

The case for universal social protection is more evident than ever

By Shahra Razavi

The idea that societies can be secure by relying on individualised market-based provision for those who can afford it, and porous “safety nets” for the poor, has proven to be illusory. If the COVID-19 pandemic has sent the world one message, it is that [we are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us](#). If people are unable to access quality health care and quarantine themselves, they face serious health risks and may transmit the virus to others, and if one country cannot contain the virus, others are bound to be (re-)infected. And yet, with the exception of those countries with robust and comprehensive social protection systems, many are struggling to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of all those affected.

After the last global catastrophe – the 2008 financial crisis – the international community unanimously reaffirmed the human right to social security by adopting the ILO [Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012](#) (No. 202). In doing so, countries pledged to guarantee at least a basic level of social security, including access to health care and income security over the life cycle for all, as part of their national social protection systems, and to progressively ensure higher levels of social protection. More than a decade later, as the current crisis makes clear, not nearly enough progress has been made.

However, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis there are glimmers of hope. Both the pandemic and the ensuing economic meltdown have spurred a flurry of government action on social protection. Between 1 February and 12 May 2020, [168 countries and territories](#) announced at least 915 social protection measures in response to the COVID-19 crisis, with a notable number of countries [extending coverage](#) of existing programmes, including to workers in the informal economy, and removing various obligations and behavioural conditions to facilitate access. It is still too early to know whether these will be temporary stop-gap measures, or if they will be sustained and integrated into national social protection systems. A lot will depend on the broader macroeconomic context: concerns that [austerity may be around corner](#) if not already here cast a dark shadow. However, what is clear is that particularly in a complex, fast moving and unpredictable crisis like COVID-19, [universal or categorical approaches](#) are preferable to narrowly targeted ones which leave governments struggling to reach large swathes of the population. The case for universal social protection is further strengthened by the fact that it is a powerful economic and social stabiliser, softening the impact of crises and contributing to a swifter recovery.

In recent weeks, even the [World Bank](#) has spoken of the merits of “universal entitlements to health care and income support” and the need to reach the “missing middle”, i.e. those not covered by social insurance or social assistance, while the [IMF](#) recognises the logic of universal responses, at least in the short term. One can only hope that this will herald a move away from the narrow means-tested targeting (and [problematic proxy means-tests](#)) strongly advocated in the past. Targeting methods though have long been criticised for their arbitrariness, [exclusion errors](#) and

stigmatising effects, not to mention their higher administrative costs. Another desirable outcome would be [to avoid cumbersome and punitive behavioural conditionalities](#) often attached to targeted family-oriented cash transfers. A decade of feminist research demonstrates the [detrimental effects conditionalities may have](#) in contexts where quality public services are in short supply and where intersecting forms of discrimination mean that well-intended programme requirements easily slip into coercive and disempowering implementation practices. These concerns together with the exigencies of mitigating the crisis can open the door in many more countries to both universal child benefits (UCBs)¹ and universal social pensions – two core components of a [social protection floor](#).

Take the instructive example of UCBs. These can be potent tools for reducing poverty, as evidenced by existing UCB experience and by country simulations. When compared with benefits for children using narrow targeting, UCBs often perform better in terms of poverty reduction. Moreover, UCBs directly fulfil [child rights](#), better ensure early childhood development needs, and incentivise birth registration by helping to link parents with essential social services. There is also great potential for universal social pensions to reach the more than [80 per cent](#) of older women and men over statutory retirement age in low-income countries who currently do not receive a pension. This is particularly important given the disproportionate threat to the health, rights and socio economic well-being of older persons caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With UCBs alone, globally, it would be possible to reach two-thirds of all households (because they include children).² In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, where social protection coverage tends to be particularly patchy, more than three-quarters of all households include children below the age of 18. Taking into account the age composition of the population living in poverty – [44 per cent of those living in extremely poor households, subsisting on less than \\$1.9 per day, are children below 15](#) – UCBs would not only reach many households in general, but many households living in poverty. Universal social pensions, in turn, could reach one-fifth of all households globally, or roughly 15 per cent of households in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The renewed interest in universal approaches is also evident in the lively debates about the promises of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), especially an ‘emergency’ UBI as a crisis response ([ECLAC, Standing](#)). Yet, in order to achieve the objective of ensuring a basic level of income security, [not any UBI will do](#). The impact a UBI will have largely depends on its design, including the level of benefit it provides, how it is financed, and how it relates to existing tax and social security systems. UBI proposals are indeed very diverse and guided by different motivations – ranging from interest in its emancipatory potential (i.e. expanding choices and resourcing meaningful autonomy), to concerns about cost-savings or reducing the size of the state. In a context of fiscal belt-tightening, there are justified concerns that UBIs may be promoted to replace contributory social security systems that offer higher levels of protection, undermine [workers’ rights](#) and crowd-out public investment in essential services, thereby reinforcing their [unchecked privatization](#).

¹ UCBs are a cash or tax transfer paid to households with children, unconditionally and on a regular basis.

² All the figures in this paragraph are preliminary calculations based on [UN DESA \(2019\)](#).

Unlike a “thin” or minimalist understanding of a UBI, the concept of universal social protection is firmly grounded in the international human rights framework and [encompasses three key aspects](#): (1) *universal coverage* ensuring that everyone is protected; (2) *comprehensiveness* of protection for the full range of contingencies covered; and (3) the *adequacy* of benefit levels to support a dignified life. Universal social protection means that everybody is adequately protected against the full range of risks throughout the life course, but this does not require that everybody receives a benefit at every point in time. It also allows for differentiation of needs (ILO 2019). For instance, [targeting within universalism](#) means that groups or individuals that require additional or different kinds of support, for example indigenous communities or persons with disabilities, can receive it. Similarly, UBIs do not differentiate between adults with different needs and responsibilities; yet without sufficient public investment in quality care services, women’s ability to access [employment](#) is likely hampered.

Last but not least, a [human-centred recovery](#) requires a ‘[jobs-rich](#)’ response, including the creation of millions of much-needed decent jobs in the [care sector](#), now deemed ‘essential’, and the green economy. Not only does employment have intrinsic rewards given its social dimensions and ramifications, it also generates (through taxes and social contributions) [most of the resources needed to finance a comprehensive and universal social protection system](#). A concern with some variants of UBI is that by [de-linking employment from social protection](#) the benefits they offer can be overly thin.

If the pandemic has a silver lining, one hopes that it spurs governments to deliver on their promise to achieve universal social protection by 2030, to expand access to health services, sickness benefits, paid family leave, unemployment protection and other types of social protection benefits. Only then will our societies and economies be able to weather the COVID-19 pandemic – and the other crises to come.

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