



# Social protection response to COVID-19 in rural LAC: The potential of digitalisation to build back better

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In partnership with the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO-RLC), the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) published three policy briefs on lessons learned from the social protection response to the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) to build social protection systems back better for rural populations.

The third policy brief in the series identifies good practices in the use of digital innovations to support rural populations' social and economic inclusion during the pandemic and beyond. For this assessment, interviews were conducted with stakeholders of three programmes selected as good practices in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing measures brought the digitalisation of social protection to centre stage. However, gaps in access to information and communication technology (ICT) may exclude rural communities from digitalised social protection. Digital technologies were used for beneficiary registration and benefit delivery, but only one of the 45 programmes implemented or adapted during the pandemic that explicitly targeted LAC's rural communities used ICT that did not relate to mobile money or digital application forms (distribution of tablet computers in Peru).

Programmes that digitalised prior to the pandemic played an important role in the response to the crisis by allowing adaptations to maintain service delivery, such as Brazil's Food Acquisition Programme (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos—PAA*), or to expand horizontal coverage in rural areas, such as Peru's *Bono Rural*, or by adding new components for building back better, such as *Supérate*, which grew out of the Dominican Republic's *Quédate en Casa* and *PROSOLI*. Therefore, these programmes were analysed as LAC's good practices.

Brazil's PAA, under the National Supply Company (CONAB), purchases food from family farmers and distributes it to those living in food insecurity. Digitalisation of its operational system commenced before the pandemic, introducing an offline application to request and monitor benefits. Internet access was only necessary for downloading and uploading the application. This PAANet platform successfully reduced the payment time from 20 days to 3 days. During the pandemic, farmers could continue selling products digitally while bureaucratic aspects were relaxed, such as sending documents by email instead of mail. Interviewees estimate that changes may remain in place permanently. However, gaps in the programme's coverage remain, due to the exclusion of remote areas from infrastructure and a lack of literacy skills.

The Dominican Republic's *Quédate en Casa* was implemented at the onset of COVID-19 and expanded cash transfers to vulnerable families. Households were selected from the social registry, SIUBEN, and cash was transferred to a digitalised beneficiary card system already in place, or national identity cards. Noteworthy digital tools introduced through the new *Supérate* are: a chatbot allowing beneficiaries to request information on eligibility and credit value, facilitating communication with the population; an eCommerce

platform supporting the economic inclusion of smallholders; capacity-building measures helping the rural population to gain digital skills; and a QR code pilot project facilitating mainly urban benefit delivery and data collection.

Peru's *Bono Rural*, targeting poor people in rural areas, formed part of a package of four emergency cash transfers provided by the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion. It targeted those classified as eligible in the SISFOH registry. Families received transfers mainly digitally through bank accounts, mobile banking or money transfers. Peru addressed its geographical disparities when digitalising social protection through *tambos*, which provide Internet access to rural communities; Itinerant Social Action Platforms (PIAS), which are boats connected to satellites that take state services to remote areas; and *carritos pagadores* (payment vehicles).

All programmes relied on pre-existing digital social and civil registries. This infrastructure increased shock-responsiveness and allowed programmes to expand coverage and quickly identify eligible recipients. In Brazil and the Dominican Republic, farmer associations and the wide use of tools such as WhatsApp were found to be important for implementation.

Nevertheless, connectivity problems and access barriers continue to make it difficult for poor rural communities to access social protection, despite support measures. Lastly, premature fiscal consolidation in the aftermath of the robust fiscal response of most countries in the region may fail to ensure the necessary budget to expand social protection to all those who need it and ensure the expansion of the digital infrastructure necessary to leave no one behind.

## How to build back better?

- Use digitalisation to facilitate practical implementation of social protection by increasing mobile payment opportunities, providing electronic payment cards, digitalising information management systems and unifying online registries.
- Facilitate productive inclusion by reducing bureaucratic barriers to banking and communication, closing digital infrastructure gaps and establishing eCommerce platforms.
- Promote digitalisation in rural areas by increasing access to digital services or adapting current instruments, considering offline tools, using social media to disseminate information, and training rural populations in digital literacy to enable communities to access technology independently.

## Reference:

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