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## Commission for Social Development

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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: Priority Theme: “Fostering social development and social justice through social policies to accelerate progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to achieve the overarching goal of poverty eradication”.

Statement submitted by **Save the Children International**, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\* and member of the Global Coalition of Social Protection.

\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



## ***Accelerating progress in poverty reduction and fostering inclusive development through child-sensitive social protection and universal implementation of Social Protection Floors.***

### **Tackling child poverty is critical to delivering the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and realisation of children's rights**

Child poverty remains one of the world's greatest challenges to the realisation of the SDGs and children's rights, including the right to survival, learning and protection. Children living in poverty are deprived of the care, protection, healthcare, and education necessary to realise their full potential as adults, further perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty. Estimates from UNICEF and the World Bank show that more than 330 million children lived in extreme poverty in 2022,<sup>1</sup> while UNDP estimates that half of the world's 1.1 billion people experiencing multidimensional poverty are children.<sup>2</sup>

With countries and households around the world continuing to feel the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis and conflict, child poverty rates are likely to grow without significant and targeted action. Save the Children estimates that 774 million children around the world are both living in multidimensional poverty *and* exposed to high climate risk. Most of the 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.<sup>3</sup>

Through the SDGs, world leaders committed to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty. With SDG1 target 3, States agreed to put in place social protection floors (SPFs) by 2030, taking forward ILO Recommendation 202 guaranteeing access to quality essential health care for all and basic income security for children, persons with disabilities, older persons and the unemployed.<sup>4</sup> While national floors of social protection are vital to leave no one behind and underpin the global commitment to end poverty, only 47% of the global population are reached by at least one of the provisions of SPFs, and significant regional disparities persist.<sup>5</sup>

### **Child-sensitive social protection is an effective tool for poverty reduction, resilience building and human capital development.**

Social protection is globally recognized as an effective tool for alleviating poverty, enhancing household income security, fostering human capital development, building resilience, and mitigating the impacts of climate-related and other shocks. It is also a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other internationally ratified agreements.

There is a wide body of evidence demonstrating that, alongside access to basic services and complementary interventions, child-sensitive social protection (CSSP) instruments such as child and maternal benefits, old age pensions and disability benefits in the form of cash transfers and voucher assistance, can and do support poor households to raise well-nourished, healthy, protected and educated children.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF and World Bank Group, Global Trends in Child Monetary Poverty According to International Poverty Lines, July 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/documents/child-poverty-trends>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023, [2023mpireportenpdf.pdf](https://www.undp.org/publications/2023mpireportenpdf.pdf) (undp.org).

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children, Generation Hope: 2.4 billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis, 2022, [Generation Hope: 2.4 billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis | Save the Children's Resource Centre](https://www.savethechildren.org/resources/generation-hope).

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization, Recommendation concerning National Floors of Social Protection No. 202, Geneva, 101<sup>st</sup> ILC session, 14 June 2012, [Recommendation R202 - Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 \(No. 202\)](https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/iloorg/2012/05/120502.pdf) (ilo.org).

<sup>5</sup> ILO, World Social Protection Report 2020-22, September 2021, [ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---soc\\_sec/documents/publication/wcms\\_817572.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_817572.pdf).

One of the best-evidenced and 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 (UCB) system.<sup>6</sup> There is ample evidence that when governments invest in UCBs, there are substantial poverty reduction, human development, and growth impacts. A simulation exercise for 14 middle-income-countries showed that universal transfers financed by 1 percent of GDP led to a fall in the child poverty headcount of as much as 32 percent in some countries.<sup>7</sup>

UCBs can contribute to gains towards other SDGs, including **reducing child mortality** (SDG3), preventing chronic **malnutrition** (SDG2), increasing access to **education** (SDG4), and **reducing risks to children's protection** – including family separation, child marriage and child labour (SDG5 and SDG16).<sup>8</sup> There is also strong evidence that failing to invest in the early years of a child's life is not just an individual tragedy but also a huge loss to national growth prospects.<sup>9</sup>

### **CSSP is critical to addressing the worst impacts of crises.**

In countries affected by climate and environmental disasters, conflict, pandemics and other covariate shocks, CSSP instruments, such as cash transfers for children and their carers, can provide much needed and swift relief to protect lives and livelihoods. Shock-responsive universal social protection systems, such as UCBs, should form a critical component of disaster-risk management, climate adaptation and justice.

Had UCBs 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. Once a social protection system is established and budgeted for, the administrative burden associated with increasing coverage and transfer values in the event of shocks is significantly reduced.

Robust social protection systems are critical to the sustainable management of protracted humanitarian crises. Where these are not in place, or where governments cannot provide direct assistance to populations living in humanitarian need, the humanitarian system must step in with life-saving assistance. With unprecedented burdens on the humanitarian system, and likely long-term poverty challenges, investing in longer-term, more systematic and government-led approaches must urgently be considered. Such systems allow for cash to be delivered quickly, helping to save lives and livelihoods and reduce costs of responding to emergencies after they have happened, acting also as a bridge between short-term humanitarian cash transfers and longer-term government-led social protection systems.<sup>10</sup>

### **Coverage gaps and financing challenges for CSSP.**

Social protection coverage for children remains very low, with over 1.77 billion out of 2.4 billion children around the world having no access to social protection and significant regional disparities ranging from 82.3% of children in Europe and Central Asia, to 12.6% in Africa.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Save the Children, A Foundation to End Child Poverty: How universal child benefits can build a fairer, more inclusive and resilient future, October 2020, [A Foundation to End Child Poverty: How universal child benefits can build a fairer, more inclusive and resilient future | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#).

<sup>7</sup> ODI and UNICEF, Universal child benefits: policy issues and options, June 2020, [UCB-ODI-UNICEF-Report-2020.pdf](#).

<sup>8</sup> Save the Children UK, The Role of Cash Transfers in Improving Child Outcomes: The Importance of Child-Sensitivity and Taking a 'Cash Plus' Approach, 2018, [The Role of Cash Transfers in Improving Child Outcomes: The importance of child-sensitivity and taking a "Cash Plus" approach | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#).

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work, 2019, [https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/816281518818814423/pdf/2019-WDR-Report.pdf](#).

<sup>10</sup> Save the Children, Shock-Responsive Social Protection, July 2022, [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Save-the-Children-Shock-Responsive-Social-Protection-Brief-July-2022.pdf/](#).

<sup>11</sup> ILO and UNICEF. 2023. *More than a billion reasons: The urgent need to build universal social protection for children*. Second ILO-UNICEF Joint Report on Social Protection for Children. Geneva and New York. [https://www.unicef.org/media/135211/file/More%20than%20a%20billion%20reasons:%20The%20urgent%20need%20to%20build%20universal%20social%20protection.pdf](#).

While ECOSOC has adopted a number of resolutions committing governments to scale up investment in CSSP,<sup>12</sup> only a small proportion of public spending globally is targeted towards social protection for children. 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 at more than 1% of GDP, where as it accounts for .07 percent of GDP or below in Africa, Arab States and the Americas.<sup>13</sup> 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 and their caregivers would achieve.

Given the financial constraints faced by many countries, there is a widespread call for the establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection to ensure, through national means and global solidarity, that social protection floors are guaranteed and in place everywhere through sustainable funding.<sup>14</sup>

## Recommendations

- 1) **All Government should prioritize universal social protection for children.** There is a strong economic and social rationale for universal, categorical (i.e. child-focused) approaches. To ensure that benefits effectively reach all children, governments should put in place processes to enable the participation of families from different sectors of society, especially those who experiencing discrimination and inequality, and address obstacles limiting access, including lack of birth registration, administrative and geographic barriers, among others.
- 2) **Governments can take different pathways towards the progressive realization of universal coverage depending on their starting points.** Countries should prioritise universal coverage for children during their earliest years as 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 are better able to invest further resources, for example, extending provision to children up to the age of five or by introducing universal coverage in those areas that show the highest levels of deprivation. The delivery of UCBs alongside the provision of other quality public services, such as universal health coverage and inclusive quality education, is an integrated policy solution needed to achieve even greater impacts across a wide range of child development outcomes.<sup>15</sup>
- 3) **Protect and support children impacted by crises and 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 and families most impacted.<sup>16</sup>
- 4) **Support the establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection** to assist countries to address gaps in their social protection coverage. Such a fund could provide temporary financing to a small number of countries that would commit to gradually expanding their own national financial contributions to social protection schemes over time, as government revenues allow.

<sup>12</sup> See E/RES/2019/6, E/FFDF/2022/L, and E/FFDF/2023/L.1.

<sup>13</sup> ILO and UNICEF, 2023. See Figure 2.10 on pg. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Council, Global fund for social protection: international solidarity in the service of poverty eradication, Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, A/HRC/47/36, 22 April 2021, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/093/37/PDF/G2109337.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>15</sup> Save the Children, Strong, Integrated Health and Social Protection Systems: Essential for achieving children's rights, 2022, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Strong-integrated-soical-protection-and-health-systems.pdf/>.

<sup>16</sup> Op cit Save the Children (2022).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the commitments through the 2030 Agenda 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, much of the world remains off track from achieving this target, and children, in particular, are being left behind.

In the current context of multiple and intersecting crises, the cost of extending social protection coverage of children may be seen by many countries as a barrier. However, the economic and social costs of not extending social protection to reach all children are too big to ignore. By ensuring that no child is left behind, UCBs can secure better returns on investment and help reduce broader childhood deprivation and inequality and improve resiliency in the long run, while also disrupting the cycle of intergenerational poverty and contributing to the achievement of other SDGs.

Investing in CSSP systems and floors must a top priority in development planning and financing, and child rights obligations as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.