans various thematic outcome areas, including improving early childhood development outcomes, nutrition outcomes, education outcomes and reducing child labour among others^{xii}.

- In Nigeria, our [Child Development Grant Programme \(CDGP\)](#) reduced stunting and improved dietary diversity, use of health and nutrition services, food security, women's livelihoods and control of resources.
- In Cambodia, our [NOURISH](#) programme recorded a 17% reduction in stunting and improvements in maternal nutrition, breastfeeding and household hygiene and sanitation rates in our programme; and similar effects were observed in our [PAISANO](#) Food for Peace programme in Guatemala.
- In Nepal and the Philippines we piloted and are now planning scale up of a parenting programme with the following social protection programmes: Child Grant in Nepal – a government cash transfer programme for mothers with children under 5 years currently covering one third of the

country. 4Ps in the Philippines– a government cash transfer programme for poor families provided to parents with children under 18 years reaching 4 million households ^{xiii}.

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Q4: Are there examples of how measures and responses to alleviate poverty through social protection systems in emergency situations or, for example, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, have positively affected children’s rights, particularly to social security?

In many countries affected by climate-induced natural disasters, conflict, pandemics and other covariate shocks, child-sensitive social protection instruments, such as cash transfers, can provide much needed and swift relief to protect lives and livelihoods. Shock-responsive social protection systems should therefore form a critical component of disaster-risk management, climate adaptation and justice.

Universal social protection systems such as UCBs foster greater shock-responsiveness. A good shock-responsive system needs to be able to reach a large proportion of households – so that governments have a system by which to scale up support. If UCBs had been widely in place prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would have been possible to rapidly reach two-thirds of households globally with critical financial supports and links to services. UCBs have become a key policy tool in many high-income countries, and a growing number of lower income countries have also started out on this path. Currently, UCBs are in place in just 21 countries (mainly in Europe), while a further 87 have varying forms of child or family benefits. 72 countries still have no child or family benefit scheme^{xiv}. Yet, such policies, alongside other universal social security instruments and investments in public services, have been central to maintaining economic and social progress.

Once a social protection system is established and all 0–17-year-olds in a country are registered to receive monthly UCB payments, the administrative burden associated with increasing coverage and transfer values in the event of shocks, such as climate-related disasters or pandemics such as in the instance of COVID-19, is significantly reduced. The system could start working even in countries where fewer children are registered (e.g. 0-3 or 0-5 year olds) as they are still likely to capture a large number of the most vulnerable households where children reside. Indeed, in countries where national social protection systems were in place to provide regular, predictable cash transfers (e.g. unemployment benefit, sick pay, pensions or child benefits), these have been scaled up successfully in the face of COVID-19^{xv}.

Social protection systems are critical to sustainable management of protracted humanitarian crises. Where social protection systems are not in place, or where governments cannot or will not provide direct assistance to populations living in humanitarian need, the humanitarian system must continue to step in with life-saving assistance. However, with unprecedented burdens on the humanitarian system, and likely long-term poverty challenges, investing in longer-term, more systemic and government-led approaches must urgently be considered. In Somalia, Save the Children has supported four shock-responsive safety net pilots, working with local actors to use data for early warning of shocks that are likely to affect children’s rights. The system allows cash to be delivered quickly, helping to save lives and livelihoods and reduce costs of responding to emergencies after they have happened. Such mechanisms can act as a bridge between short-term humanitarian cash transfers and longer-term government-led social protection systems^{xvi}.

Throughout 2020, Save the Children in Fiji supported the government by implementing shock-responsive cash transfers, first to support families affected by COVID-19-related economic

contractions and, after December 2020, the impact of Tropical Cyclone Yasa^{xvii}. Save the Children also provided additional technical assistance to the Government of Fiji to help strengthen the existing national social protection system, including by identifying crisis affected communities; digitalising existing and new registrations; and performing data management and analysis to ensure targeting of priority groups (i.e. female-headed households, survivors of gender-based violence, people with disability, and the sick and elderly). The measures taken helped ensure that, not only were the humanitarian cash transfers delivered by Save the Children aligned with the existing social protection system but that, beyond the humanitarian response, ways were explored to build and strengthen longer-term social protection systems, as part of an exit strategy from the humanitarian cash assistance.

Q5: How can States deliver more effectively to ensure the effective implementation of universal social protection for children, including through international cooperation?

Universal social protection for children should be a priority for all states^{xviii}. There is a strong economic and social rationale for universal, categorical (i.e. child focused) approaches and governments should aim to **progressively move towards universal coverage** of all children. A wide body of evidence shows the substantial returns on investment that arise from investing in all children and highlights its affordability^{xix}. By ensuring that no child is left behind, UCBs can secure better returns on investment and help reduce broader childhood deprivation and inequality. In addition, universal approaches provide a greater economic stimulus – much needed in the current context with numerous studies highlighting the local economic ‘multiplier effect’ of cash transfers to households^{xx}.

Attempts to target the poorest or ‘most deserving’ households are often costly to deliver and almost always inaccurate, excluding many of those in need. Poverty-targeted social protection schemes are far less effective at reaching those who are left the furthest behind^{xxi}. Universal benefits may make people more likely to contribute taxes for social protection by fostering a stronger ‘social contract’ between governments and citizens, as well as reducing stigma and other negative impacts of targeting. A healthy social contract is formed when governments fulfil the rights and needs of society by providing appropriate services and support, such as social protection. This in turn fosters trust and confidence in institutions, and legitimacy among society, leading people to be more willing to contribute – in the form of taxes – in return for this support.^{xxii}

Governments can take different pathways to the progressive realization of universal coverage depending on their starting points. We recommend that countries prioritise universal coverage for children during their earliest years, which is a critical period of physical, cognitive and emotional development, as well as children with disabilities. Once universal coverage has been achieved for these children, governments can gradually expand coverage as they become better able to invest further resources, for example, extending provision to children up to the age of five. Where even this initial step is not fiscally feasible, governments could consider ranking geographic areas of the country by levels of infant malnutrition and poverty and start by introducing universal coverage in those areas that show the highest levels of deprivation against these indicators. For countries that already have some form of income support scheme for households with children, we recommend various steps to bring greater benefit to more children. The first of these is to look at how to close coverage gaps, especially among children that may be socially marginalised or excluded. While some countries have managed to achieve widespread coverage through taxpayer-funded schemes, others have opted to combine taxpayer-funded schemes with programmes that are funded or part-funded by contributions from employees and companies.

The delivery of UCBs alongside the provision of quality public services is an integrated policy solution that will be needed to achieve even greater impacts across a wide range of child development outcomes. For example, we argue for strong integrated universal healthcare and social protection systems.^{xxiii}

An immediate priority must be to protect and support children from the climate impacts they are currently facing, and to build resilience and preparedness for future shocks. This includes scaling up investment to protect children from immediate and slow-onset impacts of the climate emergency and linked crises, and prioritizing support for children most impacted.^{xxiv}

As governments around the world grapple with the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic downturn and the cost-of-living crisis, the cost of extending social protection coverage of children will understandably be seen by many as a barrier. Economic downturn and debt repayments are undermining the capacity of many governments in lower income countries to make the investments that are needed to spur green and just development and meet the SDGs. However, the economic and social costs of not extending social protection to reach more children and their caregivers are too big to ignore. Investing in social protection systems should be seen as foundational for the achievement of other SDGs and therefore a top priority in development planning and financing. Drawing on cross-country research, in 2019 the ILO shared a guidance paper^{xxv} that highlighted eight different approaches that governments have taken to create greater fiscal space for social protection programmes.

Endnotes

ⁱ [Save the Children Global Child Sensitive Social Protection Approach Paper | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#)

ⁱⁱ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/a_foundation_to_end_child_poverty_full_report_english.pdf/

ⁱⁱⁱ See our Children's Resources center for published resources on CSSP:

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/topics/child-sensitive-social-protection/>

^{iv} Save the Children (2022). Generation Hope: 2.4 billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis

^v ILO, 2021. World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social protection at the crossroads – in pursuit of a better future. International Labour Office – Geneva.

^{vi} *ibid*

^{vii} ILO (2019). Extending social security to workers in the informal economy: Lessons from international experience. A living document (November 2019).

^{viii} *Op cit*, ILO (2021)

^{ix} See page 31 in Save the Children's Universal Child Benefits paper.

https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/a_foundation_to_end_child_poverty_full_report_english.pdf/

^x 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.

^{xi} See for example, Save the Children's [analysis of the child sensitivity of social protection system in Uganda](#)

^{xii} See more examples in [Save the Children Global Child Sensitive Social Protection Approach Paper | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#) and [Save the Children's Social Protection Brief: Asia-Pacific | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#)

^{xiii} https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/child_social_protection_asia_pacific_2021.pdf/

^{xiv} ILO/UNICEF (2019) Joint Report on Social Protection for Children: Towards universal social protection for children: Achieving SDG 1.3.

^{xv} <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099800007112236655/pdf/P17658505ca3820930a254018e229a30bf8.pdf>

^{xvi} <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Save-the-Children-Shock-Responsive-Social-Protection-Brief-July-2022.pdf/>

^{xvii} *ibid*

^{xviii} https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/a_foundation_to_end_child_poverty_full_report_english.pdf/

^{xix} Heckman, J. (2013) Invest in early childhood development: Reduce deficits, strengthen the economy and Hodinott, J., Alderman, H., Behrman, J. R., Haddad, L. and Horton, S. (2013) The Economic Rationale for investing in stunting reduction, *Maternal and Child Nutrition*, 9(S2).

^{xx} Egger, D., Haushofer, J., Miguel, E., Niehaus, P. and Walker, M. (2019) General equilibrium effects of cash transfers: experimental evidence from Kenya.

^{xxi} Kidd, S. and Athias, D. (2020). Hit and Miss: An assessment of targeting in social protection with additional analysis

^{xxii} Jordan, J. (2013). Policy feedback and support for the welfare state. *Journal of European Social Policy*. Vol. 23(2), pp. 134–148.

^{xxiii} [Strong, Integrated Health and Social Protection Systems: Essential for achieving children's rights | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#)

^{xxiv} *Op cit* Save the Children (2022).

^{xxv} *Op. Cit.* Ortiz et al. (2019)