

# **Role of social protection in reducing the burden of public health and social measures during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence review**


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**A technical collaboration between WHO, Tampere University, and ILO**

## Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM)

- PHSM are **non-pharmaceutical interventions** to reduce the risk and scale of infectious disease transmission
- operate by decreasing exposure to pathogens and/or making exposure safer
- the first and sometimes the only intervention available at the onset of an outbreak
- multi-sectoral and multi-level implementation



**Public health benefits**

- Reduce #cases, morbidity and mortality
- Reduce the burden on the healthcare system
- Continue business and essential service operations
- Buy time to develop and produce vaccines and treatments

**Unintended negative consequences**

- Health outcomes: mental health conditions, domestic violence, substance use, interrupted health service utilization
- Socio-economic outcomes: unemployment, interrupted learning, food insecurity, slowed economy, poverty

## Health and socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19 and public health and social measures

Examples of negative health consequences

Increase in malaria and tuberculosis incidence

Decline in childhood vaccinations

Examples of negative socio-economic consequences:

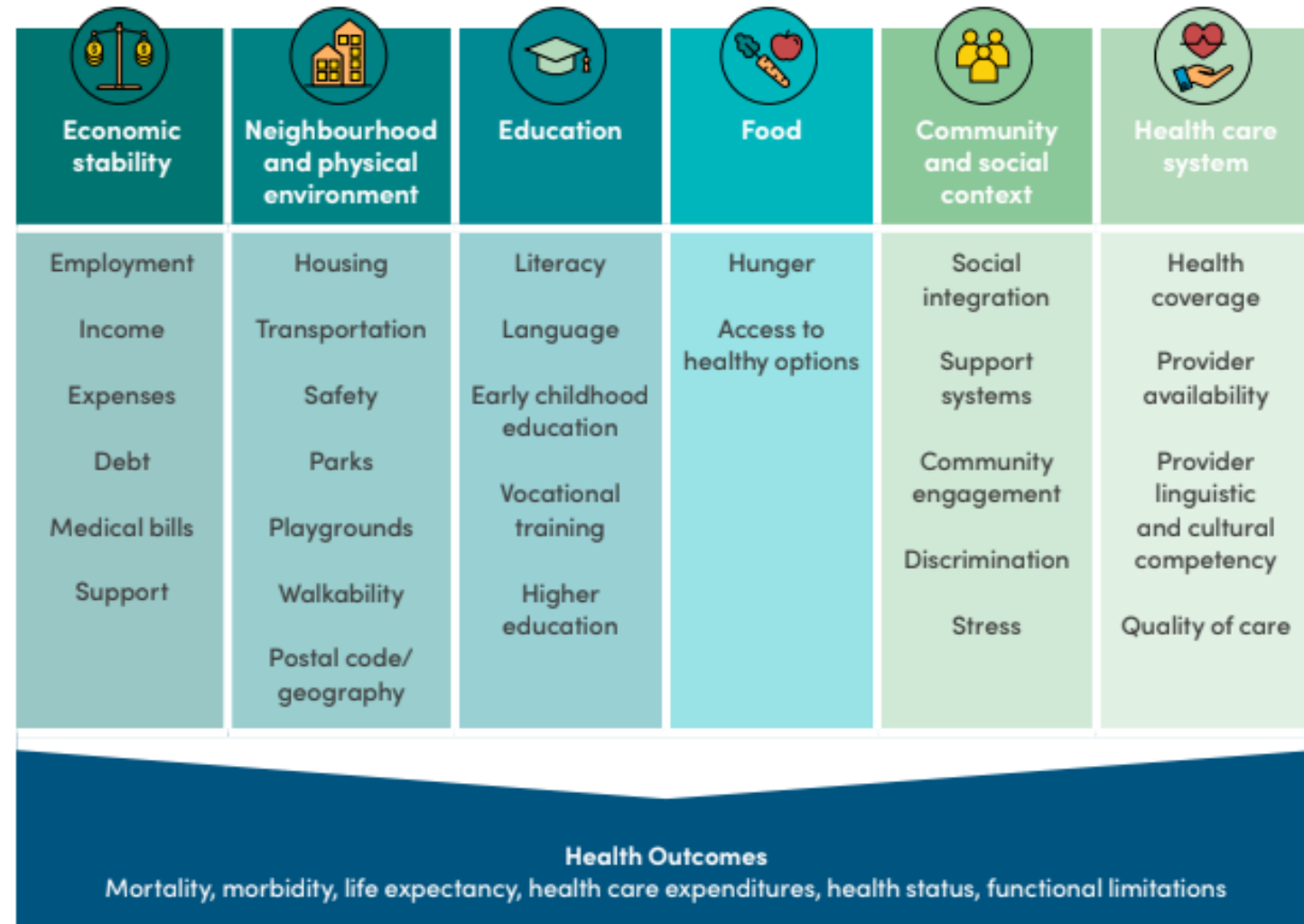
Reversal of three years of progress with poverty reduction

Increase in food insecurity

Children affected by school closures

Decrease in GDP per capita

## Social Determinants of Health



# Role of social protection during health emergencies

- Social protection: A set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout the life cycle
- Goal of social protection during emergencies: (i) reach those most in need, including those otherwise excluded from regular national social protection schemes; (ii) provide adequate support; and (iii) be delivered in a timely manner
- Positive impact seen during TB and HIV epidemics
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 50% of the work population had access to at least one social protection measures but often inadequacy of benefits and exclusion of vulnerable and marginalized communities
- During the pandemic: Scale up of existing benefits and introduction of emergency measures



## Why a scoping review on social protection and unintended negative consequences of PHSM?

- Social protection policy monitoring available but little known about effectiveness of the measures specifically for health equity
- Raise awareness for the importance of a multi-sectoral, equitable and balanced implementation of PHSM to avoid unnecessary harm
- Provide policy options and introduce the concepts of social protection to health policy-makers



# Results

- 1079 social protection policies and programmes from 316 studies and reports
- 523 social protection measures were newly introduced, 272 adapted for the emergency needs

Benefit	Example	Country income level				No. of multicountry studies	Total
		Low	Lower-middle	Upper-middle	High		
<b>In cash: Programme providing cash benefits to individuals or households</b>							<b>742</b>
Family maintenance	Child allowance	26	96	178	110	15	425
Unemployment	Income support	3	17	40	114	2	176
Sickness	Paid sick leave	2	7	7	55	3	74
Old age	Pension	NA	7	17	3	2	29
Disability	Invalidity pension	NA	1	10	6	NA	17
Other	Deferrals on mortgage payments	NA	1	1	7	NA	9
Maternity/paternity/parental	Paid parental leave	NA	NA	3	4	NA	7
Education	Tuition fee assistance	NA	NA	3	NA	NA	3
Housing	Rent allowance	NA	NA	NA	2	NA	2

# Scoping review - evidence

Benefit		Country income level				No. of multicountry studies	Total
By contingency	Example	Low	Lower-middle	Upper-middle	High		
<b>In kind: Programme providing goods, services or vouchers to allow individuals or households to obtain defined goods or services</b>							<b>230</b>
Goods	Food	16	39	48	30	1	<b>134</b>
Services	Skills training as part of an employment programme	1	11	19	37	5	<b>73</b>
Vouchers	Voucher for groceries	0	2	10	10	1	<b>23</b>
<b>General labour and fiscal measures: Measures and policies directed at stimulating and regulating the labour market or using taxation and government spending</b>							<b>24</b>
Taxation	VAT decrease	1	4	8	11		<b>24</b>
<b>Moratorium on evictions or other rent relief: Programmes to protect tenants from being evicted due to unpaid rent or measures to reduce or defer payment of rent</b>							<b>20</b>
Moratorium	Rent deferral	0	2	2	15	1	<b>20</b>
<b>Utility or financial fee waiver: Programme providing a fee waiver allowing individuals or households to access a defined good or service or reimbursing a defined good or service</b>							<b>63</b>
Waiver	For household electricity costs	6	18	15	23	1	<b>63</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>55</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>361</b>	<b>427</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>1079</b>

NA: not applicable; VAT: value-added tax.

# Scoping review on social protection and PHSM consequences

## - “Effectiveness” results (n = 44 studies)



### Food insecurity (n = 32)

- The more methodologically robust studies especially confirmed positive effects of social assistance, social insurance and other measures (e.g. tax credits and minimum wage) on food security across different country income levels
  - Positive equity effects (n = 3)



### Financial and employment insecurity (n = 18)

- The evidence illustrates the beneficial effects of social insurance on financial and employment security, but presents a more mixed picture for other social protection measures



### Dietary quality (n = 3)

- No effects found





# Scoping review on social protection and PHSM consequences

## - “Effectiveness” results (n = 44 studies)



### **Social attitudes and cohesion (n = 2)**

- Positive trend for association between cash transfers and social cohesion, attitudes towards emergency response measures and trust in government



### **Educational investment (n = 1)**

- One experiment from Colombia found a positive effect of repeated cash transfers on recipients' investment in their children's education



### **Mental and physical health (n = 15)**

- The evidence supports a positive effect of social protection on mental and physical health
  - In-cash, in-kind, social insurance and eviction moratoria were seen to have positive effects



# Scoping review on social protection and PHSM consequences - Qualitative evidence (n = 25 studies)



## Positive experiences

- Emphasized the usefulness of social protection for health as experienced by beneficiaries
- Pointed to positive associations between social assistance and food and housing security
- Highlighted the power of social protection to help vulnerable and previously marginalized populations feel included in society

## Challenges

- Emphasised the complexity of providing social protection, including the need to address access barriers for different groups, challenges in administering these interventions, particularly in emergency settings, and in identifying the most vulnerable populations

# Research implications

- Issues on conducting research
  - geographical coverage of studies
  - research designs
  - appropriate comparators
  - implementation science and value assessments
  - Test interventions outside the emergency context
- Promote multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approaches
- Prioritize evidence for decision-making while acknowledging complexity
- Apply an equity lens and disaggregate data



# Conclusion: Implications for policy and action

## Integration of social protection into health emergency preparedness and response

- Develop strong social systems outside of emergencies to make them more efficient and resilient
- The effect of social protection is tied to the context, population and its implementation
- Evaluate emergency social protection measures to understand whether they achieve the desired impact and reach those who are most in need

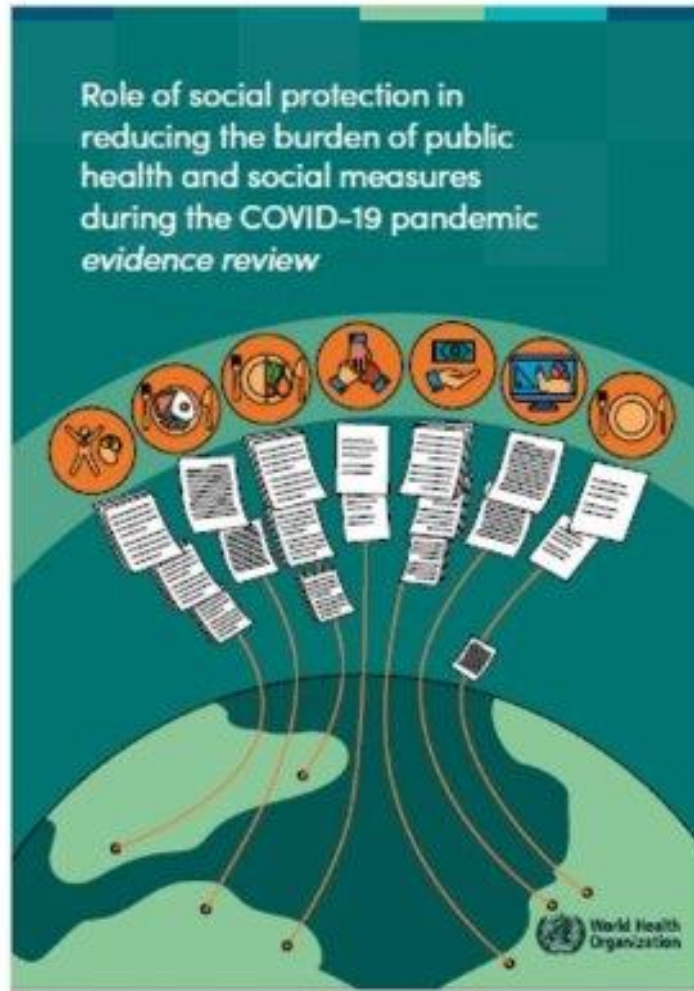
## Conclusion:

- Positive effects despite emergencies
- Adaptable systems allow broadening coverage and increasing benefits – quick scale-up
- Social protection is beneficial to mitigate the unintended negative consequences from PHSM during health emergencies
- Stronger systems are more resilient – preparedness is key to responding to crises



## Access the evidence review

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Find the report here:

<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/379704>



# Thank you!



# References

- *The Sustainable Development Goals report 2023: special edition. Towards a rescue plan for people and planet. New York: United Nations*
- *Emergencies: coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic [website]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024*
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