



© UNICEF/UNI1324049

## TECHNICAL NOTE

# Social Protection for Children and Families in the Context of Migration and Displacement during COVID-19

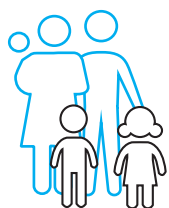
13 August 2020

Children and families on the move are doubly impacted by COVID-19. They are directly and immediately affected by the socioeconomic fall-out of the pandemic, but they are also disproportionately excluded from response and recovery efforts. This is especially true for migrants in irregular situations, migrant workers with precarious livelihoods or working in the informal economy, and those fleeing their homes due to persecution, war, violence, human rights violations or climate related disasters – whether within their own countries or abroad.

However, the pandemic has also shone a light on the immense contribution they make to their communities and countries. Millions of migrant and displaced people are at the frontline of the COVID-19 response or play a critical role as essential workers, including in the health sector, the formal and informal care economy, and along food supply chains. As workers and income earners, as well as consumers of goods and services, people on the move contribute to generating taxes that strengthen and sustain local economies. Those living outside their country of birth represent 3.4 per cent of the world population yet contribute 9.4 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP)<sup>1</sup> – excluding them from the global socio-economic response to COVID-19 hampers everyone's chance of recovery.

At the same time, with jobs and livelihoods wiped out overnight, little to no savings, remittances dropping dramatically, weak social support networks and limited or no access to social protection to fall back on, millions of migrant workers, their children and those forcibly displaced now face extreme poverty, food insecurity and dire hardship – and in many cases stigma and discrimination due to nationality or migration status further impede their access to support and basic services.

## Three factors make migrant and displaced children and their families particularly vulnerable:



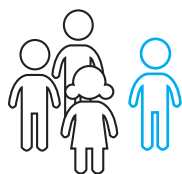
**Firstly, the world's 164 million migrant workers<sup>2</sup> and their families are disproportionately concentrated in jobs that are precarious, informal, low paid and offer poor working conditions.** These jobs have been the first and the worst affected by COVID-19 containment measures. Women and girls are especially impacted – representing approximately 42 per cent of all migrant workers worldwide,<sup>3</sup> and playing a critical role in health services. Women migrant workers also carry the biggest burden in both paid and unpaid domestic and care work, which is exacerbated by physical distancing measures.

---



**Secondly, the loss of employment and wages among migrant workers is resulting in a dramatic decline in remittances, with devastating effects for millions of children and their families.** Many of the poorest children depend on the money sent home as 'remittances' by family members working in faraway cities or abroad. In countries like Tonga, Haiti and South Sudan, remittances constitute more than 30 per cent of GDP,<sup>4</sup> and they help alleviate poverty, improve children's nutrition, health, development and access to education. Due to COVID-19, remittances through formal channels are expected to drop by 20 per cent, wiping out USD \$109 billion<sup>5</sup> – the equivalent of nearly a third of global overseas development assistance (ODA). In Mexico alone, this loss of income could result in 800 deaths of children under age 1 each year, or a 10 per cent increase in child labour.<sup>6</sup>

---



**Finally, migrant and displaced families – particularly those who are undocumented – are largely excluded from national social protection measures to mitigate the social and economic impacts of COVID-19.** In fact, migrant and displaced children often miss out twice – as 'non-nationals' they are excluded from social protection responses in their host country, and as they are not physically present in their country of origin, they miss out there too. Research shows an investment of just 1 per cent of GDP in universal child benefits could decrease a nation's poverty rate by up to 20 per cent.<sup>7</sup> And while spending on social protection has increased in response to COVID-19, expanding it beyond nationals and citizens has been challenging with some notable exceptions (*see Promising Practices below*). This lack of income security for migrant and displaced people means they are more likely to fall into poverty, face protection risks or exploitation, or be forced to work while sick, with potentially devastating consequences for everyone. Inclusive social protection makes sense – both economically and from a public health perspective.

**Not only is social protection a human right,<sup>8</sup> the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* explicitly applies to all children IN a country – not OF a country.** By excluding migrant, refugee, returnee or internally displaced children and their families from local, national and global socio-economic response and recovery efforts, we put them at risk and undermine our own response. Nobody is safe, until everybody is safe.

In line with UNICEF's Agenda for Action for COVID-19, which identified migrant and refugee children as particularly vulnerable, **this brief calls for urgent action to ensure social protection programmes are inclusive of children and families affected by migration and displacement – regardless of their citizenship, nationality or migration status.** UNICEF and partners have a critical role to play in delivering inclusive social protection programming and humanitarian cash transfers; addressing barriers that prevent migrant and displaced children and their families accessing social protection; helping to keep remittances flowing; and creating the fiscal space for inclusive government responses.

**Inclusive social protection is core to UNICEF's mandate, commitment to the SDG agenda, focus on equity and ensuring no child is left behind.** It is not a question of 'if' – and his brief aims to set out the 'how'. For tips and recommendations on how UNICEF and partners can increase access, coverage and inclusion of children and families on the move in social protection programmes – based on needs, and regardless of migration or displacement status – please read below.



## Recommendations to consider

**1** **Ensure inclusive social protection programmes for all children and families on the move – whether they are migrants, refugees, returnees or internally displaced.** Where this is not possible, **provide direct assistance, including humanitarian cash transfers**, that can strengthen and influence social protection systems.

**Where there is a functioning social protection system:**

**Support to maintain routine social protection measures accessed by migrant, displaced and returnee families, including** predictable social cash transfers, in kind assistance, employment guarantee programmes, and health and social insurance, **and avoid disruptions from measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19**, including movement restrictions or reduced budgetary allocation.

**Where migrant, displaced or returnee families are excluded from existing social protection programmes, adjust or expand these programmes to ensure their inclusion.** This means expanding and relaxing eligibility criteria and removing restrictive administrative requirements for enrolment and benefit collection, to ensure programmes are available to all, regardless of migration or displacement status.

**Ensure new social protection programmes developed in response to COVID-19 are inclusive of migrant, displaced and returnee families.** This means explicitly including migrant, displaced and returnee populations, alongside other marginalized group in needs assessments and decisions on targeting. Ensure rapid analysis is undertaken to inform evidence-based advocacy with partners to expand coverage for migrant, displaced and returnee children and their families.

**Include children and families of migrants ‘left behind’ in social protection responses.** With declining remittances, many children ‘left behind’ by migrant families lose their economic lifeline and social protection support. Address any bias or exclusion criteria linked to having a ‘family member abroad’ in national social protection programmes and ensure children of migrant workers are included in economic stimulus packages, response plans and mitigation measures.

**Where functioning social protection systems do not exist:**

**Design new or scale up humanitarian cash transfers to address the distinct challenges migrant, displaced and returnee populations face.** This include introducing procedures to ensure cash assistance is delivered safely and does not expose programme participants to COVID-19, as well as introducing complementary services to deliver nutrition, health, education and child protection.

**2** **Address barriers that prevent access to social protection services for children and families in the context of migration and displacement**, including by:

**Establishing firewalls** to ensure undocumented migrants can access social protection services without fear of being detected, detained or deported by immigration authorities or law enforcement. This means ensuring policies and practices are in place to prohibit the sharing of information between service providers and immigration authorities, or that service providers are not required to ask for migration/legal status to provide services.

**Empower and strengthen the capacity of the social workforce, utilize technology and engage with the private sector** in partnership with the public social protection system, to improve access for hard to reach and excluded populations. Innovative approaches to reach the most vulnerable may include self-targeting, self-enrollment, and cooperation with telecommunications companies and remittance services.



**Provide timely, culturally and linguistically appropriate, child-friendly and relevant information on available social protection programmes and support.** Ensure translation and audio-visualization of messaging and communication materials and information into languages and formats commonly spoken and easily understood by all children and youth on the move in your context, including those living with a disability.

### **3 Advocate for remittance services to be classified as ‘essential services’ and for transfer fees to be dropped and help mitigate any operational impacts of COVID-19.**

By keeping remittances flowing and bringing transaction costs as close to zero as possible, we can help migrant and displaced people support their families and communities in their home countries. In the medium term, it will be critical to support new emerging remittance models to overcome regulatory and infrastructure barriers – including through digital means.

### **4 Work closely with local authorities** to support and adapt governance structures and strengthen coordination to deliver inclusive social protection programmes for migrant and displaced families. This includes empowering local governments through resource allocation and social workforce capacity development and monitoring the provision and quality of social protection services and their impact on families affected by migration and displacement.

### **5 Work with partners to provide better working conditions, including family friendly policies for migrant and displaced workers:**

**Implement flexible work arrangements for all, including migrant and displaced workers and their families.** When properly designed, flexible work arrangements can support workers to meet personal or family needs, achieve better work-life balance and enhance productivity in challenging circumstances. Flexible work arrangements for migrant and displaced workers who are most

vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic are particularly important, especially in the context of widespread school closures and restricted childcare options.<sup>9</sup>

**Support working migrant and displaced families with childcare options that are safe and appropriate in the context of COVID-19.** Childcare is an integral part of family-friendly policies by supporting parents to provide responsive care for young children while they work. In the context of extensive school and childcare closures, employers can provide critical support to migrant parents who are faced with limited or no childcare options.<sup>10</sup>

**Ensure that migrant or displaced women and girls or those 'left behind' do not bear the consequences of income loss and lack of childcare options in their family.** Instead, think of how recovery and response efforts can help to empower women and girls.

## 6 **Advocate for International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to ensure social protection related loans provided in response to COVID-19 are conditional upon the inclusion of migrant and displaced children and families in social protection programmes, regardless of status and support governments to assess related financing needs.**

This will help create the fiscal space for an inclusive response as governments around the world are grappling with the economic impact of the crisis.

## 7 **Generate evidence to make a strong investment case and demonstrate the benefits of expanding support to migrant and displaced families for communities and countries.**

Political economy considerations can help guide decision making by governments. Strong evidence on the contributions migrants and displaced communities make to local economies, debunking popular myths, and documenting good practices by governments elsewhere, can help to influence policy decisions.



# Inclusive Social Protection Promising Practices

The City of **Minneapolis** has launched two housing assistance programmes that are open to households irrespective of migration or legal status – one specifically targeting families with children enrolled in elementary school.<sup>17</sup>

**Chicago** makes its COVID-19 relief programmes, for example, the COVID-19 Housing Assistance Grant and online resources for Chicago public school students, available to all residents, including migrants and refugees.<sup>18</sup>

**Ireland**, in response to COVID-19, pays unemployment benefits of 350€ per week to non-EU migrant workers who have lost their jobs.<sup>14</sup> The government does not share any data received from potential beneficiaries of the COVID-19 Unemployment Payment with Immigration Authorities.<sup>15</sup>

The **German Federal Pension Insurance** supported to integrate refugees by seconding staff to help process asylum applications and providing office equipment to the authorities concerned. A special team was established to address refugee social protection issues in partnership with other pension insurance institutions and authorities.<sup>12</sup>

**Spain** has extended social protection programmes to include asylum seekers and undocumented migrants amid the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>13</sup>

In **Iraq**, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are included in national cash transfer programmes during COVID-19.<sup>21</sup>

Returned migrant workers are eligible to receive unemployment benefits during the crisis in **Moldova** if they have a medical insurance.<sup>16</sup>

A number of other cities such as **Arlington** or **New York City** have introduced alternatives to school meal plans, available to all without any requirement for documentation.<sup>19</sup> Not only does this ensure that children in poor families are regularly fed but it also enables undocumented migrant children to benefit without any fears of repercussions or deportation.

**Guyana** extended its social protection system (cash transfers) to include migrant children and their families from Venezuela in 2019. Payments were used for housing or rent and purchase of school supplies.

Despite lockdown measures, remittance service providers in **Zimbabwe** are allowed to open three times a week.<sup>20</sup>

**Thailand**'s Universal Healthcare Coverage Scheme, introduced in 2001 and extended in 2005, covers migrants as well as their spouses and children, regardless of their legal status.<sup>11</sup>

*This map is stylized and not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or area or the delimitation of any frontiers. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the Parties. The final boundary between the Republic of the Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.*



## UNICEF works in more than 150 countries to strengthen social protection systems, including via social assistance, social welfare services and other initiatives.

In **Jordan**, UNICEF improves access to kindergarten for Syrian refugee children through a cash transfer programme that allows families to send their children to school.

In **Yemen**, with support from the World Bank, UNICEF reached 1.41 million people, including many who are internally displaced, with unconditional cash transfers.

In **Ecuador**, UNICEF and partners deliver cash transfers for Venezuelan migrant and refugee families with children. This programme was adapted in response to

COVID-19 with cash transfers being distributed through OTP codes and remote mechanisms for screening and psychosocial support. 12,597 migrant or displaced households are receiving humanitarian cash transfers and 300 are benefiting from other social assistance from the government.<sup>22</sup>

In **Uttar Pradesh, India**, UNICEF's advocacy led to an expansion of the child labour cash transfer programme, to include children from families of migrant workers, and provide numerous social protection schemes for the families of children enrolled.<sup>23</sup>

**Brazil's** social protection system is designed to be inclusive, however, many Venezuelan migrants continue to have limited access. UNICEF conducted a study to identify barriers faced by migrants in accessing social protection, which highlighted social workers limited time and capacity to be a key bottleneck. The team is now working to address this with the relevant municipalities in Roraima state.



## Endnotes

- 1 McKinsey Global Institute, 2016, [People on the Move: Global Migration's Impact and Opportunity](#)
- 2 ILO, 2018, [Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology](#)
- 3 UN Migration Network, 2020, [SG Policy Brief on COVID-19 and People on the Move](#), citing IOM, World Migration Report 2020.
- 4 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/covid-19-through-migration-lens-policy-responses-should-be-inclusive-migrants>
- 5 UN Migration Network, 2020, [SG Policy Brief on COVID-19 and People on the Move](#)
- 6 CGDEV Analysis, 2020, [Migrant Remittances will Plummet. Here is what that means for Global Development](#) (based on analysis of previous studies).
- 7 ODI/UNICEF, 2020, [Universal child benefits: policy issues and options](#), p. 74.
- 8 Article 22 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and Article 26 of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- 9 UNICEF, 2020, [Family-friendly Policies and Other Good Workplace Practices in the Context of COVID-19](#)
- 10 UNICEF, 2020, [Family-friendly Policies and Other Good Workplace Practices in the Context of COVID-19](#)
- 11 UN Women, 2020, [Leaving No-one Behind: Access to Social Protection for All Migrant Women](#)
- 12 ISSA, 2018, [Providing Social Protection to Refugee Populations](#)
- 13 EU Website on Integration, 2020, [Spain Introduces Special COVID-19 Integration Measures](#)
- 14 World Bank, 2020, [Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures](#)
- 15 Government of Ireland, 2020, [COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment](#)
- 16 World Bank, 2020, [Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures](#)
- 17 City of Minneapolis, 2020, [Minneapolis Gap Funding](#)
- 18 City of Chicago, Office of the Mayor, 2020, [Mayor Lightfoot Signs Executive Order to Protect Immigrant and Refugee Communities during COVID-19](#)
- 19 New York City Department of Education, 2020, [Free Meals](#)
- 20 <https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/zimbabwe-allows-money-transfer-agencies-to-open-amid-coronavirus-lockdown-46370696>
- 21 UNICEF, 2020, [Iraq COVID-19 Situation Report No.2](#)
- 22 UNICEF, 2020, [Ecuador COVID-19 Situation Report - June 2020](#)
- 23 UNICEF, 2020, [India COVID-19 Situation Report – June 2020](#)