

Bahrain: 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.

Bahrain’s economy was heavily slowed down by COVID-19 and the sharp reduction in oil prices in 2020, with its gross domestic product (GDP) contracting by 5.4 per cent. The national fiscal deficit worsened due to the COVID-19 mitigation measures, pushing the public debt-to-GDP ratio to 133 per cent in 2020, compared to 100 per cent in 2019. According to a survey on the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic in the country, Bahrainis with lower education levels and Bangladeshi migrant workers were the most affected (UNDP n.d.). It is worth noting that foreign workers account for 80 per cent of the country’s total workforce and have limited access to social protection policies, including those implemented during the pandemic (World Bank 2021).

Up to the end of March 2021, the IPC-IG mapping of social protection responses to COVID-19 in the Global South² identified seven social protection responses in Bahrain: (i) wage subsidies for workers covered by the Social Insurance Organisation (SIO) from April to December 2020, financed with resources from the Unemployment Insurance Fund; (ii) wage support for selected occupations (e.g. drivers, kindergarten and nursery workers) under contracts not covered by the SIO; (iii) payment of an extra benefit for 12,000 beneficiaries of the disability allowance; (iv) payment of an extra benefit for 17,000 beneficiaries of the social insurance/assistance scheme for vulnerable categories; (v) the postponement of loan repayments on interest-free loans; and (vi) the waiving of utility bills for households and businesses. All these measures targeted Bahraini nationals only, except for the first round of electricity and water bill waivers, which also included migrant workers.

The analysis of programmes’ child-sensitivity developed by the IPC-IG in partnership with UNICEF MENARO was limited to cash, in-kind and school feeding responses. Therefore, only the vertical expansions of the disability allowance and of the social security benefit were considered in the analysis (and not the subsidies). Whereas the disability allowance did not feature any of the six child-sensitive criteria considered in the assessment (i.e. targeting children, increasing benefit values according to the number of people in the household, and providing access to health/WASH, education, nutrition

or child protection services), the top-up of the social security benefit was child-sensitive, since children—in particular, orphans—were one of the target groups, and the benefit amount varied with the number of people in the household.

It is important to highlight here that even programmes that do not explicitly include child-related design features (e.g. wage subsidies) can have indirect positive effects on children. However, these types of programmes were not assessed in the study. Nevertheless, the short duration of social assistance programmes (just one month) and the exclusion of non-nationals is notable.

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

- Subsidies—particularly universal, untargeted subsidies—are potentially regressive tools. Further assessments of the impact of the subsidies adopted by Bahrain during the pandemic are recommended.
- The availability of data on the coverage and impact of existing social assistance programmes should be improved to assess their targeting, efficiency, and gender- and child-sensitivity.
- It is recommended to examine the feasibility of extending the social protection system to migrant workers and their families, who represent more than half of the country’s population and are potentially more vulnerable to shocks and crises. Proactive outreach and enrolment will be required to identify vulnerable households/individuals in urban settlements.
- The expansion of the social protection system in Bahrain should be accompanied by further efforts to increase the fiscal space for social protection and secure sufficient funding to ensure an adequate 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.

UNDP. n.d. “UNDP in the Arab States.” United Nations Development Programme website. <<https://www.arabstates.undp.org/e0ef5c04-a5e2-409c-8518-7396f75efd10>>. Accessed 13 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>>.