

How did China adopt social protection responses to the COVID-19 pandemic so quickly?

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The COVID-19 epidemic broke out in Wuhan, capital of the Hubei Province in China in early 2020. The country acted quickly to contain the spread of the disease through targeted lockdowns: by 19 March, no new cases outside of Hubei Province had been recorded for a week. On 26 April, the last hospitalised COVID-19 patient in Wuhan was discharged. China was relatively quick to adopt social protection measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This One Pager discusses factors that enabled the country to support the affected groups in a timely manner and how this experience could inform social protection expansion efforts elsewhere.

On 11 February 2020, the Chinese central government determined that provincial governments should provide care for children whose guardians were self-isolating due to COVID-19, including services such as psychological counselling and remote schooling services, as well as financial aid, which reached those children by the end of the month. On 27 February, the central government also mandated provincial governments to assist the inhabitants of cities under lockdown. Five days later, the Wuhan government launched an online platform for people to apply for assistance. On 20 March, central government announced that unemployment insurance subsidies should be processed and paid without physical contact. By 10 April, 297 cities had developed online platforms to applying for unemployment subsidies. On 7 March, the central government announced that the benefit amounts and coverage of the *Dibao* cash transfer programme could be increased in areas affected by the pandemic, and on 1 April, provinces and cities—including Hubei—increased the benefit amount.

Which factors could explain China's rapid social protection response? The first contributor is the existence of a large information database. For example, the Department of Civil Affairs has an information system containing the personal details of monthly *Dibao* beneficiaries. When the benefit amount was increased, the Department was able to immediately process the payment. Similarly, the National Poverty Alleviation Development Information System, led by the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development collects information of impoverished people, including some who are not eligible for *Dibao*. When the central government gave instructions regarding the expansion of the programme's coverage during the pandemic, local government departments were able to automatically identify eligible persons through this same database.

The second factor was the use of an online application system and digital payment methods. With the prevalence of mobile devices, it is very convenient for people to access the Internet or pay via mobile

phones. Therefore, those eligible for the Unemployment Insurance Subsidy and the Assistance to Stranded Persons programmes are able to upload the necessary information simply by scanning a QR code and filling out a form, to receive subsidies in digital form, such as bank transfers. Before the pandemic, the application for unemployment insurance was carried out through on-site registration, but during the pandemic 297 cities established online application platforms, and unemployment subsidies started being paid through bank transfers, which increased the efficiency of the system. In addition, in accordance with the Assistance to Stranded Persons programme, people who were stranded in Wuhan could also apply for assistance via scanning a QR code. This scheme provided 21,000 eligible people with cash or food items. Although the online application system and digital payment methods are convenient for people who own a smart phone and can read, write and access the Internet, illiterate and digitally excluded people have to walk to or call a local department for help. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the accessibility of online platforms and digital payment methods.

The last element is the role of a strong central government in ensuring the timeliness of China's social protection responses. Local government officials who did not enact measures to deal with the pandemic in a timely manner were held accountable, which further accelerated the pace of implementation. In addition, the central government can effectively mobilise and coordinate the social sector as a whole. For example, it dispatched more than 42,000 doctors from all over the country to Wuhan within a short period at the onset of the pandemic, which was highly conducive to protecting lives in a timely manner. Furthermore, the central government also mobilised local governments to allocate and transfer face masks from cities where they were abundant to those where they were scarce, which ensured a sufficient supply of masks in every city.

In conclusion, the timeliness of China's social protection response had three main contributing factors: the existing information database on beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries, the availability of an online application system and digital payment methods, and the strong role of the Chinese central government. They all played an important part in accelerating the country's implementation of social protection responses to COVID-19.

References:

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