

United Arab Emirates: 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.

Like other Gulf countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had to confront two simultaneous crises: the decline in oil prices (the country's primary source of revenue) and the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the UAE's gross domestic product (GDP) decreased by 6.1 per cent in 2020 (World Bank 2020). The economic slowdown of the Emirati economy also produced a high number of unemployed foreign workers, whose living conditions were deeply impacted.

Up to the end of March 2021, the IPC-IG mapping of social protection responses to COVID-19 in the Global South² identified nine government-provided responses in the UAE: five social assistance, two social insurance and two labour market interventions. The country was one of the fastest in the region to implement social protection measures in response to the pandemic, with most measures announced in March 2020 and implemented in the same month. Many of these were not new programmes, but horizontal expansions of existing ones. As for social assistance responses, four of the five measures used by the UAE were subsidies.

These subsidies included the postponement of government housing loan repayments for private-sector workers, as well as reduced water and electricity bills for residents and businesses. Furthermore, 12,000 poor households and vulnerable foreign workers benefited from emergency in-kind transfers in the form of essential food supplies through the *Al Meer* initiative, launched by the Ministry of Community Development and the Ministry of Economy.

The child-sensitive assessment conducted by the IPC-IG in collaboration with UNICEF MENARO focused on cash, in-kind and school feeding programmes, analysing them against six child-sensitive criteria: responses directly targeting children; programmes that increase the benefit value with household size; and programmes providing linkages to nutrition, education, health/water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and child-protection services. Given this scope, only the *Al Meer* initiative was considered child-sensitive, as it supported children's access to nutrition through food baskets distributed during Ramadan.

It is essential to highlight that, besides social assistance, other types of social protection programmes (e.g. wage subsidies) and schemes that do not explicitly include child-related features in their design can have indirect positive effects on children, but these were not assessed in the study. Nevertheless, the lack of emergency social assistance programmes other than subsidies, such as cash transfers, in the UAE is noteworthy. These policies are essential to protect the most vulnerable in society. When they include child-sensitive features, they can also prevent an increase in child poverty rates and guarantee safe conditions for children's development.

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

- Subsidies, particularly universal, untargeted subsidies, are potentially regressive tools of social protection. Further assessment of the impact of the subsidies adopted by the UAE during the pandemic is recommended.
- Further exploring the potential of social assistance responses—including cash transfers—with clearer child-sensitive features is recommended, not only in times of crisis but also as part of the routine social protection system.
- The government should examine the feasibility of extending its national social protection system to foreign workers and their families, who are potentially more vulnerable than Emiratis to shocks and crises. Proactive outreach and enrolment will be required to identify vulnerable households/individuals in remote areas and urban settlements.
- The expansion of the social protection system in the UAE should be accompanied by further efforts to increase the fiscal space for social protection and secure sufficient funding to ensure an adequate, shock-responsive and well-prepared response to crises, especially with the expected decrease in oil revenues.

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.

World Bank. 2020. "GDP per capita growth (annual %) - United Arab Emirates." World Bank website. <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?locations=AE>>. 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>>.