What are the lessons learned from the social
protection response to the COVID-19 pandemic?[1]

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The COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing and there is widespread uncertainty due to the global failure to ensure that vaccines are widely available, affordable, and effectively delivered worldwide. However, it does not seem premature to take stock of lessons regarding how social protection measures have been used by governments in the global South to respond to the health, social and economic crises triggered by the pandemic. This type of assessment can support reasoning and immediate actions to improve resilience and preparedness to similar shocks in the future, as part of the 'build back better' approach that will inspire and underpin global recovery.

The global social protection response to the COVID-19 crisis has shed new light on the importance of social protection as a social policy as well as an economic policy instrument. It was crucial not only in allowing micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, workers and families to comply with containment measures enacted by governments to try and contain the spread of the disease and attenuating their negative impact on incomes and livelihoods, but also in helping stabilise economies in general. Social protection measures were a key component of the unprecedent fiscal measures adopted by governments worldwide.

However, the response to the pandemic also revealed important gaps in social protection coverage and adequacy—particularly for workers in the informal sector, but also for those usually left behind in standard social protection schemes, such as migrant workers, refugees, and homeless people. Women suffered shocks across two simultaneous dimensions, as they are often disproportionately concentrated in lower-paying work without social security benefits, while also carrying the burden of unpaid care work—which increased even further because of the pandemic.

Countries had to quickly develop and implement innovative means to identify and reach out to these groups, with varying degrees of success. While almost universal efforts were made to reach informal workers in general, little was done to proactively consider the question of gender. According to the UN Women/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) gender tracker[2] for example, only 24 per cent of the measures took gender into account. Such efforts were also less successful for refugees and homeless people.

Looking at countries in the global South, the IPC-IG (2021), with support from the UNDP, the German Corporation for International Gooperation (GIZ) and the Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19—Expert advice helpline (SPACE), has mapped over 1,000 social protection measures. The mapping shows that low-income countries have adopted relatively fewer measures compared to both upper- and lower-middle income countries. Low-income countries also tended to rely relatively more on in-kind transfers and public works programmes, manual registration and manual cash payments when

compared to other country income groups, which suggests limited digital inclusiveness in reaching those most in need, pointing to at least a moderate level of physical contact.

Nevertheless, social protection has gained significant relevance throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Most countries in the global South, including some low income ones, made significant progress not only by providing—often for the first time—(emergency) cash transfers to the so-called 'missing middle' (those not qualifying for poverty-targeted social assistance programmes nor covered by social insurance schemes) and hard-to-reach vulnerable groups, but also by introducing technological innovations such as digital registration and e-wallets, as well as quickly mobilising resources to finance such measures.

While online and mobile-based registration portals have been essential in allowing for the rapid identification of beneficiaries, the role of local actors, complementary mechanisms such as telephone registration, social workers and more inclusive legislation should not be overlooked in fostering social protection coverage for groups included in the 'leave no one behind' agenda (LNOB), during both normal times and future crises, as they facilitate the identification of the hardest-to-reach population, which is more likely to be digitally excluded, in terms of both access and literacy.

The health crisis has also demonstrated the need for social protection systems that are more gender-sensitive. In particular, quality care services need to be expanded to facilitate the re-entry of women into the labour market in a post-pandemic scenario, and facilitated access must be provided for social assistance programmes that require identification number in contexts where women are less likely to have access to this type of documentation.

Emergency cash support was short-lived in most countries of the global South, lasting an average of 4 months, but the feasibility of their implementation and the instruments used to deliver them, including new databases, payment systems and financing mechanisms, must be considered and used to inform a substantial, long overdue expansion of coverage, in the interest of accelerating the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal Target 1.3 ("implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable"), leaving no one behind.

Reference:
IPC-IG. 2021. "Social Protection Responses to COVID-19 in the Global South: Online Dashboard." socialprotection.org website. <t.ly/qmlF>. Accessed 5 August 2021.

Notes:
1. This One Pager is an extended version of the remarks delivered by Fabio Veras (IPC-IG Research Coordinator) in the session on "Ensuring that no one is left behind" of the High-Level Political Forum On Sustainable Development, which took place on 6 July 2021 <t.ly/LVxh>.

2. See: <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>.