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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: emerging issues: National policies and measures implemented by Member States to combat hunger and poverty in times of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Challenges to get on track towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

## **National policies and measures implemented by Member States to combat hunger and poverty in times of the coronavirus disease pandemic and beyond: challenges to get on track towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

**Note by the Secretariat**

### *Summary*

Pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 2006/18, the Commission for Social Development has included the agenda item “Emerging issues” since the 2007–2008 review and policy cycle. Under that item, the Commission addresses current issues affecting social development that require urgent consideration and new cross-cutting issues in the context of evolving global development challenges. The Bureau of the sixtieth session of the Commission for Social Development decided that the theme for discussion under the item would be “National policies and measures implemented by Member States to combat hunger and poverty in times of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond: challenges to get on track towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda”.

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\* E/CN.5/2022/1.



## I. Introduction

1. The present note has been prepared to provide substantive background information to the Commission for Social Development on the theme chosen by the Bureau for the agenda item entitled “Emerging issues”. It presents policies and measures that Member States have implemented to combat hunger and poverty during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the recovery phase and identifies common challenges that they face to getting on track towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It seeks to help countries to learn from these policies and measures so that they can build on them to recover better and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goals 1 and 2, by 2030, with no one left behind.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Challenges faced by Member States

2. The socioeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted countries’ economies, labour markets, food security and nutrition outcomes. It has also reduced their capacity to meet the increased demand for expenditures on health, education and social protection measures implemented to protect people’s health and to prevent the most vulnerable populations from falling into poverty.

3. The pandemic caused a massive loss in working hours. It further highlighted the insecure working conditions of people in informal and precarious work, especially in the hardest hit sectors. The inadequacy of labour laws to respond to economic shocks, the lack of coordination in employment initiatives and the absence of unemployment insurance or lack of funding for it, among other factors, posed challenges to many, especially low-income, female-headed households and those living with persons with disabilities. Without work, people without unemployment insurance had to resort to depleting savings and/or productive assets, coping mechanisms that pushed them into impoverishment. Loss of jobs and/or reduced income, combined with higher food prices resulting from disrupted food supply chains, forced low-income families to reduce food intake and change their diets. School closures disrupted the delivery and implementation of many initiatives (such as school feeding and free food programmes) that are aimed at addressing malnutrition among children in many countries.

4. School closures also made it more difficult to retain girls in school and increased the incidence of gender-based violence, child abuse, child marriage and child labour. While online education was implemented during the pandemic, the existing digital divide combined with inadequate training of teachers threatened access and the quality of education. As online learning does not sufficiently address their special needs, students with disabilities are at greater risk of being left behind.

5. The pandemic severely affected mental health, especially among young people. Some countries reported a significant increase in the number of suicides and calls to mental health hotlines in 2020. The limited capacity of hospitals and inability for outreach workers to deliver treatment owing to restrictions on movement has limited access to health screenings and treatment, with negative impacts for all people, especially older persons, people living with HIV, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, migrants and other minority populations. Other challenges include the low

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated in the footnotes, all country examples given in the present note are from the voluntary national reviews presented at the 2021 session of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, which are available from: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.

density of health-care workers in rural areas and increases in out-of-pocket health expenditure.

6. Fragmented social protection systems and measures, inefficient delivery systems and inadequate attention to gender-responsiveness in extending social protection challenged the ability of Governments to protect people when they need it the most. In some countries, informal women workers were not entitled to receive social insurance benefits, while in countries where emergency benefits were paid to the head of the household, separated women and victims of domestic violence were unable to receive the benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. An emerging gap is a lack of access to social security insurance or unemployment benefit by those in the gig economy (many are self-employed), as there is no mandatory imposition for their participating in these schemes.

7. Many countries face increased fiscal deficits, higher debt, low growth and a slowdown in foreign direct investment. For some developing countries, this could undermine the stability of the financial system and potentially transform liquidity problems into insolvency crises. Low-income countries highly dependent on external financing in responding to the pandemic face challenges to sustaining social protection measures that were newly introduced or expanding the existing ones.

### **III. National policies and measures implemented by Member States to combat hunger and poverty during the pandemic and beyond**

8. Member States took measures to counter the multiple negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, through integrated policy and coordinated actions, and by involving all stakeholders in their efforts to recover better and achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **A. Supporting the agricultural sector to combat hunger and food insecurity**

9. Governments used fiscal packages, as well as existing programmes, to minimize the adverse fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agricultural sector and support small and medium-sized producers through rural credit available at a lower rate. For example, Brazil put in place a fiscal package that includes debt restructuring assistance and lower interest rates for rural credit (6 per cent for rural family farmers versus 8 per cent for all others). Special credit lines under the family farm programme (4.6 per cent for small producers and 6 per cent for medium-sized producers) were made available for small and medium-sized producers, especially those in hard-hit sectors, such as dairy, floriculture and aquaculture.<sup>2</sup>

10. Governments leveraged existing integrated strategies and programme and intersectoral multi-stakeholder mechanisms to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and address poverty, inequality, food insecurity and malnutrition, and environmental challenges in a more integrated manner and in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders. In Angola, the Integrated Plan for the Acceleration of Agriculture and Artisanal Fisheries was aimed at increasing national production by 15 to 25 per cent, including by increasing the availability and capacity of rural

<sup>2</sup> United States of America, Department of Agriculture, “Brazilian Agricultural Sector Thrives Despite COVID-19 Pandemic”, 12 June 2020. Available at [www.fas.usda.gov/data/brazil-brazilian-agricultural-sector-thrives-despite-covid-19-pandemic](http://www.fas.usda.gov/data/brazil-brazilian-agricultural-sector-thrives-despite-covid-19-pandemic).

development services to family farmers.<sup>3</sup> Mexico established an intersectoral governance mechanism in 2020, involving 18 thematic working groups, to create an enabling environment to facilitate dialogue among a wide range of public sector institutions, relevant United Nations agencies and civil society, including smallholders, agribusinesses, food suppliers, marketing agencies, consumers and regulators.<sup>4</sup>

11. Some countries incorporated environmental considerations into their food security strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Japan formulated the Strategy for Sustainable Food Systems (Measures for the Achievement of Decarbonization and Resilience with Innovation) in May 2021, to enhance both productivity potential and the sustainability of agriculture, forestry, fisheries and food industries through innovation. In Brazil, under the agricultural plan (Plano Safra) for 2020/21, provision was made to increase by up to 10 per cent the working capital credit limit for producers who submit a validated rural environmental record (Cadastro Ambiental Rural) to better align with the country's Forest Code.<sup>5</sup>

12. Countries quickly responded to protect household food security through in-kind food or vouchers schemes and school feeding and child feeding programmes, which were modified to address the needs of communities affected by the pandemic. In Argentina, the food card programme (Tarjeta Alimentar), part of the National Plan to Eradicate Hunger, is aimed at improving food security and promoting healthy diets by giving access, through a debit card, to money for a basic food basket. Since its launch in December 2019, the programme has benefited as many as 2.9 million children aged 0-6 years old, as well as pregnant women and persons with disabilities. During the COVID-19 crisis, the amount provided through the programme was doubled (May–December 2020) and was subsequently (since February 2021) increased by 50 per cent to respond to the rise in food prices.<sup>6</sup> In Bangladesh, the Open Market Sales programme allowed people living in urban areas to purchase rice at one quarter of the original price. Ecuador created an innovative partnership between the urban residents affected by the pandemic and rural food producers, forming a marketing and distribution network, through which urban dwellers receive baskets of fresh fruits and organic vegetables directly from farmers. Madagascar set up markets selling rice and oil at half price and provided necessities such as rice, sugar, oil and salt to people in need (for example, laundry workers, rickshaw pullers, students and older persons). In the Sudan, basic food baskets were sold to poor

<sup>3</sup> Angola, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Integrated Plan for the Acceleration of Agriculture and Artisanal Fisheries, June 2020. Available at [https://assets.website-files.com/5a8e71e3c7881c000130ff13/5ef9b3e7ac095a90de112895\\_Plano%20de%20Acelerac%CC%A7a%CC%83o%20da%20Agricultura%20e%20Pesca%20Familiar\\_vff\\_11062020.pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/5a8e71e3c7881c000130ff13/5ef9b3e7ac095a90de112895_Plano%20de%20Acelerac%CC%A7a%CC%83o%20da%20Agricultura%20e%20Pesca%20Familiar_vff_11062020.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The examples for Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru and Kyrgyzstan in this section are from: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO), *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World: Transforming Food Systems for Food Security, Improved Nutrition and Affordable Healthy Diets for All* (Rome, FAO, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Climate Policy Initiative, "Rural credit policy in Brazil: agriculture, environmental protection, and economic development", December 2020. Available at [www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/REL-Rural-Credit-Policy-in-Brazil.pdf](http://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/REL-Rural-Credit-Policy-in-Brazil.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Development Bank of Latin America "CAF-funded Alimentar food card helps 2.9 million children in Argentina", 10 February 2021, available at [www.caf.com/en/currently/news/2021/02/caf-helps-29-million-children-in-argentina-by-funding-alimentar-food-card](http://www.caf.com/en/currently/news/2021/02/caf-helps-29-million-children-in-argentina-by-funding-alimentar-food-card); and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Tarjeta Alimentar", available at <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/tarjeta-alimentar>.

families at discounted prices. Botswana, Rwanda and Uganda delivered food from house to house in urban areas.<sup>7</sup>

13. School closures threatened the nutrition of an estimated 388 million children worldwide who previously received a daily meal at school.<sup>8</sup> Some countries took actions to protect affected children. Nigeria supported some of the 9 million children who benefit from Home-Grown School Feeding by distributing food vouchers door-to-door. In Lesotho and Liberia, school meals were replaced by take-home meals. In Cabo Verde, 30,000 vulnerable children received food assistance at home. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Libya, ‘school feeding at home’ initiatives provided take-home rations to school children.<sup>9</sup> Brazil enabled in-kind food transfers directly delivered to children’s homes. Food kits include at least 30 per cent locally procured fresh foods, as established by Brazil’s school feeding law.

14. In Namibia, RightStart, a communication campaign on early childhood development, includes an information kit, “Kids and COVID-19”, to combat disinformation and provide guidance to parents, caregivers and educators.<sup>10</sup> Peru passed the national rice fortification law in 2021 and scaled up the inclusion of rice fortified with nine vitamins and minerals in the school feeding and other social protection programmes. Thailand fostered cooperation between private sector food producers and large-scale food retailers to boost food security and improve nutrition. During school closures, the Government has involved the village health volunteers system to ensure that every child is weighed and has their height measured every three months.

15. Existing programmes also helped alleviate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable populations. In China, under the Rural Revitalization Strategy, launched in 2017 to promote sustained livelihoods and the well-being of rural populations through agricultural development, total rural credit was increased by 17.8 per cent in 2020, with 91.92 million rural households having taken bank loans. In Ethiopia, the Productive Safety Net Programme, an innovative social protection scheme providing digital access to monthly food vouchers tailored to household size, has proven to be effective in protecting rural low-income families during the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> In rural areas, mothers with children under 2 years old are given vouchers for the purchase of fresh fruits, vegetables and eggs from local retailers. Community counselling and media campaigns were launched to improve dietary diversity. In Kyrgyzstan, the Cash Plus initiative (introduced to strengthen the impact of the national cash transfer programme) increased and diversified food production and boosted income-generating activities. As a result, 74 per cent of the households involved in the initiative increased agricultural productivity and 90 per cent improved dietary diversity and nutritional outcomes.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Devereux, “Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa”, *Global Social Policy*, vol. 21, No. 3 (June 2021).

<sup>8</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Devereux, “Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa”.

<sup>10</sup> See [www.rightstart.com.na/covid-19-resources/](http://www.rightstart.com.na/covid-19-resources/).

<sup>11</sup> Kibrom Abay and others, “Ethiopia’s social safety net effective in limiting COVID-19 impacts on rural food insecurity”, International Food Policy Research Institute, 28 January 2021. Available at [www.ifpri.org/blog/ethiopias-social-safety-net-effective-limiting-covid-19-impacts-rural-food-insecurity](http://www.ifpri.org/blog/ethiopias-social-safety-net-effective-limiting-covid-19-impacts-rural-food-insecurity).

## **B. Promoting economic security for sustainable livelihoods to address poverty**

### **1. Inclusive growth**

16. The crisis hit certain sectors particularly hard. Sectoral support was provided by Governments to help businesses weather the crisis. Egypt, in January 2021, launched a domestic tourism initiative aimed at spurring tourism in the country by reducing airline prices for domestic routes that connect tourist cities within Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Namibia introduced the National Employment and Salary Protection Scheme and Emergency Income Grant, under which grants were given to employers, workers and citizens in sectors heavily affected by the crisis, including tourism and hospitality, fishing, construction, small and medium-sized enterprises and the informal sector.

17. Governments have leveraged economic measures to support sectors and individuals hardest hit by the crisis. Many Governments instituted tax relief and on value added tax (VAT) exemptions as a means of boosting the disposable income of low-income households. Algeria and Tunisia deferred income tax payments. Import taxes were also reduced or exempt on basic commodities. The Comoros reduced import taxes on food and medicines by 30 per cent. Chad, Mali and Mauritania made food and other necessities exempt of import taxes. Reductions or exemptions on VAT reduce the costs of essential goods for consumers. Consequently, temporary VAT exemptions were made on basic commodities (Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Africa), food and medicines (Mozambique) and electricity and water tariffs (Mali).<sup>13</sup>

18. Governments instituted debt relief and interest-free loans to vulnerable business and households. In Angola, the Active Venture Capital Fund offers a credit line for microfinance companies, field schools, community credit banks, selected through public tender, who wish to operationalize a microcredit attribution process for women and young entrepreneurs in the fields of agriculture, beef and laying poultry, food processing, logistics and distribution of agrifood and fisheries products, aquaculture, recycling urban solid waste, transport services, professional training services, software development and cultural and artistic production.<sup>14</sup> Cabo Verde provided support to microfinance institutions to offer interest-free loans to vulnerable households. In Nigeria, traders with loans from the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme enjoyed a three-month moratorium on repayments.<sup>15</sup>

19. Governments have used digital tools to support business continuity and the viability of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, including through e-commerce. In Brunei Darussalam, support is being provided to such enterprises to market their goods online through a dedicated platform, a one-stop directory portal for e-commerce that provides opportunities and incentives for traders to use e-platforms.<sup>16</sup>

20. Remittances constitute a lifeline for around 800 million people in the world (or one in nine people) who receive and use them to cover essential costs such as food, medical expenses, school fees and housing expenses. To support income during the

<sup>12</sup> Egypt Today, "Egypt's initiative to promote domestic tourism extended to May 15", 28 February 2021. Available at [www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/99119/Egypt-s-initiative-to-promote-domestic-tourism-extended-to-May](http://www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/99119/Egypt-s-initiative-to-promote-domestic-tourism-extended-to-May).

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Devereux, "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa".

<sup>14</sup> Beyond Angola Advisors, "Medidas imediatas de estímulo para empresas e particulares, em resposta à pandemia do coronavirus", 8 April 2020. Available at <https://beyond.co.ao/medidas-imediatas-de-estimulo-para-empresas-e-particulares-em-resposta-a-pandemia-do-coronavirus/>.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Devereux, "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa".

<sup>16</sup> Available at [www.ekadaibrunei.bn](http://www.ekadaibrunei.bn).

crisis, the Qatar Central Bank removed restrictions imposed on domestic workers opening bank accounts so that they could continue to receive their wages and send remittances to their countries. Several countries temporarily suspended the fees for mobile money transfers (Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Zambia).

## 2. Social protection

21. There has been an exponential increase in social protection measures since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. The “living paper” published by the World Bank provides a real-time picture of social protection measures taken by countries. It reveals that between 20 March 2020 and 14 May 2021, a total of 3,333 social protection measures were planned or implemented by 222 countries.<sup>17</sup> Eighteen per cent of global stimulus packages were spent on social protection measures. Total spending on social protection rose by almost 270 per cent between December 2020 and May 2021, reaching \$2.9 trillion (or 3 per cent of global GDP in 2021). This figure is 4.5 times higher than spending in the sector over the great recession of 2008/09.

### (a) Social assistance

22. Social assistance measures make up the bulk of global social protection measures (55 per cent) and are the principal form of support in all regions, except Europe and Central Asia. The number of social assistance measures increased by 120 per cent between December 2020 and May 2021. In low-income countries, social assistance measures constitute 70 per cent of social protection responses. In Africa, social assistance accounted for 86 per cent of all responses recorded (over half of these were cash transfers). As a proportion of expenditure, 58 per cent of global social protection spending is dedicated to social assistance (\$1.7 trillion).<sup>18</sup>

23. Among social assistance measures, cash transfer measures are the instrument of choice for most Governments. Almost 17 per cent of the world’s population benefited from at least one COVID-19-related cash transfer payment between 2020 and 2021. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana programme in India is the biggest COVID-19-related cash transfer scheme worldwide, reaching over 206 million individuals or 15 per cent of the population. Other major programmes include the first stimulus cheque in the United States of America (160 million beneficiaries or 49 per cent of the population), the one-off universal programme in Japan (116.5 million beneficiaries or 93 per cent of the population) and the Ehsaas programme in Pakistan (100 million beneficiaries or 45 per cent of the population). Countries displayed great disparities in coverage rates for cash transfers. In low-income countries, the coverage rate for cash transfers was 4.5 per cent of their population, which corresponds to 4 times and 6 times less, respectively, than the average rate for middle-income (19.3 per cent) and high-income countries (26.7 per cent). The amounts provided have been relatively generous since the average transfer size corresponds to 31 per cent of monthly GDP per capita, ranging from 18 per cent in North America to 52 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. Overall, the average transfer size has increased by 92 per cent compared with pre-COVID-19 levels. The duration of cash transfers averages four months, which, while short, represents an increase by almost a month relative to pre-December 2020 levels.

<sup>17</sup> Global data on social protection measures presented in this section are from: Ugo Gentilini and others, “Social protection and jobs responses to COVID-19: a real-time review of country measures”, “living paper” version 15 (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 14 May 2021). Available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33635>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

24. Most cash transfer schemes are completely new schemes (69 per cent), while the remainder correspond to the scaling-up or adaptation of existing schemes, as countries pushed to innovate and target new populations who were hardest hit by the crisis and were not covered by existing programmes. San Marino has established a guaranteed minimum monthly family income during the pandemic amounting to €580, increased by €150 for a spouse and €50 for each dependent family member, and 50 per cent of the cost of rent. In Malaysia, one-off cash benefits are provided to 5.2 million households (61 per cent of all households) through the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional. In the Philippines, the Social Amelioration Program was aimed at reaching 18 million low- and middle-income households (75 per cent of all households) with a monthly transfer of 5,000–8,000 pesos. Peru launched a Second Universal Family Bonus for families living in poverty. The new subsidy will benefit 8.4 million households.<sup>19</sup> In Egypt, the Presidential initiative Ahalina provides a monthly grant for workers whose livelihoods are severely affected by the crisis, with about 1.4 million beneficiaries.

25. Existing social protection programmes were expanded both vertically and horizontally. Vertical expansion of existing social protection programmes ensures that existing beneficiaries receive additional benefits for a specified period. In Africa, many Governments (including of Algeria, Angola, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, the Gambia, Lesotho, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Sudan and Tunisia) increased cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households. In Cameroon and Zanzibar, the United Republic of Tanzania, social pension payments were increased by 20 per cent. In Malawi, a four-month lump-sum payment was disbursed in April 2020 under the Social Cash Transfer Programme, which is targeted at the rural ultra-poor and labour-constrained households and reached 7 per cent of the total population as at August 2020.<sup>20</sup> In Senegal, the Social Safety Net Programme was scaled up in response to the needs arising from the crisis. For selected cash transfer beneficiaries, regular cash transfers were complemented by a package of time-bound productive measures, including individual and group coaching, community sensitization to social norms, village savings and loan associations, life skills training, micro-entrepreneurship training, lump-sum cash grants and facilitation of access to inputs and markets.<sup>21</sup>

26. Countries also invested in the horizontal expansion of existing programmes, increasing their coverage by identifying and enrolling new beneficiaries. Across Africa, coverage of existing cash transfer programmes was expanded to include newly vulnerable households (Cabo Verde, Egypt, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Rwanda, South Sudan and Togo). In Nigeria, over 1 million new households were enrolled in the National Social Safety Nets Project and became eligible for regular social assistance and COVID-19 emergency relief.<sup>22</sup> Sierra Leone scaled up its Ep Fet Po programme both vertically and horizontally, doubling monthly benefits and adding 70,000 households to the recipients of its COVID-19 social safety net cash transfers for nine months. In Brazil, the Bolsa Familia programme was expanded to an additional 1 million beneficiaries. Income support was also provided to vulnerable households

<sup>19</sup> *Gestión*, “Bono Familiar Universal: preguntas y respuestas sobre el segundo subsidio que se entrega desde este sábado”, 6 October 2020. Available at <https://gestion.pe/economia/bono-familiar-universal-preguntas-y-respuestas-sobre-el-segundo-subsidio-de-760-soles-nnda-nnlt-noticia/?ref=gesr>.

<sup>20</sup> The Transfer Project, “Malawi”. Available at <https://transfer.cpc.unc.edu/countries/malawi/#programmes>.

<sup>21</sup> Colin Andrews and others, *The State of Economic Inclusion Report 2021: The Potential to Scale* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Devereux, “Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa”.



in the form of cash transfers to informal and low-income workers.<sup>23</sup> In Thailand, the criteria for receiving State welfare have been relaxed.

27. Governments instituted comprehensive packages that combine both the introduction of new cash transfer measures and the expansion of existing ones. In South Africa, an increased expenditure of 50 billion rand was channelled towards social grants to directly support one third of the population, including by increasing the benefit level of the Old Age Pension and the Disability Grant, increasing the Child Support Grant, providing a package of in-kind transfers, including food relief, and introducing the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant.<sup>24</sup>

28. Alongside cash transfers, other “shock-responsive” social assistance mechanisms included the temporary waivers or postponement of utility payments to boost the disposable income of beneficiary households. This constituted a relatively easy way for Governments to deliver relief in countries lacking comprehensive social assistance systems.

29. Some Governments instituted changes in legislative framework surrounding their social protection system. In 2020, Antigua and Barbuda promulgated the Social Protection Act to establish a more robust institutional and administrative framework. A new Social Protection Board and Social Protection Commission have been established, with clear roles and responsibilities for strengthening the coordination of social protection programmes. Thailand amended its legislative framework to provide increased benefits and establish rights to assistance under social protection; the Social Security Act now covers informal workers, self-employed, and agricultural producers.

#### **(b) Delivery of social assistance**

30. In some countries, the delivery of social assistance was simplified and brought closer to beneficiaries. In Qatar, the Ministry of Transport and Communication launched the Kiosks Project, which delivers State services to all citizens and private companies through self-service kiosks throughout the country. Thailand created mobile service delivery units, which have provided social welfare services to over 1 million people since 2020.

31. Countries worked to expand their social register and national identification systems. Nigeria expanded its social register from 9.5 million pre-pandemic, to, as at March 2021, 32.7 million individuals. While not all are accessing support, the expanded register has made their identification easier.<sup>25</sup> In 2017, the Government of Malawi, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), began an overhaul of its National Registration and Identification System by introducing a biometric identity card with a scannable chip. Since then, the Government has gradually sought to link the System to its ministries, departments and agencies and has encouraged private institutions to adopt its use, with a view to curbing corruption, improving efficiencies and saving government money. For instance, the Ministry of Agriculture implemented the new Affordable Inputs Programme using the biometric national identity cards. This allowed the verification

<sup>23</sup> Santosh Mehrotra, “An Alternative Fiscal Package to Mitigate India’s COVID Economic Crisis”, *The Indian Economic Journal*, vol. 69, No. 3 (June 2021). Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00194662211021366>.

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Holmes and Abigail Hunt, “Have social protection responses to COVID-19 undermined or supported gender equality?”, Social protection responses to COVID-19 and beyond, working paper 611 (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2021). Available at [https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/ODI\\_Gender\\_final.pdf](https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/ODI_Gender_final.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Vidya Diwakar and Adeniran Adedeji, “Poverty dynamics and social protection in Nigeria”, working paper (Chronic Poverty Advisory Network, 2021). Available at <https://dl.orangedox.com/5TzXbDzS1rKxMcXsaF>.

of the records of 4 million smallholder farmers and the removal of almost 500,000 “ghost” farmers. As a result, more subsidies are available for legitimate beneficiaries and costs of \$27 million have been saved. COVID-19-specific changes include a Farm Input Subsidy Programme coupon redemption scheme mobile app, introduced in 2020 by the Ministry of Agriculture. Since the app was introduced, it has saved the Government of Malawi several million kwacha per year as it has eliminated the need to print coupons for farming subsidies, which were sourced outside the country.

32. Countries leverage digital technologies to support the identification and enrolment of beneficiaries, as well as the disbursement of cash transfers. Digital payment technologies can facilitate the delivery of grants and prevent long lines for in-person disbursement, which make social distancing difficult. In Togo, the Novissi platform for social protection uses machine learning, geospatial analytics and mobile telephone metadata to support vulnerable populations during the pandemic. To expand coverage, the poorest villages and neighbourhoods are selected using satellite images and household consumption data. Within those selected villages and neighbourhoods, the poorest individuals are identified thanks to machine learning predictive algorithms (trained on mobile telephone metadata and telephone surveys). Between November 2020 and March 2021, 57,000 new beneficiaries were prioritized for contactless social protection payments.<sup>26</sup> In Colombia, collaboration between the public sector, banks and financial technology firms has resulted in around 2 million people opening deposit accounts for the first time between March and June 2020 (far more than the 1.4 million people who opened their first account in 2019). A new requirement for individuals to have a bank account in which to receive pandemic-related aid is behind this marked increase.<sup>27</sup>

### (c) Social insurance

33. Social insurance programmes (or contributory social protection schemes) account for 21 per cent of social protection responses and increased by 110 per cent between December 2020 and May 2021. Measures include social security contribution waivers or subsidies, unemployment benefits, paid sick leave, pensions and health-care insurance support.

34. In many countries where they exist, unemployment insurance schemes have provided significant and rapid income support to laid-off workers. Social insurance covers a small proportion of the workforce in low-income countries. Nonetheless, many Governments extended the eligibility for unemployment benefits and/or increased benefit levels. In China, unemployment insurance coverage was temporarily expanded in 2020 to make unemployed migrant workers who had been insured for less than one year eligible for benefits. Thailand increased both the level and the duration of unemployment benefits. In South Africa, the Unemployment Insurance Fund provided income support to temporarily furloughed workers, while unemployed workers not receiving support from the Fund could apply for the specially established Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme. This may provide a basis for expanding social insurance to informal workers on a more

<sup>26</sup> World Bank, “Prioritizing the poorest and most vulnerable in West Africa: Togo’s Novissi platform for social protection uses machine learning, geospatial analytics, and mobile phone metadata for the pandemic response”, 13 April 2021. Available at [www.worldbank.org/en/results/2021/04/13/prioritizing-the-poorest-and-most-vulnerable-in-west-africa-togo-s-novissi-platform-for-social-protection-uses-machine-l](http://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2021/04/13/prioritizing-the-poorest-and-most-vulnerable-in-west-africa-togo-s-novissi-platform-for-social-protection-uses-machine-l).

<sup>27</sup> Francisco Miguel Aldaya, “COVID catalyzes financial inclusion in Colombia”, S&P Global Market Intelligence, 23 June 2020. Available at [www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/covid-catalyzes-financial-inclusion-in-colombia-59068822](http://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/covid-catalyzes-financial-inclusion-in-colombia-59068822).

permanent basis.<sup>28</sup> Oman instituted its first unemployment insurance scheme in November 2020.<sup>29</sup>

35. To provide income security to those who are unable to work, sickness benefits became a focus of attention. Many countries instituted measures to strengthen sickness benefits in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Singapore, the Quarantine Order Allowance Scheme was established, allowing employers and self-employed individuals to claim 100 Singapore dollars per day during a worker's quarantine period.

### 3. Labour market policies

36. The introduction of active labour market policies and labour regulations surged by almost 330 per cent between December 2020 and May 2021. The range of instruments, included adjustments to labour regulations, job retention schemes (including wage subsidies), training measures and shorter work hours.

37. Job retention schemes were used to incentivize businesses to retain their employees. The schemes varied significantly in terms of their coverage, scope and duration. The rationale was that companies could quickly bounce back once the immediate crisis had passed, without workers losing their jobs. In some countries, wage subsidies were targeted at country-specific vulnerable sectors, vulnerable workers or jobseekers; in other cases, they were rolled out nationally covering all or most sectors in the economy (such as in the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Viet Nam). Thailand provided a wage subsidy of 62 per cent of workers' salaries for up to 90 days if they had been furloughed as a result of their company being shut down by the Government. Botswana established a 50 per cent wage subsidy for three months for businesses affected by COVID-19. More targeted approaches to job retention schemes were also put in place. Lesotho paid a three-month wage subsidy to workers in textile factories. In Lithuania, hiring subsidies provided to employers supported the creation of jobs for the most vulnerable persons, including persons with disabilities, older persons, young persons and long-term or low-skilled unemployed.<sup>30</sup> Qatar established an electronic platform to rotate workers within the local labour markets in cooperation with Qatar Chamber. As a result of fiscal measures adopted to stabilize the economy and secure jobs, unemployment in Germany did not increase significantly. For instance, by easing the criteria to qualify for the short-term working allowance, 2 million people were able take on short-term jobs, compared with 200,000 before the crisis. Argentina adopted several measures to rebuild the labour market. For instance, it provided half the minimum salary to around 800,000 individuals to guarantee a basic income, while at the same time incentivizing work. The Government plans to create more employment opportunities in rural areas, as well as in selected industries, including construction, textile, recycling, food production and health care.

38. Governments have put in place targeted interventions to support small businesses and the self-employed. Almost 7 in 10 workers worldwide are self-employed or employed in small businesses.<sup>31</sup> Such interventions include wage

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Devereux, "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa".

<sup>29</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), "Oman institutes its first unemployment insurance scheme", 16 October 2020. Available at [www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_758289/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_758289/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>30</sup> Lithuania, Ministry of Social Security and Labour, "Relevant for residents affected by the pandemic: what State support you can use", 5 January 2021. Available at <https://socmin.lrv.lt/en/news/relevant-for-residents-affected-by-the-pandemic-what-state-support-you-can-use>.

<sup>31</sup> ILO, "Small businesses and self-employed provide most jobs worldwide and in Asia", 11 October 2019. Available at [www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_723553/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_723553/lang--en/index.htm).

subsidies (as mentioned above), tax deferment, financial subsidies, advantageous loans and credit, and deferring, reducing or waiving social security contributions. Brunei Darussalam implemented a series of measures to assist the private sector, particularly micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, including a six-month deferment on employers' contributions to the Employees Trust Fund and Supplemental Contributory Pensions. The Government financed the Supplemental Contributory Pensions contributions for self-employed individuals. Other provisions to micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises include discounts on rental rate of government buildings, on electricity and water bills, and corporate income tax, and salary subsidies for employees of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises who meet certain conditions. Namibia supported businesses by reduction in interest rates, wage subsidies and negotiated debt repayment holidays, and credit support. The Qatar Central Bank assigned guarantees amounting to 3 billion riyals to local banks to offer soft loans to affected small and medium-sized enterprises to help them to cover costs relating to salaries and rents as part of the National Guarantee Programme to support the private sector. The Bank of Sierra Leone launched a credit facility amounting to 500 billion leones to support production, imports and distribution of essential commodities at concessional interest rates. The Government also instituted tax deferment to manufacturers and importers of essential commodities and three-month tax relief to the hospitality and aviation sectors. In Iceland, resilience subsidies are supporting companies (having suffered a loss of revenue of 60 per cent or more) to maintain a minimum level of activity. Eswatini offered tax refunds to small and medium-sized enterprises that retained workers on full pay during lockdown.

39. Governments increased investment in existing new cash for work and public works programmes and/or introduced new programmes. In Azerbaijan, 38,000 paid public jobs were created to ensure the active employment of those unemployed people who found securing employment difficult. In India, 40 million people depended on India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for employment and subsistence in June 2020, the largest ever enrolment in the programme. South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme saw a sharp increase in demand during the crisis and employed 800,000 vulnerable South Africans during the nationwide lockdown. The programme expanded existing projects and launched new ones, especially pertaining to essential services such as cleaning and disinfection of public spaces, health education, and public health centres, early childhood development, water management and school support programmes. In partnership with NGOs, it hired 20,000 young people to support the distribution of sanitizers and soap.<sup>32</sup> In Kenya, the newly launched National Hygiene Programme, Kazi Mtaani, provided employment opportunities with daily wages to over 250,000 young people, involved in street and drainage cleaning, garbage collection, fumigation and disinfection.<sup>33</sup> Sierra Leone launched a procurement process for the rehabilitation of 1,200 km of trunk and feeder roads, foreseen to create 5,000 jobs for young persons and help to connect farmers to markets. In Ethiopia, Rwanda and South Africa, work requirements on public works were waived owing to concerns about difficulties in enforcing social distancing; participants continued to receive wages and food transfer as a form of income support.<sup>34</sup>

40. Countries made changes to labour laws to provide better worker protection and income security. In 2020, India issued guidelines to bring all vehicle aggregators

<sup>32</sup> FAO, "Public employment programmes in the time of COVID-19", 25 August 2020. Available at [www.fao.org/3/cb0882en/CB0882EN.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/cb0882en/CB0882EN.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Business Ghana, "National Hygiene Program Creates Jobs for Kenyans in Informal Settlements", 12 October 2020. Available at [www.businessghana.com/site/news/politics/224004/National-Hygiene-Program-Creates-Jobs-for-Kenyans-in-Informal-Settlements](http://www.businessghana.com/site/news/politics/224004/National-Hygiene-Program-Creates-Jobs-for-Kenyans-in-Informal-Settlements).

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Devereux, "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa".

under a new regulatory framework. The measures are aimed at ensuring customer safety, the formalization of gig workers (drivers in this case) and making the ride-hailing companies more accountable.<sup>35</sup>

## C. Investing in human capacities and the well-being of all

41. Strategies to eradicate poverty and hunger are most effective when built on the underlying premise that deprivations overlap. People who are income-poor overwhelmingly suffer from multiple forms of deprivations in the fields of education, health, and an array of living standards (including lack of access to safe drinking water, sanitation, electricity, housing, assets and cooking fuel), which also perpetuate the intergenerational transmission of poverty. These simultaneous deprivations are tightly interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Ensuring that everyone has universal access to basic services and infrastructure is essential for an inclusive and equitable recovery and a key factor in eradicating of poverty. This includes access to safely managed drinking water and sanitation, quality schools, public transport, quality health-care services that people can benefit from without incurring financial hardship, affordable housing, and reliable and affordable Internet. Exceptional efforts are needed to recover learning losses caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

### 1. Education

42. The crisis has spurred innovation in distance learning to sustain learning continuity. As schools closed, classes were moved online. Digital technologies offer considerable potential to improve and scale up distance learning and to build more open, inclusive and flexible education systems after the pandemic. Qatar launched a new online learning platform (Mzeed) that offers digital and interactive resources for students, including interactive books, textbooks in PDF format, video, audio and other digital learning materials, as well as the QLearning platform to facilitate and support all distance-learning services.<sup>36</sup>

43. Tele-school has impelled investment in school connectivity. Cyprus has invested in digital classrooms and the provision of the necessary equipment and support services. Digital technologies can also help to close the urban-rural divide in education attainment. In Burundi, secure digital cards meant for mobile telephones preloaded with audio content are being distributed to children in hard-to-reach areas during the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>37</sup>

44. Countries have leveraged volunteerism to advance the use of digital technologies in education. Young people can be ambassadors for digital tools within their local communities. In Zimbabwe, the IGATE-T project seeks to improve the life chances of 70,000 marginalized girls through learning. The programme recruits community learning champions and provides them with a monthly data allowance on

<sup>35</sup> Shreya Nandi, “New regulations for cab aggregators to uplift drivers’ lives”, Mint, 30 November 2020. Available at [www.livemint.com/news/india/new-regulations-for-cab-aggregators-to-uplift-drivers-lives-11606706104098.html](http://www.livemint.com/news/india/new-regulations-for-cab-aggregators-to-uplift-drivers-lives-11606706104098.html).

<sup>36</sup> Qatar, Ministry of Education and Higher Education, “COVID-19 efforts”. Available at [www.edu.gov.qa/en/Pages/Corona.aspx](http://www.edu.gov.qa/en/Pages/Corona.aspx).

<sup>37</sup> Zoé Allier-Gagneur and Caitlin Moss Coflan, “Your questions answered: using technology to support gender equity, social inclusion and out-of-school learning”, EdTech Hub, 14 June 2020. Available at <https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/VX7UW757/download/G2HUI699/Allier-Gagneur%20and%20Moss%20Coflan%20-%202020%20-%20Using%20technology%20to%20support%20gender%20equity%2C%20social%20.pdf>.

their mobile telephone to enable them to share daily learning activities with parents and caregivers.<sup>38</sup>

45. To respond to school closures as a result of COVID-19, efforts were made to ensure that learning opportunities are also available offline in regions with limited connectivity. Many low- and middle-income countries, where the Internet is not easily accessible to all are doing just that. In Azerbaijan, lessons were broadcast on State television channels; from March 2020 to April 2021, a total of 4,274 television lessons were broadcast, reaching more than 1.6 million students. Egypt launched the Madrasatona educational television channels. Many countries have established multi-pronged strategies that combine digital learning with more traditional distance learning tools (television, radio and print). In Colombia, a national education strategy combines online, offline and broadcasting. Alongside Aprender Digital, a national platform with over 80,000 digital resources, organized by grade the Government is preparing a kit to support home-based learning for households without connectivity and broadcasting educational programmes on both radio and television for learners from primary to middle school.<sup>39</sup> In the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru, a national education online platform exists alongside radio and television broadcasting of learning material.<sup>40</sup>

46. Countries are also providing support to strengthen the capacity of teachers, parents and pupils to adapt to remote teaching/learning. In Ecuador, a national information unit (accessible via telephone and email) was established to provide guidance to teachers and parents as well as psychological and pedagogical support to parents and students.<sup>41</sup> In many countries, guidelines and protocols to ensure a safe in-person return to schools have supported countries' efforts to return to in-person teaching. Qatar has appointed medical staff to high school diploma examination centres and adult education centres to ensure a safe environment for students.

## 2. Health care

47. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of universal access to health care. Many countries have injected significant additional resources into the health sector since the start of the crisis. In Egypt, a 100 per cent budget increase was allocated to the Ministry of Health and Population for 2020/21. Indonesia dedicated about one fifth of its stimulus package announced in March 2020 to the health sector.<sup>42</sup> Countries have also sought to increase health-care coverage. Countries have been waiving fees and subsidizing health insurance to ensure that the most vulnerable have access to health care. Indonesia provided free medical treatment to all regardless of their registration status with the national health insurance scheme (BPJS Kesehatan). Rwanda made changes to its community-based health insurance scheme to improve access for the poor and removed the waiting period between registration and eligibility for medical services.<sup>43</sup> In Morocco, the National Medical

<sup>38</sup> The Open University, International Development Office, "IGATE-T". Available at [www.open.ac.uk/about/international-development/projects-and-programmes/igate-t-improving-gender-attitudes-transition-and-education-outcomes](http://www.open.ac.uk/about/international-development/projects-and-programmes/igate-t-improving-gender-attitudes-transition-and-education-outcomes).

<sup>39</sup> See <https://contenidos.colombiaaprende.edu.co> and [www.enticconfio.gov.co](http://www.enticconfio.gov.co).

<sup>40</sup> Cristobal Cobo, Robert Hawkins and Helena Rovner, "How countries across Latin America use technology during COVID19-driven school closures", World Bank, 31 March 2020. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/how-countries-across-latin-america-use-technology-during-covid19-driven-school-closures>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> ILO and Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: the story so far and future considerations", 19 August 2020. Available at [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms\\_753550.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_753550.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) "COVID-19: compilation of social protection

Assistance Programme, a non-contributory health insurance scheme for vulnerable households (covering 20 per cent of the population), was leveraged to offer compensation for quarantine periods. The programme was also expanded to cover informal workers who lost their livelihoods.<sup>44</sup> In South Africa, COVID-19 renewed policy debates about plans for a National Health Insurance scheme.<sup>45</sup> Countries have sought to increase health coverage through legislative and regulatory means. In Azerbaijan, in January 2020, the State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance began introducing mandatory health insurance throughout the country.

48. Countries used digital means to contain the spread of the virus. In Bulgaria, a mobile application allows user to report their health condition daily and a web portal provides up-to-date epidemiological data and information on measures taken.<sup>46</sup> In Sierra Leone, the fight against COVID-19 was assisted by technology that was put in place following the end of the Ebola crisis in 2016/17, when the country became the first in the WHO Africa region to transform its national disease surveillance system from a paper-based system to a web-based electronic platform.

49. Digital tools are also helping individuals to return to normalcy by minimizing health risks. In China, the Health Code that is generated by a mobile telephone app has become a pass for people to return to work and school and move around. Within the workplace, the implementation of preventive and protective measures against COVID-19 have been supported by the preparation of guidelines, inspections and digital tools. In Cyprus, an online interactive risk assessment tool was adopted following collaborative effort with the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work.

50. E-health is playing an increasingly essential role in the achievement of universal health coverage. The digitalization of health services has increased during the crisis, spurred by the accelerated pace of digital transformation. In Azerbaijan, hospitals are being equipped with software, new registration systems and an information system that are supporting the digitalization of the supply of medicines and medical consumables. In Denmark, a strategic digitalization initiative was developed, building on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that new digital tools support a more resilient and sustainable health system.

51. Countries have been placing greater emphasis on support in relation to mental health, as mental health disorders have increased during the crisis. In Malaysia, in partnership with government agencies, Mercy Malaysia launched the Psychological First Aid Hotline. In quarantine centres and hospitals, mental health and psychological support services teams were deployed for patients with COVID-19 and health-care workers. In the Philippines, a dedicated programme was established to provide mental health and psychological support for individuals and families affected by COVID-19 and other crisis situations through several communication tools (email, a web portal, telephone and a mobile application). In Mexico, the Mexican Institute of Social Security maintains telephone consultation services in psychology and psychiatry to support persons suffering from anxiety and depression stemming from confinement measures.

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measures and resources of relevance to sub-Saharan Africa”, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Shepherd, “Measures to prevent impoverishment and get back on track”, July 2021. Available at [www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/07/Andrew-Shepherd-paper.pdf](http://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/07/Andrew-Shepherd-paper.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Steve Reid, “COVID-19 holds lessons for South Africa’s universal healthcare plans”, Down to Earth, 18 May 2020. Available at [www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/africa/covid-19-holds-lessons-for-south-africa-s-universal-healthcare-plans-71206](http://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/africa/covid-19-holds-lessons-for-south-africa-s-universal-healthcare-plans-71206).

<sup>46</sup> See <https://coronavirus.bg/>.

### 3. Clean drinking water and sanitation

52. Countries took steps to sustain access to clean water during the pandemic to support sanitation and hygiene standards. In Egypt, the Government deferred payment of residential and commercial utility bills, including water. In November 2020, the country's Holding Company for Water and Wastewater launched an online portal and app for water bills to facilitate service provision and remote payment. State-owned companies played an important role by applying moratoriums on public utility (water and electricity) payments, as was the case in Costa Rica. In Togo, free access to water during the health emergency has been made a priority, through action such as providing free public standpipes, free water to mini-drinking water supply networks and to autonomous water stations, and public boreholes in rural areas.<sup>47</sup>

### 4. Housing

53. Countries established eviction moratoriums, rent stabilization and tax moratoriums for landowners. In the United States, financial support is provided to households that are unable to pay rent or utilities through the Emergency Rental Assistance programme.<sup>48</sup> Gabon suspended rent payments for low-income households during its lockdown.

## D. Addressing the specific needs of marginalized and disadvantaged groups and those in vulnerable situations

54. Social protection measures should support the most vulnerable. The principle of universalism in service delivery can only be realized through deliberate and targeted interventions that are focused on vulnerable and disadvantaged people who face multiple and reinforcing barriers to access them.

55. Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately affected by the crisis. In the United States, COVID-19 relief grants to address the vulnerabilities of indigenous peoples during the crisis have included more than \$6 billion in federal grants to support their health service and other indigenous health systems, \$1.2 billion for housing and more than \$1.1 billion for primary, secondary and higher education programmes.<sup>49</sup>

56. Governments have put in place dedicated measures to support the education and employment prospects of young people. In Azerbaijan, the tuition fees of 21,000 students from socially vulnerable families were paid by the Government. In Monaco, a Youth Employment Assistance programme supported the integration of young people into the labour market, by allowing companies that recruited them to benefit from reimbursement of employer contributions for up to two years.<sup>50</sup> The Philippines, with funding from the Asian Development Bank, invested in the JobStart Philippines

<sup>47</sup> African Development Bank, "Au Togo, les populations rurales bénéficient du programme gouvernemental de riposte au COVID-19 soutenu par la Banque africaine de développement", 3 May 2021. Available at [www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/au-togo-les-populations-rurales-beneficient-du-programme-gouvernemental-de-riposte-au-covid-19-soutenu-par-la-banque-africaine-de-developpement-43460](http://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/au-togo-les-populations-rurales-beneficient-du-programme-gouvernemental-de-riposte-au-covid-19-soutenu-par-la-banque-africaine-de-developpement-43460).

<sup>48</sup> United States, Department of the Treasury, "Emergency Rental Assistance Program". Available at <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/emergency-rental-assistance-program>.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Walker and Emily Cochrane, "Tribal Communities Set to Receive Big New Infusion of Aid", *The New York Times*, 18 March 2021. Available at [www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/us/politics/tribal-communities-stimulus-coronavirus.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/us/politics/tribal-communities-stimulus-coronavirus.html).

<sup>50</sup> Monaco, "Mesures concernant les salariés". Available at <https://service-public-entreprises.gouv.mc/Covid-19/Relance-economique/Emploi/Mesures-concernant-les-salaries>.



programme, digitizing some aspects of the programme and creating a Youth Employment Exchange website to link private businesses with JobStart trainees.

57. Investment in early childhood education and care can contribute significantly to reducing child poverty and breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty. Unsafe living, the chronic stress of poverty, and lack of adequate stimulation and learning opportunities during early years can diminish children's chances of success throughout their lives. Countries have been taking measures targeting children. In Angola, the SOS Criança hotline was established for reporting cases of violence against children. Standard operational child protection procedures were put in place in early 2020 to establish the role and responsibilities of each sector that intervenes in the field of child protection. In Australia, the childcare sector received a boost of \$1.6 billion with the launch of the Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package.<sup>51</sup> In Iceland, the means testing threshold for child benefits will be permanently raised from 2021.

58. Older persons have been the focus of targeted measures. Cabo Verde and Mauritania established new cash transfer programmes for older persons during the crisis.<sup>52</sup> In Bangladesh, needed support has been provided to older persons through the Old Age Allowance.

59. Persons with disabilities have faced an increased risk of being infected by the virus and enduring economic hardship during the crisis. Egypt, to support persons with disabilities, launched an automatic testing of COVID-19 symptoms using chatbots in sign language through the Wasel application, alongside the Tamkeen website. In Iceland, following a one-time payment in 2020 to recipients of disability and rehabilitation pensions, in early 2021, permanent changes were made to the disability pensions system, thereby increasing social security benefits for the lowest paid disability pensioners.<sup>53</sup> Mauritania and Tunisia established new cash transfer programmes for persons with disabilities.

60. Governments have established programmes targeted at workers in the informal sector, who have minimal access to social protection. Countries have devised various solutions to register informal workers with social protection systems. In Thailand, informal workers registered online via a newly created form under a scheme that provides them with 5,000 baht per month for three months. As a result, 16 million workers were enrolled in the scheme (45 per cent of the labour force). In Sri Lanka, a payment of 5,000 rupees was provided as a daily wage to vulnerable workers, using local administrators to verify applications. Viet Nam provided support to informal workers via its Social Security Organization.

61. Greater gender-responsiveness in COVID-19 responses is needed to address the detrimental impact on women's coverage and entitlements. The UNDP COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker shows that, of the 4,968 measures recorded (as at 3 December 2021), 32 per cent were gender-sensitive.<sup>54</sup> Many gender-sensitive measures focus on preventing and/or responding to violence against women and girls. In Thailand, the Social Assistance Centre increased the number of urgent assistance telephone lines from 15 to 60, and Coordination Centres for Women and Girls were established in the southern border provinces. In South Sudan, helplines have been

<sup>51</sup> Kelsie Iorio, "The PM has announced that families can access free childcare during the coronavirus pandemic. How will that work?", ABC News, 2 April 2020. Available at [www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-02/free-childcare-explainer-coronavirus-covid-19/12115062](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-02/free-childcare-explainer-coronavirus-covid-19/12115062).

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Devereux, "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa".

<sup>53</sup> Iceland, "The Government of Iceland has announced various measures to mitigate the economic and societal effects of the coronavirus outbreak", 20 November 2020. Available at [www.government.is/government/covid-19/](http://www.government.is/government/covid-19/).

<sup>54</sup> See <https://data.undp.org/gendertacker/>.

established to assist survivors of gender-based violence by providing information and linking them to the nearest service provider, including Family Protection Centres. More efforts are needed to improve the collection and use of data on violence against women in the context of COVID-19. In Cameroon, a survey was launched by the Central Bureau for Censuses and Population Studies and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Family, with the support of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), to assess the impact of COVID-19 and governmental measures on daily life. The survey included a focus on gender-based violence, as well as on the distribution of household and care work between men and women. The survey was conducted via social media platforms.

62. Some countries have taken measures to address women's economic security, through social protection measures, labour market measures and measures that support feminized sectors of national economies. In Maldives, the United Nations-supported project entitled "Protecting women and children: digitalizing and streamlining social services and creating a unified platform for national care" is aimed at enhancing shock-responsive social protection benefits and services for women and girls. Through the project, support will be provided for better data collection on vulnerable populations (including children, women, older persons, persons with disabilities and persons living in poverty) and improving their access to social protection. Finally, the project is aimed at building an integrated, inclusive and sustainable social protection system based on the principles of a universal basic income and paving the way towards a digitized national social protection system.<sup>55</sup> In Liberia, the Government has extended credit for street vendors, with a focus on women. Through the Market Women and Small Informal Petty Traders Bank Loan Programme, the Government will fully pay the loans owed by market women and petty and small traders in affected counties.<sup>56</sup>

63. Measures have also been taken to support unpaid care work, including through the provision of paid family leaves, cash-for-care programmes, flexible and shorter work-time arrangements, or continued provision of childcare services. In Egypt, exceptional leave was granted to pregnant employees and employees with care responsibilities for children aged 12 years or under. Austria provided extended paid leave for pregnant women who cannot work remotely during the pandemic.<sup>57</sup>

## E. Closing the financing gaps

64. Mobilizing the necessary financial resources to build back better, including strengthening their social protection systems, will be challenging for many countries. Governments may choose to engage in a multipronged approach. Reprioritizing national budget lines can be useful. Cabo Verde reoriented national budgetary priorities, suspending fiscal consolidation and the reduction of public debt, and revising the 2020 budget to strengthen the National Health System to the share of 5 per cent of public expenditure. In an effort to raise funds nationally, Governments established special funds to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. In Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Mauritania, Morocco and Senegal, Governments appealed to a

<sup>55</sup> *The Edition*, "Maldives-UN sign project on digitising social services to protect women and children", 21 January 2021. Available at [https://edition.mv/covid\\_19/21655](https://edition.mv/covid_19/21655).

<sup>56</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and UNDP, "COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker. Factsheet: sub-Saharan Africa". Available at [www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP-UNWwomen-COVID19-SSA-Regional-Factsheet-2020.pdf.pdf](http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP-UNWwomen-COVID19-SSA-Regional-Factsheet-2020.pdf.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Austria, Ministry of Labour, "Kocher/Raab: Möglichkeit der Arbeitsfreistellung für Schwangere wird bis Juni verlängert", 20 January 2021. Available at [www.bma.gv.at/Services/Presse/Presseaussendungen/PA\\_20\\_Jaenner\\_2021\\_b.html](http://www.bma.gv.at/Services/Presse/Presseaussendungen/PA_20_Jaenner_2021_b.html).

sense of solidarity to establish co-financed funds, with tax-deductible donations solicited from the private sector and individuals, in addition to government seed funds. In Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe and South Africa, a “solidarity tax” was introduced for senior government officials and civil servants.<sup>58</sup>

65. With national budgets under strain, many low-income countries will be unable to close the financing gap solely through domestic resources mobilization. External financing, an important source of funding, should rest on international solidarity. There are many examples of the valuable role played by external financing during the crisis. In Malawi, the roll-out of a new urban COVID-19 social transfer programme, the Government Urban Cash Initiative, was entirely dependent on external financing, while the Government’s own fiscal resources were diverted towards urgent health and education responses to the crisis.<sup>59</sup> In Mongolia, the Asian Development Bank approved a \$73 million loan to advance social welfare support for the poor and vulnerable to alleviate the socioeconomic impact of the crisis. In particular, under the project, the Child Money Programme, which provides universal cash grants to children from birth to 17 years of age, will be expanded. As at 2019, it reached 87 per cent of the children.<sup>60</sup> In Togo, the African Development Bank provided an envelope of \$27.37 million for the Budget Support Programme for the Response to COVID-19, which has been used for cash transfers to support the most vulnerable.<sup>61</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions

66. As countries emerge from the crisis, the design of recovery strategies is the opportunity to begin building back better to overcome challenges to the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Upscaling the social protection responses and supporting mutual learning through the exchange of good practices with regard to socioeconomic policies, the provision of basic services and social protection measures can help in this endeavour. The examples summarized in the present note form the basis for improvements in policy design, building on good practices. There is a need to invest in the evaluation of emergency policies and measures (including social protection policies), especially their impact on reducing poverty and hunger and on people’s daily lives and well-being. Similarly, as existing measures have been expanded horizontally, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of innovative means of finding and enrolling new populations into social protection measures. Countries should further invest in and explore the role of digital technologies in the registration of new beneficiaries and the delivery of social protection measures and the provision of and access to basic services, including quality health care and education.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Devereux, “Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa”.

<sup>59</sup> Anna McCord and others, “Official development assistance financing for social protection lessons from the COVID-19 response”, Social protection responses to COVID-19 and beyond, working paper 616 (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2021). Available at [https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/ODI\\_Finance\\_final.pdf](https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/ODI_Finance_final.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Devdiscourse, “ADB approves \$73m loan to improve social welfare support in Mongolia”, 23 March 2021, available at [www.devdiscourse.com/article/business/1507034-adb-approves-73m-loan-to-improve-social-welfare-support-in-mongolia](http://www.devdiscourse.com/article/business/1507034-adb-approves-73m-loan-to-improve-social-welfare-support-in-mongolia); Overseas Development Institute and UNICEF, *Universal Child Benefits: Policy Issues and Options* (London and New York, 2020), available at [www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/UCB-ODI-UNICEF-Report-2020.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/UCB-ODI-UNICEF-Report-2020.pdf); Anthony Hodges and others, “Child benefits and poverty reduction: evidence from Mongolia’s Child Money Programme”, working paper, May 2007, available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1095717](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1095717).

<sup>61</sup> African Development Bank, “Au Togo, les populations rurales bénéficient du programme gouvernemental de riposte au COVID-19 soutenu par la Banque africaine de développement”.