

Chapter 10

The Role of Social Protection Policies in Fighting Poverty and Inequality During COVID–19: Challenges and Consequences in the Developing World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is aiming at exploring the potential role of social protection policies in alleviating the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It adopts two levels of a comparative approach. The first level explores different approaches in adopting and implementing social protection policies and schemes. The second presents the factors that affect the efficiency of social protection policies by comparing different responsive policies adopted by some developing countries to COVID-19 multifaceted challenge. It argues that the success of each responsive social protection program depends on many factors, such as sustainability, coverage and inclusion, etc. The main finding is that social protection policies have been designed for several decades relied on the poverty alleviation approach which was for treating consequences of poverty not the main causes of misery. The COVID-19 outbreak made it clear that there is a need to adopt human rights approach in designing and implementing social protection policies.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social protection as the main tool of the welfare state social policy dates back to the twenties of the last century. Since then, it has been a main part of the governments and international organizations' responses to devastating events, which brought tough challenges, such as the great depression in 1930, structural adjustment policies in 1980s and 1990s in many developing countries, and the

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financial crisis in 2008. Social protection programs as part of social policy helped to tame social and economic side effects of these substantial events.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, social protection programs as tools of social policy are considered as an effective way to fight poverty and vulnerability in developing countries. There are many success stories from different developing countries which implemented promising social protection programs, such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Indonesia. Their success relied on many factors that related to the political context and the type of program they adopted, and most importantly the methodology used in the selection of targeted groups. Investments in social protection have been a key element in countries' recovery from major crises. For example, after World War II in 1950s' Europe, in Asia during the 1997 financial crisis, then the 2008 financial crisis, and last but not least the COVID-19 pandemic. All these interventions proved that social protection policies are not fire bridges during crises, but they play a key role in the improvement of human development and human capital in any society (Leisering, Lutz, 2020:16).

All stakeholders, including international organizations, governments and civil society organization and many social initiatives, have been involved in these efforts during COVID-19 crisis. However, the main actor was the National government. The total expenditure of 156 countries was 2,9\$ trillion, which is 4,5 higher than during global recession in 2008 (Leisering, Lutz,2021: p6). Furthermore, expenditure on social protection during the crisis consisted of 18% of the total responsive package by countries. However large gaps in coverage in Africa and Asia still remain, i.e., in low-income countries' expenditure is on average 87 times lower than in high-income countries (Gentilini, Ugo,2022).

Statistics show that the inequality gap among different groups within countries has been widening, and some regions are still suffering from both extreme poverty rates and multidimensional inequality than other regions, which stalled poverty alleviation policies. A significant case in point is the Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA region ().

Social protection policies and interventions during Covid-19 have proven to be an important weapon in fighting the side effects of the pandemic. Therefore, they can be very helpful in putting the SDGs progress back on track. However, the severity of non-monetary effects on the most vulnerable, depends mainly on national governments and international organizations' reactions, which need to be comprehensive, sustainable, and adequate and most importantly respectful to beneficiaries' human rights (UN,2020:8), given the fact that 4 billion people- 45% of world population are covered by at least one social protection program, and 71% of world population are either covered by one social protection program or not covered at all during the beginning of the current crisis (Kristalina, Georgieva,2020:3).

This chapter will discuss the current and potential role of social protection policies and schemes of poverty alleviation, fighting inequality and preventing the devastating reverse in some development historical achievements, as well as the role of social protection in helping countries to achieve SDGs.

In this regard, this chapter poses a number of questions, as follows:

1. How did COVID-19 affect extreme poverty reduction programs? And what is the new poor phenomenon?
2. How could social protection policies help to mitigate socio-economic fallouts from crises?
3. According to different international experiences, how can social protection policies reverse the decline in extreme poverty alleviation and the widening inequality gap? Is there any new approach to face the new challenges with the Coronavirus outbreak?

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