



Social Protection and Child Protection: How to join forces to protect children from the impact of COVID-19 and beyond

Provisional Release – 08.10.2020

Coordinated by: The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

Co-sponsors: UNICEF and Save the Children

Contributing agencies: Maestral International, International Rescue Committee, Plan International, and World Vision International

Intended Audience: UN and multilateral development agencies, regional bodies, national governments, and donors

Objective: Lay out key arguments for close collaboration across SP and CP to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on children and families towards reduction of adverse CP outcomes.

INTRODUCTION: THE MEDIUM- TO LONG-TERM IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND PROTECTION AND WELLBEING OF CHILDREN

Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and how it links to protection of children

In less than a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global economy, triggering the deepest global recession in decades including estimates of up to 100 million people being pushed into poverty.¹ Without urgent action to protect families, the number of children living in monetary poor households could soar to 117 million in 2020.² This unprecedented socio-economic crisis has already rapidly exacerbated root causes of some of the biggest threats to child survival and wellbeing such as hunger, reduced access to health, education and protection services. In 2020, the pandemic has already led to the death of an additional 10,000 children each month due to lack of access to food, and an estimated 37 million may face hunger by the end of the year.³ Similarly, up to an additional 1.16 million under-five deaths could occur in a six months period due to reductions in routine health service coverage levels.⁴

School closure (which have affected 1.62 billion students), combined with wage cuts and declining employment opportunities are fertile ground for spikes in hazardous and exploitative forms of child labour.⁵ It is estimated that child labour will increase by 14% in 2020.⁶

¹MSN. (2020). [World Bank chief warns extreme poverty could surge by 100 mn.](#)

² Fiala, O. (2020). [Children in Poor Households to Soar by up to 86 Million Due to COVID-19.](#) Save the Children International.

³ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. (2020). [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020: Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets.](#)

⁴ Robertson, T. et al. (2020). [Early estimates of the indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and child mortality in low-income and middle-income countries: A modelling study.](#) *The Lancet Global Health*, 8(7), 901-908.

⁵ Highest estimates as of 5 April 2020. See: UNESCO. (2020). [Education: From disruption to recovery.](#)

⁶ Taken from ILO report, page 7–8. Estimated increase of 20% of poverty in 2020 (IFPRI); ratio of 0,7 increase of child labor for each 1% increase in poverty.

Additionally, UNFPA predicts 15 million additional cases of gender-based violence for every 3 months of lockdown⁷. Domestic lockdowns have in fact exacerbated the risk of exposure to violence for women and children. According to a survey of more than 17,500 parents and 8,000 children across 37 countries, in households that had lost income due to COVID-19, 19% of children reported violence in the home, compared to 5% when there had been no loss of income.⁸ Violence in the household reported by children was double the rate when schools were closed (17%) compared to when schools were open and the child was attending in person (8%).⁹

In fact, for children experiencing abuse, schools often serve as one of the only places they can request support from trusted adults outside their immediate family. The situation is particularly concerning for certain groups, such as children living in residential institutions: the closure of the former caused by COVID-19 implies a sudden shift to family-based care without the preparatory work required to ensure the best interests of the child are maintained.¹⁰ What's more, evidence from previous pandemics suggests a sharp increase in other forms of child protection risks, such as early and adolescent pregnancy, child marriage, female genital mutilation, family separation and abandonment, psychological and physical violence as well as sexual abuse.¹¹

In this unprecedented context, globally 2 out of 3 children have no access to any form of child or family benefit, and coverage is lowest where child poverty is highest.¹² In the aforementioned survey, 70% of respondents who suffered economic losses due to the pandemic said they had not received government support.¹³ This puts families and children's lives at risk and deprives them of their right to access much-needed services, including child protection services. That being said, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how critical social protection coverage is, and governments around the world have acted to put social protection measures in place to support the most vulnerable. A total of 200 countries/territories have planned or put in place over a thousand social protection measures.¹⁴ However, there is little data indicating how refugees and displaced populations would benefit from such measures, or to what extent they are linked with

⁷United Nations Population Fund. (2020). [New UNFPA projections predict calamitous impact on women's health as COVID-19 pandemic continues.](#)

⁸ Ritz, D., O'Hare, G. and Burgess, M. (2020), [The Hidden Impact of COVID-19 on Child Protection and Wellbeing.](#) London, Save the Children International.

⁹ Edwards, Jess. (2020). [Protect a Generation The impact of COVID-19 on children's lives.](#) Save the Children International.

¹⁰Goldman, P., van Ijzendoorn, M. H. & Sonuga-Barke, E. J. S. (2020). [The implications of COVID-19 for the care of children living in residential institutions.](#) *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 4, 12.

¹¹ Bakrania, S. & Subrahmanian, R. (2020). [Impacts of Pandemics and Epidemics on Child Protection Lessons learned from a rapid review in the context of COVID-19.](#) *Innocenti Research Brief.* UNICEF OoR-Innocenti.

¹² UNICEF Social Protection Global Framework, 2019

¹³ Edwards, Jess. (2020). [Protect a Generation The impact of COVID-19 on children's lives.](#) Save the Children International.

¹⁴ Gentilini, U. et al. (2020). [Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures.](#) The World Bank.

child protection services or outcomes. Moreover, many of the most fragile countries still have no national measures in place.¹⁵

What is Social Protection (SP)?

To respond to the challenges brought to the fore by COVID-19, many governments have launched measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on individuals, families and children - many of the most critical have been through social protections systems. Social Protection is broadly understood to refer to “a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life-course, with a particular emphasis towards vulnerable groups.”¹⁶ In line with widely acknowledged functions of social protection, a robust SP system should protect, prevent, promote and transform individuals and societies to achieve their full potential. Social protection systems should address both economic and social vulnerability. Removing financial barriers and addressing social inequalities go hand-in hand to ensure that social protection is truly child sensitive. Economic vulnerability is all too often intertwined with social vulnerabilities. Families living in poverty that are also socially excluded face the greatest disadvantages and require special attention. As such, child-sensitive and inclusive social protection must include a strong focus on social vulnerabilities and seek to address the additional risks faced by children who are both socially and economically vulnerable.

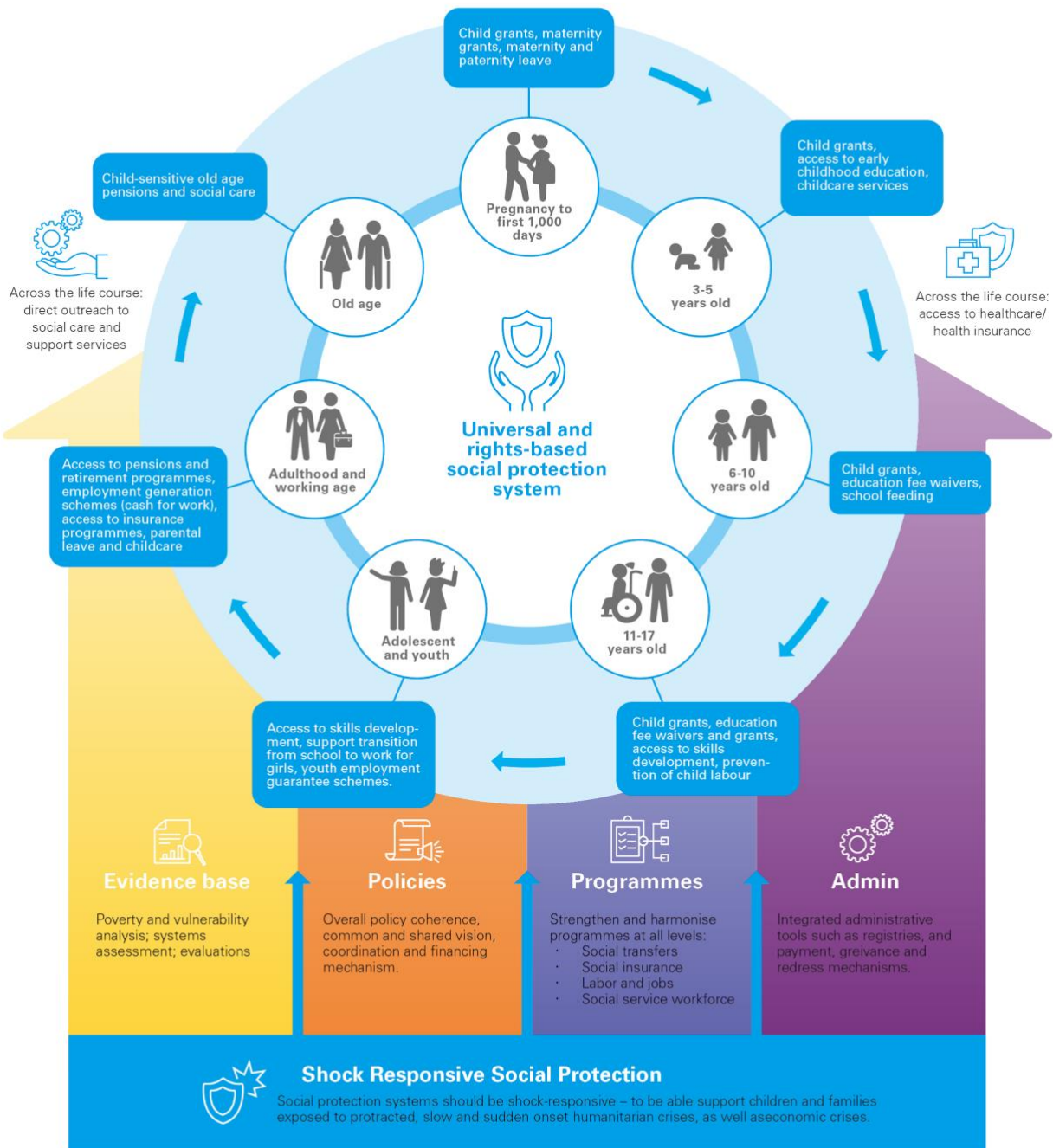
Child-sensitive social protection refers to the objective of ensuring that social protection systems and interventions are designed with the rights and needs of children at their core (see Figure below).¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Definition developed by SPIAC-B as part of Inter-Agency Social Protection Assessments (ISPA) tools development. SPIAC-B is an interagency coordination mechanism composed of representatives of international organizations and bilateral institutions to enhance global coordination and advocacy on social protection issues and to coordinate international cooperation in country demand-driven actions.

¹⁷ See also the [joint statement 'Advancing Child-Sensitive Social Protection'](#), which aims to build greater consensus on the importance of child-sensitive social protection. It lays out the particular vulnerabilities that children and families face, the ways that social protection can impact children even when not focused on them, and outlines principles and approaches for undertaking child sensitive social protection.

A child-sensitive social protection system



Source: UNICEF's Global Social Protection Programme Framework, 2019

What is Child Protection?

Child protection is the prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children.¹⁸ In emergencies, protective factors surrounding a child are diminished while risk factors increase. Insecurity or crisis places children at risk of family separation, child marriage, exploitation, and violence while caregivers struggle to identify the means to care for their children. This can cause a multitude of dire consequences with families potentially being forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms. Associated stressors can compromise children's cognitive, emotional, social and linguistic development outcomes, ultimately undermining attempts at poverty reduction, health and education. COVID-19 has led to severe economic stressors such as a reduction in household income, increased debt and the illness or death of breadwinners, subsequently increasing risks to children while creating additional barriers to accessing protective services. Providing increased and urgent support to vulnerable households, and taking steps to secure family finances, is fundamental to keeping children safe and protected.

¹⁸ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. (2019). [The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#).

WHY LEVERAGE SOCIAL PROTECTION TOWARDS CHILD PROTECTION OUTCOMES?

The work of social protection, as discussed above, is not just to reduce monetary poverty. It also addresses social vulnerabilities (due to personal characteristics or social dynamics such as disability, gender, age, sex, race or any other form of identity or experience, linked to discrimination, exclusion and/or exploitation). This often impedes children from achieving their full potential, and monetary poverty often exacerbates these vulnerabilities, making these children the most vulnerable. Conceptually, programmatically and operationally the two sectors (social protection and child protection) have much in common. Social protection is one of the largest social sectors within government programmes, often working at the national scale, and provides a unique opportunity for the child protection sector to leverage results for children. Inversely, child protection has much to offer social protection programming, with expertise in particular areas to support shared goals of addressing social vulnerabilities and promoting child rights and wellbeing, such as in early childhood development programming. For example, child protection expertise on risk and prevention can inform the design of social protection systems, from identification of vulnerable groups to referral back to adequate, quality services.

This policy brief outlines **three strategic reasons** why child protection actors should engage in leveraging social protection towards child protection outcomes.

1. The **evidence indicates that social protection can offer much in support of child protection outcomes**, as outlined below. Given this evidence base and the scale of social protection systems in many contexts, integrating child protection outcomes in policies, programmes and operations of social protection policies, programmes, and operations can likely help achieve results for children in a sustainable way.
2. Second, there are **clear synergies to be had from finding ways to link or, where appropriate integrate, social protection and child protection systems and mechanisms**, to deliver better results for children. There are many entries for this, from capitalising on established coordination mechanisms, to drawing on institutional platforms such as social protection Management Information Systems or child

protection Information Management Systems to identifying people who need support.

3. Third, there are **substantial benefits to more consistently bringing together expertise from both sectors to yield better and/or more results for children**. For example, drawing on child protection expertise and learning for better risk mitigation and response to child protection issues in existing social protection programmes, including enhanced case management for existing social protection participants, drawing on social protection expertise in targeting and reaching recipients at scale, and experience in integrated multi-sectoral programming from both sectors.

Challenges to integration of SP and CP

It is important, however, to recognise that there are barriers to bringing these two sectors together, particularly in some humanitarian contexts. Many programmes are designed as stand-alone interventions and not in combination with other programs and sectors, fearing ‘the Christmas tree effect’ of trying to overload social protection programmes with too many objectives. Some practitioners are particularly concerned about integrated programming due to concerns about the risks and sensitivities that protection issues can involve and the need for robust protection-relevant analysis and coordination.¹⁹ The aim of this policy brief is not to ignore these concerns, but rather to illustrate practical ways in which the sectors can pull together to deliver greater results for children, without suggesting that either sector can deliver everything alone.

¹⁹ Mishra, A. & Battistin, F. (2019). [Child Outcomes of Cash Transfer Programming: A synthesis of the evidence around survival, education, and protection in humanitarian and non-humanitarian contexts](#). Save the Children.

EVIDENCE ILLUSTRATING HOW SOCIAL PROTECTION APPROACHES CAN CONTRIBUTE TO CHILD PROTECTION OUTCOMES DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND

A. Social protection can contribute to support results in the reduction of some key drivers of child protection issues, including violence prevention, risky sexual behaviours, child marriage, and child labour

- Evidence indicates that social protection can address some areas of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence directly. For example, a mixed-methods review of cash transfers and intimate partner violence indicates that in over 70% of 22 rigorous studies reviewed, cash transfers reduced IPV.²⁰ In addition, social protection can in some contexts reduce risky sexual behaviours, reduce early sexual debut, transactional sex and unsafe sex.²¹ Emerging evidence also suggests that social protection has gender-transformative potential, including increasing gender equitable attitudes through a cash plus approach (Chzhen et al, 2020) and [addressing long-term gender equality relevant outcomes](#).²² However, ‘a do no harm approach’ is fundamental - as well as recognising the potential that social protection programming offers for protection outcomes, we must recognise that there must be a rigorous risk mitigation approach in place to ensure that rolling out social protection programmes does not expose participants or vulnerable and marginalised people around them to further risks, including different forms of gender-based violence.
- In addition, social protection can contribute to child protection outcomes by addressing some of the **drivers** of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.²³ A review of rigorous evaluations of cash transfers indicates that cash transfers can reduce monetary poverty, increase women’s empowerment, and improve school

²⁰ Buller, A. M. et al. (2018). [A Mixed-Methods Review of Cash Transfers and Intimate Partner Violence in Low and Middle-Income Countries](#). *The World Bank Research Observer*, 33(2), 218-258.

²¹ Bastagli, F. et al. (2016). [Cash transfers: what does the evidence say?: A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features](#). ODI.

²² UNICEF OoR-Innocenti. (2020). [Age-Sensitive Social Protection: A conceptual framework](#).

²³ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. (2019). [CPMS Pillar 4: Standards to Work Across Sectors](#). *Child Protection Minimum Standards*.

enrolment and attendance, amongst other key outcomes.²⁴ Evidence on pensions in low and middle income contexts from the same review indicates that children and adolescents growing up in recipient households benefit from increased school attendance and demonstrate a reduced incidence of multiple sexual partners. Poverty-related stress has been identified as a key driver, alongside social norms, of multiple child protection issues. Cash transfers can play a role in reducing early marriage and child labor, when poverty is a main driver.²⁵ However, whilst a number of cash transfer programmes have demonstrated reductions in child marriage, some have shown mixed results or no impact. Also, while there is some indication that cash transfer programmes can reduce the likelihood and intensity of participation in child labour, which has been shown to positively impact school enrolment and attendance²⁶, the evidence is mixed. Social protection programs have also been linked to a reduction in family separation/child relinquishment to institutional/residential care and support of family reintegration.²⁷ Where social protection programs have targeted households with children with disabilities, positive impacts on the overall wellbeing of children were observed.²⁸

- Social protection can therefore contribute to the reduction of some key drivers of child protection issues, while child protection is in turn supportive of social protection objectives. However, social protection is not a silver bullet, and cannot serve as a replacement for child protection systems - in some contexts, it may not deliver CP results on its own. Indeed, there are still significant evidence gaps, including better understanding what design and implementation features in social protection programming could best support child protection outcomes. Cash plus is widely viewed as a potential promising avenue, providing regular transfers in combination with additional components or linkages. This is done either by intentionally supporting further behaviour changes or by addressing supply-side constraints. Examples include provision of information (such as through behaviour change or sensitization meetings), provision of additional benefits and support (such as supplementary feeding or psychosocial support), provision or facilitation of access to services (such as through health insurance or setting up Village Savings and Loan Associations), building capacity to deliver specialized GBV and Child Protection services and incorporating referral systems, and implementation of case management. Further research is needed on what the most effective combination of

²⁴ Bastagli, F. et al. (2016). [Cash transfers: what does the evidence say?: A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features](#). ODI.

²⁵ Save the Children International. (2020). [The Effectiveness of Cash Transfer Programming for Children](#).

²⁶ International Labour Organization. (2020). [Brief: COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy Immediate responses and policy challenges](#).

²⁷ Ferguson, M. & Moret, W. (2018). [ASPIRES Family Care Process Assessment: Cash Transfers for Family-Child Reintegration and Prevention of Separation](#). USAID, FHI360 & ASPIRES.

²⁸ UNICEF Syria. (2019). [Cash transfer programme for children with disabilities in Rural Damascus and Tartous governorates](#).

'plus' components might be to deliver better child protection outcomes with cash programming.

B. Provide support to caregivers in support of child protection outcomes

Well-designed and implemented social protection that takes care work into consideration is also vital to enhance both children's and women's rights. Increasing the value of social transfers to provide additional resources for supporting care provision is important during COVID-19, where care work has intensified for many women and girls. For example, adequate universal child benefits can ensure that caregivers get the economic support they need to care for their children. Paid parental/maternity/paternity leave *for all* would ensure that parents have the time they need to bond with their children, care for them and support their own wellbeing, while also providing access to additional resources for supporting care provisions. Employment guarantee schemes can ensure that they provide safe, quality childcare alongside economic empowerment for parents of all genders. Where they don't, this can result in unintended negative consequences, including lower female participation, parents being forced to resort to expensive private sector options, and poor or even dangerous care provision for children.

C. Increase access to services that support protective outcomes

In addition, the evidence and learning from social assistance, social insurance and social care services indicate that social protection can increase access to key services and support in response to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence. For example, social assistance and health insurance can increase health service utilization for children and mothers. This is key for ensuring that children and women get the care to which they are entitled. Health services can also offer another entry point for providing key information, resources, and referral mechanisms for child protection issues, just as access to schools provides a potential pathway to a protective environment as well as a place to learn. Another direct way of increasing access to Child Protection and GBV services is to strengthen capacity of Social Protection frontline workers (for example, colleagues distributing cash in a cash transfer programme) to provide referrals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the rationale, evidence, and success of social protection initiatives in supporting child protection outcomes, the following are a set of recommendations that can be considered by governments, donors, UN agencies and NGOs.

Financing, Policy & Coordination

- **Urgently take stock of the current social protection coverage for children and put in place ambitious but feasible measures for financing expanded coverage**, such as universal child benefits – with the goal of working towards progressive realization of universal coverage. Specifically develop costed, multi-year plans to achieve a progressive expansion in the coverage of social protection schemes for children, aiming towards programmes with clear linkages to child protection systems and child protection relevant goals – supported by financial commitments of at least 1% of GDP over the medium- to longer term.
- **Influence policy and do joint advocacy:** The development of national policies or strategies for social protection can serve as an entry-point to promote child protection in the design of social protection, and indeed the inverse, with child protection strategies or policies offering an entry point to further the goal of expanding coverage towards universal social protection, including extending benefits to include refugees, migrants (including children on the move), displaced populations, and other vulnerable groups. Joint advocacy between child protection and social protection actors in both the development and humanitarian sectors and different line ministries (where relevant) should also be promoted to support better integrated and multi-sectoral programming.
- **Joint planning and coordination between relevant Social Protection and Child Protection departments and coordination groups:** Work together to identify the contribution that different services can lead to coordinated and integrated programming. For example, joint planning and design of social assistance programs can ensure that child vulnerability and risk drivers are considered, and child protection outcomes are embedded. This could be done through social protection or humanitarian coordination mechanisms depending on context, such as cluster

meetings or social protection coordination meetings, where social protection and child protection actors come together for planning and coordination.

- **Map and assess policy and programme landscape jointly to identify gaps and opportunities to embed in SP and CP systems/responses.** Child protection assessments should map the social policy landscape in the country of operation with formal and informal social protection services and opportunities to align social protection systems and policies with national child protection strategies.

Programme Design & Implementation

- **Ensure safeguarding, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse policies and protection mainstreaming in all social protection services.** This is crucial to ensure that no further harm is imposed on vulnerable children and their families. Examples of this include adhering to safeguarding measures in CVA and other forms of social assistance.
- **Participation of children and other beneficiaries in the process:** Ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable children, their caretakers, women, and marginalised groups, as well as directly affected populations more broadly, are included in the design and implementation of child-sensitive social protection programs and promote social accountability mechanisms. Local CSOs and grassroots women's rights organisations can be key in understanding context and identifying and reaching particularly vulnerable groups.
- **Design holistic integrated programming:** Though they often sit in the same Ministry at country level, for social protection programs to achieve child protection outcomes and vice versa, holistic integrated programming with other child protection services such as case management and psychosocial support is required. **This should include investment in the workforce who deliver Child Protection and Social Protection services.** For integration to work, vacancies must be filled and there must be increased capacity building along with training on Integrated Management System (IMS) and Child Protection to enhance skills that would allow for more collaboration.
- **Build on learning from existing innovative and successful pilots of child and gender sensitive social protection models, particularly in support of child protection outcomes.** These pilots should be rigorously evaluated where appropriate, to better understand the impact that different Cash Plus components may have on overall results for children, including key learnings to inform the scale-up on a national level.

M&E and Research

- **Build further evidence of impact:** It is critical to understand what components or approaches are making a difference in the lives of children in order to pursue more support for strengthening child protection in social protection programmes.
 - **Develop clear monitoring and evaluation systems:** Existing programs should address the evidence gap in how social protection programs could leverage child protection outcomes, setting baselines and looking to measure impacts against key outcomes.
 - **Gather sex, age and disability disaggregated data** to enable analysis and inform theories of change that support child protection outcomes in social protection work across stable, fragile and humanitarian contexts.
 - **Build evidence that has external validity** designed to address issues of cross-national policy transfer and scaling.
 - **Plan for safe and efficient storage and sharing of recipients' data** through the development and roll-out of information management systems and technology infrastructure.

Take a systems-wide approach

- **Governments and those providing technical assistance: Ensure that lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic are learned, and design social protection programmes and systems to be gender-responsive, inclusive, and shock-responsive.** This will encompass a wide range of actions, including measures such as:
 - Strengthen and keep up-to-date social registries that can quickly identify and reach households in need in the event of a shock, including referrals of children and families identified through child protection case management;
 - Put forecast-based action systems in place that can scale-up support in anticipation of future shocks in order to help prevent households from needing to engage in harmful, negative coping mechanisms particularly those affecting children's nutrition, access to school, and exposure to violence, child labour and child marriage;
 - Ensure there are preparedness plans with agreed procedures for all programmes to flex and respond in the event of different shocks; and strengthen the digitisation of payment mechanisms not only to increase financial inclusion of households, but also to ensure they can be reached even in the event of large shocks;
 - Donors allow for design flexibility to ensure that social protection programs respond to the ever-changing risk factors and circumstances that vulnerable children face throughout their life cycles.

ANNEX 1. CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: Comprehensive Child Sensitive Social Protection

Save the Children CSSP model in Somalia is the most comprehensive scheme in Somaliland. It offers a regular income guarantee to families through a monthly cash benefit, with the goal of expanding it into a comprehensive child benefit and building the capacity of MESAF to invest in all children across Somaliland.²⁹

CASE STUDY 2: Cash Plus programs and protective outcomes for children

Cash Plus programs have proven to have positive child outcomes, including child protection, both in development and humanitarian contexts. For instance, in 2018, Save the Children implemented a multi-purpose cash transfer 'Plus' program in response to the influx of Venezuelans into Colombia. The program aimed at covering vulnerable households' basic needs and preventing them from resorting to negative coping strategies, which notably affect the protection and nutritional status of children. In addition to the monthly transfer of multi-purpose cash grants, Save the Children provided beneficiaries with Child Protection and Nutrition support, consisting of IYCF activities and provision of recreational and psychosocial support through child friendly spaces and case management. Results from the program highlighted the effectiveness of Multi Purpose Cash Assistance as a tool to tackle the financial causes of shelter, WASH and food insecurity, as well as its positive multiplier effects on other sectors such as Child Protection, Nutrition and (to a certain extent) Education and Health, particularly when combined with soft complementary activities.

CASE STUDY 3: Participation of children and other beneficiaries

World Vision's Citizen Voice and Action community-based social accountability program is key to effectively implementing child-sensitive social protection, as it facilitates constructive dialogue between local governments and communities to improve both the quantity and quality of basic social services for improving children's well-being.³⁰

CASE STUDY 4: Social protection programs supporting protective outcomes for children

Parenting programs linked to social protection programs have proven to be effective in promoting child protection outcomes in several countries. A parenting program introduced by Save the Children for beneficiaries of the government Child Grant in Nepal resulted in substantial reduction in both violence and neglect of children.³¹

²⁹ Save the Children Somaliland. (2020). [Scoping and Sector Review of Social Protection in Somaliland](#).

³⁰ World Vision. (2020). [COVID-19 & Urgent Need for Child-Sensitive Social Protection](#).

³¹ Save the Children International. (2019). [Assessment of a Parenting Pilot Intervention Linked to the Child Grant in Nepal](#).