

# Saudi Arabia: Design, implementation and child-sensitivity of social protection responses to COVID-19<sup>1</sup>

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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.

Saudi Arabia's economy has been greatly affected by the pandemic and the sharp decline in oil prices. Saudi gross domestic product (GDP) registered a negative real growth rate of 4.1 per cent between 2019 and 2020 (General Authority for Statistics 2020). Furthermore, the International Labour Organization (2021) estimated that the country registered a total loss of working hours of 10.8 per cent in 2020—above the regional average (9 per cent). These indicators directly translate into deteriorated living conditions for families and children in the country. It is further important to highlight that migrant workers represent 80 per cent of the private-sector workforce in Saudi Arabia; they are generally informal workers.

Against this background, social protection has been fundamental to the response to the crisis. Up to the end of March 2021, the IPC-IG mapping of social protection responses to COVID-19 in the Global South<sup>2</sup> identified eight social protection responses in Saudi Arabia: four labour market, three social assistance and one social insurance response. The Saudi government announced a set of support packages for the private sector, amounting to USD61 billion, and allocated USD1 billion as part of its scheme for special social transfers targeting families with low incomes.

Two of the social assistance responses mapped were built on the pre-existing Social Insurance Pension scheme, which consists of monthly payments for vulnerable families funded by the Zakat.

First, the verification of eligibility for the Social Insurance Pension scheme was temporarily suspended, and a one-off top-up was paid during Ramadan in 2020. Heads of households received SAR1,000 (USD266.60),<sup>3</sup> and dependents received SAR500 (USD133.30).

Second, the government allowed a temporary exemption (for 3 months) from paying social housing fees for beneficiaries of the Social Insurance Pension scheme. It also provided free treatment for all people infected with COVID-19, regardless of their migratory status.

The assessment conducted by the IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO considered measures child-sensitive if they targeted children, increased the benefit value for larger households or contained benefits that were linked to health, education, nutrition or child protection services. Given this scope,

only one intervention in Saudi Arabia was considered child-sensitive, namely the one-off top-up of the Social Insurance Pension during Ramadan. This programme had two child-sensitive features: it explicitly targeted children (including divorced women with children, widows with children, and orphans) and offered higher benefit values to larger families.<sup>4</sup> A total of SAR1.850 billion was directed to this initiative. However, it was only a one-off top-up.

It is essential to highlight that, besides social assistance, other types of social protection programmes (e.g. wage subsidies) that do not explicitly include child-related features in their design can have indirect positive effects on children, although they were outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the range of social assistance measures were limited to the top-up of the Social Insurance Pension Scheme, which is noteworthy. More of such policies are essential, as they provide income support to the most vulnerable during emergencies and can enable 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 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 Saudi Arabia in terms of shock-responsive and child-sensitive social protection are the following.

- Expand social assistance responses that provide explicit support for children's needs and are linked to relevant services, such as child protection, in regular times as well as during shocks.
- Analyse the feasibility of including migrant workers and their families, including undocumented migrants, in social protection programmes.
- Improve the availability of data on the responses to COVID-19, to allow more accurate assessment and informed policy- and decision-making.

## 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.

General Authority for Statistics. 2020. *Gross Domestic Product 2020*. Riyadh: General Authority for Statistics. <<https://t.ly/N7Tb>>. Accessed 14 July 2022.

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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. Exchange rate as of 6 April 2022.
4. Information on the cap for the benefit value was not found online.