

Syria: Design, implementation and child-sensitivity of social protection responses to COVID-19¹

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This One Pager is part of a series based on the report 'Social protection responses to COVID-19 in MENA: Design, implementation and child-sensitivity', developed in partnership by the IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO (Bilo, Dytz, and Sato 2022). The study reviewed the design and implementation features of the social assistance measures implemented in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region up to the end of March 2021, and the extent to which they took children's needs and vulnerabilities into account.

Since 2011, Syria has been experiencing conflict and humanitarian crisis on a vast scale. This has impacted the economy and education and health provision, among other key services, pushing millions of people into unemployment and widespread poverty (UNICEF 2022). By 2019, over 6.6 million Syrians had fled the country, many of them to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (UNHCR 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has only deepened the impact of the 10-year-long crisis. Social protection has, therefore, played a key role in protecting the most vulnerable from the impacts of the multiple crises.

Up to the end of March 2021, the IPC-IG mapping of social protection responses to COVID-19 in the Global South² identified three government-provided responses in Syria: two social assistance programmes and one labour market intervention. The latter consisted of an unemployment allowance in the form of a one-time payment of SYP100,000 for informal workers and construction workers.

In terms of social assistance, electronic cards for buying subsidised foods were extended to include the purchase of subsidised bread for SYP60. Moreover, cash and in-kind benefits were provided to persons with disabilities, and elderly people over 70 years old. Registration occurred through a digital channel that was launched by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Volunteer groups at the neighbourhood level also assisted in the registration of individuals who could not fill in the online forms.

In addition to the government-provided responses, the IPC-IG mapped 21 humanitarian interventions in Syria.³ Given the multiple crises in the country, it is important to highlight that not all of the humanitarian responses can be strictly considered a response to the pandemic alone; some of them might also have been implemented in a similar form without COVID-19.

Regarding child-sensitivity, 17 of the 21 humanitarian assistance initiatives and both of the government social assistance responses were considered child-sensitive. The assessment conducted by the IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO considered measures to be child sensitive if they supported children's access to child protection, education, nutrition or health services, increased benefit values with household size and/or directly targeted children.

Nine of the measures supported child nutrition (including seven humanitarian responses, such as food transfers, and the two government responses). Further exacerbating the already dire situation in Syria, COVID-19 has acted as an accelerator in keeping children out of school. In response, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for example, began distributing self-learning materials to children. UNICEF also scaled up its emergency cash transfer to children with disabilities. Vulnerable children with disabilities were identified through a network of national non-governmental organisations, community platforms and outreach activities/field assessments. Special efforts were made to identify girls with severe disabilities.

Based on the analysis of the social assistance responses to COVID-19, some of the key lessons learned for Syria in terms of shock-responsive and child-sensitive social protection are the following.

- The use of existing programmes in emergencies should be further explored, as it can help to redirect efforts into more rapid and durable support.
- To provide support to children and their families, humanitarian and government responses should further work together to expand the country's routine social protection programmes.
- Humanitarian actors have been at the forefront of social assistance in Syria. In countries that suffer from long-lasting conflicts and crises, such as Syria, the international community should guarantee that humanitarian actors have sufficient financial resources.
- The ongoing efforts to roll out the integrated management information system, which paves the way for setting up unified and integrated social protection registries, should be expedited.

References:

Bilo, C., J.P. Dytz, and L. Sato. 2022. "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in MENA: Design, implementation and child-sensitivity". *Research Report*, No. 76. Brasília and Amman: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and United Nations Children's Fund Middle East and North Africa Regional Office.

UNHCR. 2020. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <<https://t.ly/TlwX>>. Accessed 15 July 2022.

UNICEF. 2022. "Syrian crisis." United Nations Children's Fund website. <<https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/syrian-crisis>>. Accessed 15 July 2022.

Notes:

1. For the full list of references and a description of all social protection measures mapped, see the full study.
2. See: <<https://socialprotection.org/social-protection-responses-covid-19-global-south>>.
3. Only cash, in-kind and school feeding measures led by UNICEF, UNRWA, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or the World Food Programme were considered in the scope of the study.