

# Supporting families and children beyond COVID-19: Social protection in high-income countries

*A briefing of the report*

## Key messages

- COVID-19 is the greatest crisis high-income countries (HICs) have seen in generations. HICs have no recent experiences with pandemics. This calls for careful learning, and short feedback loops, as the crisis continues.
- Children will be heavily impacted, particularly those in low-income households. HICs should plan for long-term social system strengthening to build resilience to future shocks (including crises that may follow from short-term decisions, e.g. stimulus to austerity).
- Our report estimates that child poverty rates across HICs will remain above pre-COVID-19 levels for at least five years. This will arrive on the back of over two decades of stagnation in child income poverty rates in most HICs.
- Only 2% of public financial relief in HICs was allocated to support children and families during the first wave of the pandemic. Around 90% was allocated to or through businesses.
- A 'trickle-down' approach to child welfare is likely to exclude the most marginalized. This approach prioritizes those attached to the formal labour market or secure employment, meaning the worst off are hardest hit.

## Recommendations

### Rebalance fiscal stimulus packages

to allow for increases in social protection expenditure, in line with the evidence on what works for protecting children during crises. The public and private costs related to falling living conditions in the child population today will be long lasting, and expensive, as greater demand for social interventions follows over time.

### Relax eligibility criteria for family policies

including employment conditions, social contributions and residency, to enable all vulnerable families with children – for instance, jobless households, the near poor and recent migrants – to access benefits at this time.

### Diversify social protection responses

to cover the range of needs during COVID-19, including income support; school feeding and/ or replacement services; childcare; healthcare; and waivers for utilities, rent and/ or mortgages.

## Key messages

- As countries lean towards stimulus, business support can include family-friendly conditions and equitable investment of public funds.
- Around one-third of HICs did not implement any policies targeting child support in their response to the first wave of the pandemic.
- Rebalancing of economic stimulus to social protection expenditure is needed.
- Most policies are expansions of pre-existing eligibility – and so risk missing the near or new poor – or have work conditions and so risk missing children in poorest households.
- Governments should diversify their social protection responses. Benefits must raise all families – regardless of size and structure and circumstance – above poverty thresholds.
- Among countries that did invest in social protection for children and families, including childcare, school feeding and family allowances, most lasted on average three months – completely inadequate to address the projected poverty risks in the long run.
- Countries with a higher GDP and greater commitment to family benefits and/or universal approaches to payments, report lower income poverty rates.
- Many countries will have borrowed to finance stimulus packages, and in absence of growth and inflation, will have debts to repay.
- Austerity is shown to have damaging effects on risks of child violence, homelessness, health outcomes, and child institutionalisation.
- Economic contractions have been predictive of poorer child well-being outcomes in HICs in the following year, putting recent gains in Sustainable Development Goals at risk.

## Recommendations

### Build family policies into core of relief

As countries look to a post-COVID-19 future, ensure that inclusive policies – designed to protect children from poverty and improve well-being – are built into the heart of COVID-19 recovery responses.

### Include conditions of family-friendly and equitable investment of public funds for continued business support

for example, regulating leave and work conditions for parents – options so far underutilized in fiscal stimulus packages.

### Protect existing child and family benefits from austerity at all costs

known to increase violence, homelessness, poor health, and child institutionalization.

### Look to the long term and strengthen social protection systems

as well as child and family policies that prevent poverty, to maximize progress towards the SDGs and build resilience to future shocks.



*"Available evidence shows that direct intervention to families is more effective in mitigating poverty than general fiscal stimulus. This means second wave responses to COVID-19 will require a rethink."*