

## Social protection system responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

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### Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on global public health, economies, and the daily existence of countless individuals worldwide. Social protection systems have emerged as critical tools in navigating this crisis, offering essential support to vulnerable populations and helping to stabilize societies amidst unprecedented challenges. These systems have played a pivotal role in providing income support to those unable to work, ensuring access to healthcare services, and offering relief to businesses and families facing financial hardship. Beyond immediate relief, social protection has bolstered resilience by addressing inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, promoting social cohesion, and reinforcing the role of governments in safeguarding public welfare. As countries continue to grapple with the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic, the role of robust social protection systems in building a more inclusive and resilient society has become increasingly apparent.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Social protection system, Crisis, pandemic.

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### 1. Introduction

Social protection is an integral part of the ILO's four pillars for tackling COVID-19, in line with international labour standards, namely: stimulating the economy and employment; supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes; protecting workers in the workplace; and using social dialogue. Social protection is therefore an essential mechanism for supporting people during this crisis, giving them access to healthcare and protecting them from the massive loss of income resulting from the deepest economic recession since the Second World War. By accelerating recovery through its positive contribution to consumption and aggregate demand, social protection acts as a powerful economic and social stabiliser (ILO, 2017). Many developing countries have put in place temporary social protection measures to respond to the crisis and facilitate access to healthcare, protect jobs and mitigate income losses. However, recovery will only be sustained and future crises mitigated if countries can

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progressively build on these exceptional support measures or transform them into comprehensive and responsive social protection systems, including social protection floors, in line with the ILO's fundamental rights and social security standards, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2020a). This will necessarily involve expanding and maintaining the budgetary space for social protection, as well as political will. However, our problem is as follows:

In this article, we show how the pandemic affects macro-economic variables that are important for social policy, and the possible consequences of these developments. We then highlight some of the economic support measures for workers that most countries put in place during the pandemic, in order to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the economy and the labour market. These measures attempted to make up in the short term for shortcomings in the social security system highlighted by the crisis. Finally, the pandemic is likely to accelerate technological, social and economic change, the direction and scale of which also need to be assessed, as well as their possible impact on social security.

## **2. Consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic refers to the global outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. It began in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, and spread rapidly around the world, causing widespread illness, significant loss of life and profound disruption to economies, societies and daily life. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, marking its global spread and severity. The pandemic continues to pose unprecedented challenges to public health systems, economies and global efforts to control its transmission and mitigate its impact. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health and humanitarian crisis, its economic and social consequences are also significant and are likely to be felt well into the future. Between the summer and autumn of 2020, the main international organisations (in particular the OECD, the World Bank and the ILO) carried out several studies on the economic and social consequences of the pandemic (employment prospects, impact on low wages). The extent of the long-term economic and social consequences will depend, on the one hand, on the economic, financial and social policy measures that have been or will be taken. On the other hand, the adaptability of our societies will also play a crucial role. Although an unexpected shock such as a pandemic or a global economic recession can have devastating effects only in the short term, in the longer term nothing is certain. Behaviours may change, as may the way companies and the public operate. The long-term impact of the pandemic on the economy, welfare, social security, health care and the environment is not yet known.

### **2.1 Social insurance receipts and expenditure:**

Since the middle of the last century, our modern economies and societies have gone through a number of crises, of varying lengths, and periods of transition. Often, thanks to appropriate responses from governments and central banks, our complex economic systems have managed - sometimes quickly, sometimes more slowly - to stabilise and return to the path of growth. But unfortunately this has not always been entirely the case. There have sometimes been downward shifts in the levels of wealth creation, employment and tax revenues over a long period (compared with a no-crisis scenario). Serious economic crises can therefore leave indelible marks on the economy and public finances. The health and economic crisis of 2020 will lead to a deterioration in social insurance finances, on both the expenditure and revenue sides. In order to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and limit its consequences, exceptional funding has been decided in Switzerland, in most OECD countries and elsewhere. To support the economy, a range of measures to help businesses, workers and private households were rapidly implemented. On the revenue side, the crisis can be expected to lead to job losses, higher unemployment and bankruptcies. These consequences of the crisis will have an impact on future growth in the wage bill and therefore on social security contributions, which are the main source of funding for most branches of social security. The FSIO has estimated that between 2020 and 2030, cumulative revenue from 1st pillar social insurance (AVS/AI/APG) will be around CHF 5 billion lower than the projections made at the end of 2019, i.e. before the pandemic.

### ***2.2 Employment impact of covid 19:***

The COVID-19 pandemic had a far-reaching impact on global employment, causing widespread disruption across industries and economies. Initially, the implementation of lockdowns and restrictions to contain the spread of the virus led to immediate job losses, particularly in sectors that rely on physical presence, such as hospitality, entertainment and non-essential retail. As companies struggled to adapt to reduced consumer demand and operational constraints, many were forced to lay off workers or put them on indefinite leave. The resulting economic downturn compounded the challenges, creating a ripple effect of job insecurity and financial strain for millions of workers worldwide (Archibald & Barca, 2020).

In response to the crisis, governments introduced a range of support measures, including wage subsidies, unemployment benefits and small business loans, to cushion the blow and preserve jobs where possible. However, the uneven impact of the pandemic exposed existing inequalities within the labour market, with marginalised groups, including low-income earners, women and minorities, bearing the brunt of job losses. Meanwhile, industries able to adapt to remote working saw a surge in demand for digital skills and online infrastructure, accelerating trends towards virtual workplaces and redefining job

roles and expectations. Looking ahead, the long-term impact of the pandemic on employment remains uncertain. While vaccination efforts and economic recovery plans offer hope of a return to pre-pandemic levels of activity, structural changes in consumer behaviour, technology adoption and global supply chains suggest a lasting transformation of the labour market. The challenge now is to rebuild a more resilient and inclusive labour market, address inequalities and equip workers with the skills needed to thrive in a post-pandemic economy characterised by flexibility, digital literacy and adaptability (Gentilini, U., et al, 2020).

### **3. Challenges relating to vulnerable individuals and populations**

The tight confinement introduced to limit the spread of the virus has unfortunately resulted in increased vulnerability for individuals and populations who were already considered to be at risk in terms of personal safety. This is particularly true of victims of domestic violence, who find themselves even more isolated and less able to seek help from violence prevention and victim support organisations . This is also the case for neglected and abused children and people with mental illness, whose isolation results in increased vulnerability and relative invisibility in the eyes of public authorities. The challenges are also glaringly obvious for the homeless and individuals affected by extreme poverty, who cannot benefit from access to private spaces to protect themselves from contamination (De Neubourg et al, 2021a). The main objective for stakeholders is therefore to find ways of reaching these at-risk populations and to establish mechanisms for providing remote care and services (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

#### ***3.1 The Jauffret-Roustide and Bertrand analysis:***

In their article, the authors offer a comparative analysis of the effects of the pandemic on users of psychoactive substances in France and Quebec, and on the practices of the medicosocial workers called upon to support them. The authors highlight the increased distress experienced by users, resulting from a number of factors, including social isolation, economic insecurity and lack of housing. Despite the fact that public policies differ in some respects, their combined analyses reveal both the contributions and the limitations of government intervention in these two regions. For medico-social workers, the crisis has been an opportunity to innovate and rethink harm reduction models, in particular through new ways of working together and organizing the players involved. Despite the commitment of professionals in the field to rapidly adapt their care systems in response to the increase in requests for help and the support needs of users, the pandemic context has nevertheless highlighted the pre-existing shortcomings and fragility of healthcare systems, as well as social services, particularly in terms of accommodation. In this respect, COVID-19

revealed the limitations of an essentially biomedical model of care, and the need for integration mechanisms that provide access to social rights and housing.

### **3.2. *Mahi, Farcy-Callon and Rubio analysis:***

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### **3.3 The contribution of Aubut, Goyette and Plourde :**

Their contribution focuses on a population particularly affected by the pandemic crisis, i.e. older people in the justice system, who find themselves at the junction between two vectors of vulnerability - age and prison care. In their article, the authors present the results of a study conducted among some twenty elderly litigants who recounted their experience of the pandemic crisis, with particular reference to the impact of this crisis on their lives both in detention and on their return to the community. The results of this study indicate that the crisis had a significant impact on their lives, since they faced obstacles in the four main dimensions of social and community reintegration: organisational, occupational, relational and personal. The results of this study point to the need to develop strategies to better meet the specific needs of this vulnerable population, and to better support them in their socio-community reintegration process.

## **4. What financial impact will Covid-19 have on social protection?**

A global crisis with multiple dimensions, the Covid-19 pandemic is having a major impact on the French social protection system. Since March 2020, it has been on the front line, particularly in terms of (Weber. M, 2021) :

1. Providing financial resources for a healthcare system that is in great demand, enabling the French to access and use it;
2. Maintaining the payment of social benefits at a time when the country's economy has been severely disrupted: retirement pensions, minimum social benefits and other benefits have continued to be paid;
3. Providing financial support to workers and companies that have ceased trading, thereby keeping the economy afloat, in particular by deferring social security contributions or making short-time working widely available.

As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant financial impact on social protection systems worldwide. These consequences vary according to the nature and strength of the social protection systems in each country, and the way in which they have responded to the pandemic. Here are some of the main financial consequences of COVID-19 on social protection:

1. **Increased healthcare costs:** Healthcare systems have had to cope with a significant increase in demand for medical care as a result of the pandemic. This has resulted in additional costs for the purchase of medical equipment, the creation of screening and treatment centres, the recruitment of additional medical staff, and the research and development of vaccines and treatments.
2. **Increased sickness benefits:** Many people were affected by COVID-19 and had to be quarantined or hospitalised, leading to an increase in sickness benefits paid by social protection systems. The costs of testing, treatment and healthcare also contributed to this increase in expenditure.
3. **Increased unemployment benefits:** Containment and social distancing measures have led to the closure of many businesses, resulting in massive job losses. Social protection systems have had to increase their unemployment benefits to support workers affected by the economic crisis.
4. **Additional social aid:** Vulnerable individuals and families have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, leading to increased demand for social aid, such as food aid, social housing and other forms of social assistance.
5. **Limited financial resources:** The economic recession caused by the pandemic has reduced governments' tax revenues, which has had an impact on their ability to fund social protection systems. Some countries have been forced to reduce the budgets allocated to these programmes or resort to borrowing to maintain them.
6. **Reassessment of budget priorities:** The pandemic has highlighted the importance of social protection systems, leading many governments to reassess their budget

priorities. Some have decided to invest more in these systems to strengthen them for the future.

7. **Pressure on pension schemes:** Fluctuations in financial markets due to economic uncertainty linked to the pandemic have had an impact on pension schemes, forcing some governments to consider reforms to ensure the long-term stability of these schemes.

It is important to note that the response to the pandemic varies from country to country, and the financial impact on social protection depends on the policies and measures taken by each government. Some countries have adopted exceptional measures to strengthen their social protection systems and help citizens through the crisis, while others have faced more severe budgetary constraints.

## 5. Countries' reactions to the Covid -19 Crisis

Countries' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic varied widely. Some countries acted swiftly and decisively, implementing strict quarantines, robust testing and economic support measures to contain the virus and mitigate its impact. Others faced challenges such as delayed responses, inconsistent policies and strained health systems, highlighting disparities in global preparedness and response capacity. The pandemic underscored the importance of proactive public health measures, equitable vaccine distribution and international cooperation in managing and preventing future health crises. Countries' responses to the COVID-19 crisis varied widely, revealing both strengths and weaknesses in global governance and crisis management. Some countries responded quickly and decisively, implementing strict containment measures, robust testing and contact tracing, and providing substantial economic support to mitigate the impact on businesses and individuals. These proactive measures, seen in countries such as New Zealand and South Korea, were instrumental in containing the virus and limiting its spread within their borders (Gentilini. U, 2022).

Conversely, other countries were criticised for delayed responses, inconsistent messaging and inadequate health infrastructure. The pandemic exposed weaknesses in global health systems and highlighted disparities in access to care, particularly in low-income and marginalised communities. Countries such as Brazil and India struggled with overwhelming caseloads and strained health systems, exacerbating the humanitarian and economic toll of the pandemic, while geopolitical tensions and nationalist tendencies further complicated global cooperation efforts and hampered the equitable distribution of vaccines

and medical resources. The pandemic underscored the need for international solidarity and collaborative efforts to respond effectively to global health crises.

Looking ahead, lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis must inform future preparedness strategies, emphasizing the importance of resilient health systems, equitable vaccine distribution and proactive public health policies. Countries that invest in strengthening their health infrastructure and social safety nets will be better equipped to cope with future health emergencies and ensure the well-being of their populations. We could distinguish these responses as follows (De Neubourg et al, 2021b) :

**1. Early and Proactive Responses:**

- **New Zealand:** Implemented one of the strictest lockdowns globally in March 2020, sealing its borders and enforcing stringent quarantine measures. This proactive approach effectively eliminated community transmission for periods, demonstrating the efficacy of swift and decisive action in containing the virus.
- **South Korea:** Leveraged its experience from previous epidemics like MERS to implement widespread testing, contact tracing, and quarantine measures early on. Rapid testing and digital contact tracing apps helped curb the spread, leading to relatively low infection rates and mortality compared to many other nations.

**2. Challenges and Delayed Responses:**

- **United States:** Initially faced challenges with testing availability and coordination between federal and state authorities, leading to delays in containment efforts. Inconsistent messaging on public health measures and political divisions further complicated the response, contributing to high infection rates and mortality.
- **Brazil:** Faced a surge in cases and overwhelmed healthcare systems due to delayed lockdown measures and inconsistent public health policies. The country struggled with insufficient hospital beds, medical supplies, and a lack of centralized coordination, exacerbating the crisis.

**3. Global Cooperation and Vaccine Distribution:**

- **COVAX Initiative:** Led by the World Health Organization (WHO), COVAX aimed to ensure equitable access to vaccines worldwide. However, challenges in vaccine production, distribution logistics, and vaccine nationalism resulted in disparities in vaccine access between wealthy and low-income countries.



- **European Union:** Faced initial challenges in vaccine procurement and distribution but implemented collective purchasing agreements to secure vaccines for member states. The EU's coordinated approach aimed to ensure fair distribution and vaccination coverage across its diverse member states.
4. **Economic Support and Social Safety Nets:**
- **Germany:** Introduced extensive economic relief packages to support businesses, workers, and families affected by lockdowns and economic downturns. Measures included subsidies for businesses, wage support schemes, and expanded social welfare benefits to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on livelihoods.
  - **India:** Implemented one of the world's largest lockdowns in March 2020, affecting millions of migrant workers and informal sector workers. Despite challenges in healthcare capacity and economic fallout, India launched vaccination campaigns and economic stimulus packages to address the crisis's dual impacts.
5. **Lessons Learned and Future Preparedness:**
- The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the critical importance of resilient healthcare systems, robust public health infrastructure, and proactive crisis management strategies.
  - Countries that invested in early testing, contact tracing, and healthcare capacity were generally more successful in containing the virus and minimizing its socio-economic impact.
  - Global solidarity and cooperation are essential for equitable vaccine distribution and effective pandemic response, underscoring the need for strengthened international health governance and preparedness frameworks.

In conclusion, the diverse responses to the COVID-19 crisis underscored the importance of adaptive governance, evidence-based public health interventions, and international collaboration in addressing global health emergencies. Countries that prioritize health equity, social protection, and sustainable development are better positioned to mitigate future health crises and promote resilient societies (World Bank, 2022.).

#### 4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on public health, the global economy and the daily lives of countless people around the world. Throughout this unprecedented public health crisis, social protection systems have emerged as critical tools in addressing its impact. This article explores the multiple dimensions of social protection and its central role in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the significant societal benefits that these systems provide.

Social protection encompasses a range of measures designed to protect individuals and communities from economic and social risks. During the pandemic, these systems provided vital support to vulnerable populations, including income support for those unable to work due to lockdowns or illness, access to health services, and assistance to families and businesses facing financial hardship.

A key aspect of social protection during COVID-19 was its role in securing basic livelihoods and preventing widespread poverty. Programmes such as unemployment benefits, cash transfers and food assistance have been instrumental in stabilising households and communities facing economic disruption. By alleviating financial stress and meeting basic needs, social protection has helped to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and promote resilience and recovery.

In addition, social protection systems have played a crucial role in strengthening public health responses. By ensuring access to health services, including testing, treatment and vaccination, these systems have helped to contain the spread of the virus and protect vulnerable populations. They have also supported health education and awareness-raising efforts, and encouraged community involvement in preventive measures.

Beyond immediate crisis management, the pandemic has highlighted the long-term importance of robust social protection systems. Countries with well-established systems have demonstrated a greater capacity to respond effectively to the challenges of the pandemic, thereby strengthening social cohesion and stability. Investing in social protection not only safeguards individual well-being, but also contributes to sustainable development goals by reducing inequality and promoting inclusive growth.

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the indispensable role of social protection in crisis response and building resilience. As countries continue to navigate the complexities of recovery and adaptation, strengthening and expanding social protection systems will be essential to ensure equitable and sustainable outcomes for all members of society.

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