

Iran: 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.

Iran is the most populous country in the MENA region, and over 60 per cent of its population are aged 30 or younger (Worldometer 2022). The country has a traditionally strong welfare system, yet the combination of economic sanctions, the economic downturn, climate-driven disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic added new economic and social pressures. To put this into context, inflation reached 39.9 per cent in 2021, and unemployment for those aged 15–24 years was almost 29 per cent in 2020 (World Bank 2022). Moreover, approximately 11.5 million households live below or just above the multidimensional poverty line, and Iran is home to more than 3 million refugees and migrants, the majority of them from Afghanistan (United Nations 2020).

Up to the end of March 2021, the IPC-IG mapping of social protection responses to COVID-19 in the Global South² identified seven responses provided by the government in Iran: four social assistance, two social insurance and one labour market intervention. One of the social assistance responses consisted of providing loans with low interest rates to informal workers affected by the pandemic, and interest-free loans for low-income households registered with the Targeting Subsidies Organisation.

In addition, the government provided up to IRR6 million (USD22)³ to people with low incomes who were not covered by any social support, lasting for 4 months. The benefit value increased according to household size, which is considered a child-sensitive feature according to the criteria used in the assessment conducted by the IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO. Moreover, the State Welfare Organisation and the Imam Khomeini Relief Fund also provided between IRR1 million and IRR1.2 million (around USD4) per person to assist families with low incomes, reaching about 40 million individuals.

The IPC-IG also mapped 10 humanitarian responses⁴ in Iran led by UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP), with 8 of them having at least one child-sensitive feature: 6 were designed to directly support children's access to health/water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); 3 programmes directly supported children's access to nutrition; and 2 aimed to support children's access to education. Two measures also directly targeted children or based the benefit value on household size.

Humanitarian assistance has often focused on providing financial support to vulnerable groups—particularly those excluded from government responses, such as non-nationals—using multi-purpose cash or one-off cash transfers. UNHCR, for instance, provided a one-off cash transfer to extremely vulnerable refugee households through a vertical expansion of its programme by providing a top-up of USD300 to around 9,000 existing beneficiaries in July 2020.

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

- It is fundamental to invest in the institutional capacities and preparedness of the national social protection system to respond to shocks, including the rapid implementation of vertical and horizontal expansions of programmes. It will thus be key to enhance the Iranian Welfare Database (the country's registry used for social protection programmes) and improve real-time monitoring.
- Child-sensitive features (e.g. targeting families with children, increasing benefit values for families with children) should be part of the design of social assistance programmes, to increase the potential of these programmes to protect children and reduce their vulnerabilities in times of crisis.
- Coordination between humanitarian agencies and government actors has ensured wider coverage of the population and will be key to enhance services further.
- In coordination with the international community, it is necessary to provide social protection to migrants and refugees, and integrate them into the national social protection system, where possible.

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.
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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->>.
3. Market exchange rate as of 8 April 2022.
4. Only cash, in-kind and school feeding measures led by UNICEF, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, the International Organization for Migration, UNHCR or WFP were considered in the scope of the study.