

# REFLECTIONS

## LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: UNDP SUPPORT TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time, with devastating social, economic, and political consequences worldwide, and a tragic loss of life. As a central actor in the United Nations Development System, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is playing an important role in shaping and driving the United Nations response to the crisis.

To support the UNDP response to COVID-19, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has undertaken a review of lessons from past evaluations of UNDP's work in crisis contexts. The purpose is to provide evidence-based advice to UNDP country offices that are responding to requests to help prepare for, respond to, and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable.

This paper focuses on social protection support and is one in a series of knowledge products from the IEO focusing on important areas of UNDP support to countries in crisis.

### METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment, designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the UNDP [Evaluation Resource Centre](#) over the past decade. Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by the IEO were an important source, given their independence and high credibility. Additionally, high-quality decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices were considered. Within each review, the emphasis was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP. The analysis seeks to offer practical and timely insights to support UNDP decision-makers for effective crisis response. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature on crisis support.

### CONTEXT

Effective social protection and social safety networks are central to the COVID-19 crisis response. Such efforts can both support national preparedness efforts in strengthening policies, institutional systems and processes for social protection that would reduce the impact of the crisis on poorer sections of the populations, as well as respond to the income needs during and immediately after the crisis.

UNDP provides support to governments in developing countries across the world to strengthen social protection measures. This includes support for the development of social-protection-related policies, such as food security measures, cash transfers, cash for work and other social safety net measures. This paper identifies some key lessons

learned from evaluating UNDP's past social protection support – with a particular focus on the restoration and enhancements of social protection systems during and after crises.

## AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

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| <b>1</b>   Strengthening social protection policies contributes to effective crisis response.                   | <b>2</b>   Targeting of vulnerable sectors, particularly those that generate employment, yields positive dividends for social protection efforts. | <b>3</b>   Institutionalization of social safety net measures and processes are fundamental to their success. |
| <b>4</b>   Using technology in the provision of social protection assistance improves efficiency and targeting. | <b>5</b>   Applying a gender lens to all elements of the social protection framework has positive impacts on inclusiveness and effectiveness.     | <b>6</b>   Partnerships enhance the sustainability of social protection measures.                             |

## LESSONS LEARNED

### **1** Strengthening social protection policies contributes to effective crisis response.

Crises and corresponding immediate response measures can be an opportunity to expand and improve existing social protection policies and systems after the recovery. This includes building on the crisis response measures to improve quality and coverage of existing systems in the long run, strengthening the preparedness for future crises – for example by embedding social protection in disaster risk reduction strategies to support long-term resilience and adaptive capacity; or social protection measures as part of national poverty alleviation programmes. Following the revolution and political crisis, Egypt adopted policy and institutional measures to strengthen national cash transfer programmes for vulnerable communities, including the elderly, people with disabilities and families living in poverty. Similarly, national social protection policies in Gambia, Tanzania and Belize promote social safety nets.<sup>1</sup> Although not in response to a crisis, Mauritius developed a Marshall Plan to combat poverty and social exclusion through an integrated social protection plan and set up a national social register to target and manage social assistance.<sup>2</sup> The Marshall Plan is considered a social protection innovation in Africa, comprising 39 actionable and costed proposals to reach Mauritians living in absolute poverty – spanning a variety of support measures including cash transfers, educational support, skills training, job placement, small business development, social housing and child care.

### **2** Targeting of vulnerable sectors, particularly those that generate employment, yields positive dividends for social protection efforts.

Comprehensive social protection measures often do not succeed given the costs involved. Therefore, most countries specifically target vulnerable groups. Going beyond this, sectors most impacted during the crisis need attention not only for revival but also to ensure that the jobs they provide are not lost. In the past, economic packages and social protection measures targeted at vulnerable sectors have been successfully employed to protect jobs during a crisis. For example, the Indian Ocean Tsunami severely affected tourism in Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia with significant consequences for jobs and livelihoods in the aftermath.<sup>3</sup> The three countries took measures to revive the tourism sector and reduce the impact of the crisis on the dependent communities. These programmes' success was based on simultaneous infrastructure reconstruction and subsidies to the tourism sector as well as specific measures to accelerate the return of tourists through attractive packages.

Informal workers and wage labourers are more vulnerable to economic shocks and crises; hence, targeting such groups must be prioritized. National employment generation programmes in several countries, for example in India and Pakistan, are important mechanisms for targeting social assistance and guaranteeing minimum work.<sup>4</sup> Such programmes have shown themselves to be effective delivery mechanisms for cash transfers in a well-targeted manner during crises. A lesson from UNDP's support across crisis-affected countries, for example in Syria, is that sustained efforts are needed to ensure that social safety nets are able to provide timely assistance to poor households to better cope with the crisis and minimize negative coping mechanisms, such as selling livelihood assets or extreme situations of youth radicalization.<sup>5</sup>

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**Institutionalization of social safety net measures and processes is fundamental to their success.**

Cash transfers and other social safety nets are critical to fulfilling basic needs during the crisis response. It is well documented that cash/conditional cash transfers play an important role in building resilience, maintaining social cohesion, and protecting the most vulnerable, especially in the early stages of a crisis. Infusing cash reduces harmful coping strategies that negatively affect individuals' long-term opportunities and livelihoods, such as selling essential assets, undernutrition and debt. Although UNDP supported cash transfers only in a few countries, there are valuable lessons to be learned. UNDP's support to cash transfers in Haiti shows how crucial it is to ensure feasibility in the design, given the institutional capacity and other factors.<sup>6</sup> For example, conditional cash transfers were found not to be the most appropriate tool in response to Hurricane Matthew, as the added burden of monitoring compliance delayed the response. While accountable targeting processes are important, the Haiti experience shows that care should be taken to ensure that such processes do not stall the implementation and drive up the cost of delivery. Also, the Haiti experience demonstrates that, in a humanitarian setting, the strategy adopted for risk prevention and mitigation, as well as the development of local capacities, improves the effectiveness of cash transfers.

The institutionalization of cash for work, particularly linkages with social and economic policies, helps reduce the extent of human loss and suffering during crises. Cash for work, although not feasible during the immediate response, can be blended into social safety net measures during the reconstruction phase. A cross-section of UNDP's cash for work initiatives in crisis settings shows that when anchored in local development processes, the outcomes are more sustainable for improving livelihoods and maintaining essential infrastructure. An innovative example of this is the social protection component of UNDP's 3x6 approach, which has been piloted in countries like Burundi and Yemen.<sup>7</sup> Compared to standard cash-for-work programmes, the 3x6 focuses not only on generating immediate income and injecting capital into the local economy, but also encourages beneficiaries to save a small portion of their earnings to invest in assets or new business at the end of the programme. These programmes have been successful in promoting social cohesion and stimulating local economic recovery. Another key lesson is that cultural factors need attention while implementing cash for work. UNDP support in Syria, Haiti and Yemen points out a reluctance by women to participate in the cash for work programmes.<sup>8</sup> Alternative options should be explored to enhance women's access to jobs and livelihoods.

The disruption of livelihoods is at the core of most social and economic impacts of many crises. Integrating social protection programmes with livelihood support provides an opportunity to strengthen resilience and boost the post-crisis recovery. Hence, linking social protection measures with livelihood programming can be an opportunity for addressing both short-term vulnerabilities and boosting long-term recovery. Following the 2016 Ecuador earthquake and the 2018 Indonesia earthquake, as well as in the context of protracted conflict in Syria, cash-for-work initiatives were anchored in asset creation programmes to restore damaged facilities and social infrastructures, such as schools, water networks and health care centres.

**4****Using technology in the provision of social protection assistance improves efficiency and targeting.**

Advancements in technology facilitate the delivery of social protection in crises, for example, in the form of digital finance. In response to the Ebola crisis, UNDP implemented recovery cash transfers for affected survivors in Sierra Leone.<sup>9</sup> These were administered using existing electronic cash systems of a national telephone provider to achieve a secure and efficient delivery of assistance and, at the same time, strengthen financial inclusion. Similarly, the use of biometrics and Blockchain technology in Jordan has improved the quality and cost-efficiency of social assistance while reducing opportunities for fraud, duplication of services and mistargeting.<sup>10</sup>

Digitalization plays an essential role in monitoring and targeting social protection programmes. The Unified Beneficiary Registry in Malawi, which serves as a national social registry, is an example where the national identification system was used to improve targeting and as an effective information system for social protection.<sup>11</sup> In India, UNDP supported the operationalization of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the world's largest employment guarantee programme. Worker rights assertion and transparency of the scheme were enhanced through the interactive information technology system established.<sup>12</sup>

**5****Applying a gender lens to all elements of the social protection framework has positive impacts on inclusiveness and effectiveness.**

Despite the disproportionate impact of crises on women, social protection and social safety nets are yet to pay sufficient attention to this imbalance. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on women's economic needs and apply a gender lens to all elements of the social protection framework. The different social and economic risks that women face necessitate gender-sensitive social protection measures and social safety nets. While there are examples where women's issues and gender have received sufficient attention, for example in gender mainstreaming and the inclusion of a gender dimension in the existing social protection system in the Dominican Republic, more sustained efforts are needed to improve the inclusiveness of social protection measures.<sup>13</sup>

Across crisis countries that UNDP has supported, social protection programmes underscore the importance of understanding the context in which programmes are implemented, for example regarding cultural norms that pose constraints on women's work, multiple social roles that women play and gender power dynamics. It is critical how social protection programmes are conceptualized, implemented, and monitored to ensure women's economic participation. Therefore, it is vital to apply a gender lens to the analysis, design, and implementation of social protection programmes. A key lesson from both crisis and non-crisis contexts is that concerted efforts should be made to avoid gender stereotyping social safety net interventions for women.

**6****Partnerships enhance the sustainability of social protection measures.**

Based on UNDP's experience, it has often proven challenging to implement novel social protection programmes without building on existing protection frameworks and strong local partnerships. Especially in times of crisis, when speed and scale-up of social assistance are top priorities, it is best to rely on existing inter-agency or joint government-UN platforms and tools that have been extensively tested and harmonized across implementation partners. The same applies to the post-crisis recovery: assets, systems and partnerships that have been developed as part of the immediate response provide an opportunity to be integrated into national social protection frameworks for long-term resilience building. While the importance of collaboration is acknowledged, international cooperation at the national level remains siloed. For example, UNDP efforts to strengthen social protection in countries like Angola or Guatemala have failed due to a lack of common resources and partnerships.<sup>14</sup>

Private sector investments have the potential to advance social protection initiatives. UNDP country programme experiences demonstrate that government measures alone cannot sustain social protection measures and that private sector contributions are essential. Private sector and social protection are complementary but have yet to be harnessed systematically. For example, private sector insurance is seen to complement government efforts in the area. Employment generation and strengthening livelihood infrastructure are areas where private sector participation is shown to have considerable potential. Although not in the social protection support area, UNDP programmes show that private sector participation is feasible in livelihood enhancement in crisis contexts. In Sudan, private sector engagement in solar energy was transformative for agriculture sector livelihoods.<sup>15</sup>

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see UNDP '[Leaving No One Behind: A Social Protection Primer for Practitioners' \(2016\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Evaluation of UNDP Support to Poverty Reduction in the Least Developed Countries \(2018\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami \(2006\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [India ADR \(2012\)](#) and [India ADR \(2002\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Syria ICPE (2020 – forthcoming)

<sup>6</sup> [Early lessons learnt from cash transfer interventions in post Matthew Haiti \(2017\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Yemen ICPE \(2018\)](#) and [Evaluation Finale de la Stratégie Nationale de Réintégration Socio-Économique de Personnes Affectées par le Conflit au Burundi \(2015\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Yemen ICPE \(2018\)](#) and Syria ICPE (2020 – forthcoming)

<sup>9</sup> [Final Evaluation of the Social Rehabilitation and Payment to EVD Survivors Project \(2017\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Advancing Inclusive and Sustainable Social Protection in the Response to the Syrian Crisis \(2018\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Evaluation of UNDP Support to Poverty Reduction in the Least Developed Countries \(2018\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> [India ADR \(2012\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Dominican Republic ADR \(2016\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Angola ICPE \(2018\)](#) and [Guatemala ICPE \(2019\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Evaluation of UNDP Support to Poverty Reduction in the Least Developed Countries \(2018\)](#)

### ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE

By generating objective evidence, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) supports UNDP to achieve greater accountability and facilitates improved learning from experience. The IEO enhances UNDP's development effectiveness through its programmatic and thematic evaluations and contributes to organizational transparency.

### ABOUT REFLECTIONS

The IEO's *Reflections* series looks into past evaluations and captures lessons learned from UNDP's work across its programmes. It mobilizes evaluative knowledge to provide valuable insights for improved decision-making and better development results. This edition highlights lessons from evaluations of UNDP's work in crisis settings.

