

Media Update

2 March 2023

UNICEF & ILO

JOINT PRESS RELEASE

Number of children without critical social protection increasing globally – ILO and UNICEF

Multiple crises set to plunge more children into poverty creating an urgent need to scale-up social protection; new report warns

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GENEVA/NEW YORK, 2 March 2023 - The number of children without access to social protection is increasing year-on-year, leaving them at risk of poverty, hunger and discrimination, according to a new report released by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF today.

More than a billion reasons: The urgent need to build universal social protection for children warns that an additional 50 million children aged 0-15 missed out on a critical social protection provision – specifically, child benefits (paid in cash or tax credits) – between 2016 and 2020, driving up the total to 1.46 billion children under 15 globally.

“Ultimately, strengthened efforts to ensure adequate investment in universal social protection for children, ideally through universal child benefits to support families at all times, is the ethical and rational choice, and the one that paves the way to sustainable development and social justice,” said Shahra Razavi, Director of the Social Protection Department at the ILO.

According to the report, child and family benefit coverage rates fell or stagnated in every region in the world between 2016 and 2020, leaving no country on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of achieving substantial social protection coverage by 2030. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for

example, coverage fell significantly from approximately 51 per cent to 42 per cent. In many other regions, coverage has stalled and remains low. In Central Asia and Southern Asia; Eastern Asia and South-eastern Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; and Western Asia and Northern Africa coverage rates have been at around 21 per cent, 14 per cent, 11 per cent and 28 per cent respectively since 2016.

Failure to provide children with adequate social protection leaves them vulnerable to poverty, disease, missed education, and poor nutrition, and increases their risk of child marriage and child labour.

Globally, children are twice as likely as adults to live in extreme poverty – those struggling to survive on less than US\$1.90 (PPP*) a day – approximately 356 million children. A billion children also live in multidimensional poverty – meaning without access to education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation, or water. Children living in multidimensional poverty increased by 15 per cent during the COVID-19 pandemic, reversing previous progress in reducing child poverty and highlighting the urgent need for social protection.

Moreover, the pandemic highlighted that social protection is a critical response in times of crisis. Nearly every government in the world either rapidly adapted existing schemes or introduced new social protection programmes to support children and families, but most fell short of making permanent reforms to protect against future shocks, according to the report.

“As families face increasing economic hardship, food insecurity, conflict, and climate-related disasters, universal child benefits can be a lifeline,” said Natalia Winder-Rossi, UNICEF Director of Social Policy and Social Protection. “There is an urgent need to strengthen, expand and invest in child-friendly and shock-responsive social protection systems. This is essential to protect children from living in poverty and increase resilience particularly among the poorest households.”

The report emphasizes that all countries, irrespective of their level of development, have a choice: whether to pursue a “high-road” strategy of investment in reinforcing social protection systems, or a “low-road” strategy that misses out on necessary investments and will leave millions of children behind.

To reverse the negative trend, the ILO and UNICEF urge policymakers to take decisive steps to attain universal social protection for all children, including:

- Investing in child benefits which offer a proven and cost-effective way to combat child poverty and ensure children thrive.
- Providing a comprehensive range of child benefits through national social protection systems that also connect families to crucial health and social services, such as free or affordable high-quality childcare.
- Building social protection systems that are rights-based, gender-responsive, inclusive, and shock responsive to address inequities and deliver better results for girls and women, migrant children, and children in child labour for example.
- Securing sustainable financing for social protection systems by mobilizing domestic resources and increasing budget allocation for children.
- Strengthening social protection for parents and caregivers by guaranteeing access to decent work and adequate benefits, including unemployment, sickness, maternity, disability, and pensions.

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Notes to Editors

*PPP refers to purchasing power parity. Purchasing power parity is a measure of the price of specific goods in different countries and is used to compare absolute purchasing power across countries.

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About the ILO

Advancing social justice, promoting decent work

The International Labour Organization is the United Nations agency for the world of work. We bring together governments, employers and workers to drive a human-centred approach to the future of work through employment creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue.

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

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