

Universal social protection floors, our joint responsibility

Governments have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social and economic disruption it has wrought with a range of ad-hoc schemes, including paid furloughs, cash transfers and family support. While commendable, these responses share two major limitations.

First, many are temporary, short-term fixes, covering lockdowns or a notional period until economic recovery kicks in. They do nothing to change the underlying circumstances that left many millions of people vulnerable, or to put them in better standing to face future crises.

Secondly, the measures simply do not address the existential threats that face many of the world's worst-hit communities. Although worldwide government spending on the COVID-19 response is more than \$11 trillion, by far the largest responses have come from rich countries. For example, the European Union recently adopted a Euro 750 billion recovery plan (equivalent to 6 percent of its GDP) while Japan's economic recovery plan equates to 22 percent of its GDP (or \$1.1 trillion). But among low-income developing countries the fiscal response has averaged 1.2 percent of GDP.

Developing countries, particularly low-income countries, have limited domestic resources, made worse by falls in some export commodity prices. They are simply unable to put in place the comprehensive crisis response measures their people need, let alone the longer-term social protection systems that would create more fundamental resilience.

Even before COVID-19, 69 percent of the global population was either not covered, or only partially covered, by social security. Almost two-thirds of the world's children had no social protection coverage, only 22 percent of unemployed persons received unemployment cash benefits, and just 28 percent of persons with severe disabilities received disability cash benefits.

Global crises like this pandemic observe no geographical or political borders. Against them we are only as strong as the weakest among us. If we are to build greater resilience and a more effective ability to recover, we need to support all countries in creating robust social protection floors. The current piecemeal approach is like starting to recruit firefighters after a blaze has broken out, and then directing them to save only a few rooms in the burning building.

Clearly, this doesn't work. In these circumstances, international solidarity is essential, and in everyone's interest. Social protection floors for all are affordable. The financing gap for all developing countries – the difference between what these countries already invest in social protection and what a full social protection floor (including health) would cost – is about \$1,191 billion in the current year, including the impact of COVID-19. But the gap for the low-income countries is only some \$78 billion, a negligible amount compared to the GDP of the industrialized countries. Yet the total official development assistance for social protection amounts to only 0.0047 percent of the gross national income of donor countries.

International human rights law recognizes that wealthy states have a duty to help fulfill social rights in countries with more limited resources, and a number of steps have already been taken to convert this commitment into concrete assistance. In 2011 an expert advisory group recommended donors provide predictable, multi-year financing to strengthen social protection in developing countries. In 2012, two independent UN human rights experts proposed a Global Fund for Social Protection to help low-income countries create social protection floors for their people. The same year the ILO's membership – governments, workers and employers from 185 countries – backed the idea of comprehensive social protection with a unanimously-adopted pledge to “establish and maintain ... social protection floors as a fundamental element of their national social security systems.”

We regularly hear pledges that we must, and will, ‘build back better’ from the current crisis. We can only do this if everybody has a minimum level of social protection, including the poorest and most marginalized.

Countries must deploy the maximum resources available to make social protection a reality for all. This may require more effective approaches to taxation and tackling corruption. Longer term, this redistribution of assets will help to curb inequality and discrimination and support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's promise to “leave no one behind.”

This crisis offers us many lessons. One is that building back better requires international solidarity and better social protection for all, not just those who can already afford it. If we ignore this message, we risk condemning future generations to endure once more the immense suffering we see today. That, surely, is an intolerable prospect.

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