

Qatar: 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.

In Qatar, the impact of COVID-19, combined with a contraction of hydrocarbon revenues, led to a decline in gross domestic product (GDP) of 3.6 per cent in 2020 (World Bank 2021). Migrant workers and their families are among the most affected population groups, as many experienced lay-offs, pay cuts and delays in payments during the pandemic. As for children, lockdowns, social distancing and school closures were sources of profound mental distress (UNICEF 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 government-provided responses in Qatar: three social assistance, two labour market and two social insurance interventions. In terms of social assistance interventions, Qatar focused on subsidies (two of the three responses). Food and medical supplies were exempt from customs duties for a period of 9 months, and rental fees and utility bills for households and businesses were waived. The country also automatically renewed social security cards, to ensure vulnerable groups continued receiving cash assistance.

In addition, Qatar granted free testing and treatment for COVID-19, provided through the public health system to all nationals and residents, with no need to possess a health card or a Qatari identity document. The government also set aside over USD800 million to pay the wages of foreign workers who had to stay in quarantine or were undergoing treatment for COVID-19, regardless of whether they were entitled to sick leave or not.

In the child-sensitive assessment conducted by the IPC-IG in collaboration with UNICEF MENARO, social assistance interventions (cash, in-kind and school feeding programmes) were analysed considering six child-sensitive features: responses targeting children; programmes that increased the benefit value according to the number of children in the household; and programmes providing linkages to children's access to nutrition, education, health/water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and child protection services. Given this scope, only the automatic renewal of the social security cards was considered child-sensitive, as it explicitly targeted vulnerable children, and the benefits increased for larger households.

It is essential to highlight that, besides social assistance, other types of social protection programmes (e.g. wage subsidies) and schemes that do not explicitly include child-related features in their design can have indirect positive effects on children, but they were not assessed in the study. Nevertheless, the lack of emergency social assistance programmes other than subsidies, such as cash transfers, in Qatar is noteworthy. These policies are essential to protect the most vulnerable groups, helping them to overcome crises in the medium and long term. When they include child-sensitive features, these measures can also prevent an increase in child poverty rates and guarantee safe conditions for children's development.

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

- Subsidies, particularly universal, untargeted subsidies, are potentially regressive tools of social protection. Further assessment of the impact of the subsidies adopted by Qatar during the pandemic is recommended.
- Explore further the potential of social assistance responses—including cash transfers—with clearer child-sensitive features, not only in times of crisis but also as part of the routine social protection system.
- It is recommended that the Government of Qatar examine the feasibility of extending its national social protection system to foreign workers and their families. Proactive outreach and enrolment will be required to identify vulnerable households/individuals in remote areas and urban settlements.
- The expansion of the social protection system in Qatar should be accompanied by further efforts to increase the fiscal space for social protection and secure sufficient funding to ensure an adequate response to future 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.

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World Bank. 2021. "GDP growth (annual %) - Qatar." World Bank website. <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=QA>>. Accessed 14 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>>.