Ep. 5 | What's changed since COVID: Responses, knowledge sharing, and advice

Joanne Sharpe: Hello and welcome to the social protection podcast. I'm your host, Jo Sharpe. The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for people and governments all over the world, as well as massive new demands for social protection. It has also sparked an extraordinary collective effort to track social protection developments, extract analysis of trends from huge datasets, delve into the details of implementation and lessons learned, and, most importantly, share all this knowledge to inform more effective responses. Our team at socialprotection.org has played a role in that collective effort, hosting a dedicated online community, webinars, papers, and conferences devoted to sharing knowledge on COVID-19.

And this month, social protection.org is celebrating its 6ᵗʰ anniversary. So, what better time to focus in on the remarkable efforts of social protection experts to mobilise knowledge and provide advice to inform the response to the pandemic?

This will be the first of two episodes that explore that question. So, we'll be putting our guests on the spot and asking them for their takes. Our guests today are Maya Hammad and Edward Archibald.

Maya is a researcher at the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, which earlier this year launched an online interactive dashboard that tracks COVID-19 responses in the Global South. Edward Archibald is an independent consultant working with the Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19: Expert Advice Helpline, better known by its acronym SPACE, which has been working to advise governments across the globe. Edward and Maya, welcome to the social protection podcast!

Edward Archibald: Thanks for having me, Jo.

Maya Hammad: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Joanne Sharpe: Can I start by asking you both to tell us a little bit about your work during the pandemic?

Edward Archibald: Thanks, Jo. In March or April of 2020, and as we all know, countries across the globe began considering the use or adaptation of social protection systems and programmes at that time and to respond to COVID-19.

At that time, FCDO and GIZ jointly set up an advisory helpline and, as you said, it was called SPACE. So, it had a multidisciplinary expert team and that the aim was to support decision-makers across national governments, donors, implementing partners with thinking through how to establish, maintain or adapt their systems or their programmes to meet these needs.

So, we did this through several different ways. Some of it was through bespoke clinics where we provided advice to one or more of those actors. We also developed a suite of guidance

documents. My first assignment with SPACE happened to be providing advice to FCDO in Zambia and the request consisted of a really rapid half-day appraisal of all these documents related to the proposed social protection response to COVID in Zambia and central to that was this 40- or 50-page concept note that the UN in Zambia had prepared.

It was a one UN approach. So, we analysed the document and prepared for a call the next day with FCDO Zambia, and we used SPACE's strategy matrix that had been developed. Then, we held a clinic the next day with FCDO Zambia and then immediately wrote up the analysis and the discussion and to turn that around within 24 hours or so.

So, it all happened within basically two days that we had to get across the situation, analyse the options, have the call, and then write it up and deliver it to them. That's when I realised that it was going to be a demand for our services, but also that we were going to be providing very rapid advice. So, in terms of mobilizing and sharing knowledge, SPACE published around 30 documents, guidance or analysis, but also some other incredibly useful resources, such as a living catalog of documents related to COVID-19 social protection responses, separated by countries and themes. It's a phenomenal piece of work.

Joanne Sharpe: Maya, what about you? Can you tell me a little bit about the IPC-IG dashboard and the work you've been doing?

Maya Hammad: Sure. So, from March 2020 until March 2021, the IPC-IG was working on a dashboard of national social protection responses to COVID across the entire Global South. The dashboard is currently online and available at socialprotection.org.

It has more than a thousand measures, the majority of which are a social assistance followed by labour markets, and then social insurance measures. The dashboard has several indicators, which have actually been prepared in collaboration with SPACE colleagues. These indicators analyse measures from a shock-responsive perspective and cover topics, such as the target groups of each measure, the coverage, how adequate benefits are calculating that utilising a percentage of minimum wage or as a percentage of minimum household expenditure.

So, for me personally, as an Arabic speaker, I was involved mostly in data collection and collation for the dashboards MENA region and one thing that's really good about the dashboard is that it's very interactive. It allows you to filter in based on the social protection instrument, component or the region, which is very good for researchers and just generally people who are interested to see what countries have actually implemented throughout the last year or so.

Joanne Sharpe: What are your thoughts on what it takes for this kind of research and evidence mobilizing this kind of knowledge so that it can influence policymaking?

Maya Hammad: So actually, what we've worked on at the IPC was we've utilised the dashboard, we've had to prepare a report for the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support at the UNDP about the lessons learned and the innovative practices that have emerged from

COVID and how they facilitated, most importantly, the inclusion of groups that were traditionally excluded in social protection in normal times prior to COVID.

And based on all of the country examples that we've collated in the dashboard, we tried to highlight some of the innovations in beneficiary identification, in registration, payments modalities, and communication, but also provide some recommendations for how these practices can be optimally implemented and ensure better inclusion in the future or in future crises or just general social protection practices.

But, generally, it's always better to zoom in on what's relevant to the country, but also to transform them into accessible formats, such as briefs and short presentations. From our work at the IPC, we've noted that lots of policymakers have a preference towards one-on-one technical sessions where examples can be presented, but there's scope for questions and answers and more discussion about really what works and what would be more suitable in a specific country context.

Joanne Sharpe: So, following on from that, Ed, can you talk a little bit about how you've seen the advisory work that you and your colleagues from SPACE have been providing? And how that has actually interacted with decision-making on the part of governments around the social protection response to COVID?

Edward Archibald: Yeah, it's a good question, Jo.

I think probably a couple of examples come to mind. One was with Yemen, where we were providing advice to the Social Fund for Development, which is a national agency. FCDO had requested that it sort of brokered the engagement that we had with them, introduced us to the Social Fund for Development.

Then, we worked with the Social Fund for several months. The work there was reviewing some of their approach to different areas of social protection and have they prioritise their work, how they're targeted. It was viewed by our counterparts there as extremely useful. That's the feedback that they provided throughout that time.

It gave them some heft, I think, on how they could strengthen their approach to gender and then they are taking forward our recommendations in that regard. The second main area of recommendations was in relation to the opportunities to foster stronger linkages with the humanitarian sector, and particularly regarding the interoperability agenda. They are also taking some of that forward.

Now, couple of things to mention one is we were deliberately pragmatic with our recommendations. We were not compiling this long laundry list of best practices that might never have been implemented. So instead, we worked really closely with them to understand what their constraints were and what would be achievable.

Joanne Sharpe: Of course, there has been a lot of attention throughout the pandemic on the COVID response, the good and maybe less good practices that have emerged, particularly

around social protection, lots of talk about the opportunities for how social protection can advance. Can I put you on the spot now and ask you each to name the two most significant changes to social protection that have emerged through this response?

Maya Hammad: I'd say the two key changes we've seen in the Global South are definitely digitization and more coordination. Digitization is something we've seen used more in registration and payments, but also in communication methods, case management, and grievance redress mechanisms. In most countries that we've looked at in the dashboard and in the report that I mentioned earlier, this wasn't used or not used as widely prior to COVID.

And I have to emphasise here that digitization is, of course, a double-edged sword as can like simultaneously include, but also exclude some people. But generally, what we've seen from COVID is that countries that had online registration systems or that created them were able to deliver assistance more rapidly than countries that didn't.

Two great examples here are Togo and Jordan, also countries that relied on digital payment modalities rather than in-person ones offered firstly faster, but also safer delivery options for the recipients. So, what we've seen is that COVID resulted in a shift to digital payments, mostly through bank transfers, but also through a lot of utilisation of mobile money, which wasn't prevalent as much in a lot of countries.

And what we've seen is that countries had to issue new regulations to ease the due diligence process surrounding know your customer regulations and create tiered accounts to enable things such as remote onboarding of individuals and allowing bank accounts to be opened with alternative IDs. In terms of coordination, one thing we've looked at in the report is the creation of Social Protection Emergency Response Committees in a lot of countries and this would usually be led by either the Ministry of Finance or the relevant ministry overseeing social protection. These committees were vital because they facilitated coordination across different sectors, between different governmental institutions, as well as coordination with the private sector and both local and international NGOs.

So, a good example here that I can think of is in Jordan, where the state-led zakat fund and the main in-kind assistance NGO and the Jordanian Red Crescent were all members of the National Emergency Response Committee headed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. And what that led to is coordination of the response, each entity knowing the beneficiaries that the other is providing assistance to and also the unification of the package provided within the in-kind assistance and the value. So that's one really good example that I can think of.

Edward Archibald: I'm just going to build on Maya's points because Malawi was an interesting example in terms of collaboration and coordination between development and humanitarian actors.

The point I specifically want to mention is there were pre-existing relationships. There was pre-existing work over about five or six years prior to COVID that came to the fore in the crisis, because of those relationships that were already in place, the understandings between agencies. So, coordination wasn't yet formalised, but people knew each other, and they knew the respective strengths of individuals and agencies.

And that played out in Malawi where there was a decision by government to divide up some of the design of an urban cash-transfer programme, according to the comparative advantage of the different agencies. So, UNICEF took leadership on the component in relation to payment mechanisms, because they've worked on that a lot.

I think WFP and ILO worked on gathering and analysing data to understand where these hotspots were in urban centres and what sort of transfer level that would be needed. So that was a really interesting example and I think it speaks to the value of a relationship established and developed over a period of time.

Another key change that I've seen is the growth of urban programming in environments or context where social assistance was previously or primarily a rural affair. So, examples that come to mind include Sierra Leone, Malawi, Ghana, and pivoting to an urban environment was a novel experience for many government officials who had previously only worked at a rural level.

So now they needed to work with local actors in urban environments. So, then I had to work with city councils or block leaders in township areas and, in some cases workers organisations, this is really quite new for a lot of these officials. Then another dimension of the urban expansion was large-scale registration and, sometimes, this was done door to door, sometimes it used existing lists of informal workers, there's the digitization element as well that Maya was referring to. So, I think this urban dimension, I mean, there are many aspects to it, but I've just highlighted a couple.

Joanne Sharpe: Coming back to Maya again. Are there shifts that have occurred that you think have received less attention that you think perhaps should be better known or better understood?

Maya Hammad: Yes, and it's quite linked to what Ed was saying about the role of local actors. So, what we've seen in the very early stages of the pandemic was that community-based organisations were the first responders in their community. Sometimes, even like neighbourhoods, towns, and villages, what sets up, what they would call, like volunteer emergency groups to provide immediate assistance to elderly and persons with disabilities.

This was especially relevant in countries that have very stringent lockdown measures and had not yet implemented social protection programmes. But, a lot of these arrangements were community-based, and they have been referenced in the literature, they have, definitely. What I don't believe is that they have been extensively explored to allow like a deeper exploration on how they can be streamlined into shock-responsive social protection in the future.

One country that we saw utilising these volunteer networks in the implementation of emergency responses was Syria. So, in Syria, they had these neighbourhood networks that were set up and these networks were tasked with the responsibility of assisting people, specifically persons with disabilities and elderly persons in their neighbourhoods, with the newly established digital registration process.

The point of that was so that they wouldn't be excluded from these programmes just because they don't know how to complete the process. We saw that in Egypt where the Ministry had worked alongside local actors and NGOs and the delivery of assistance. I think the agility of these networks is something we can learn from and something that countries can definitely utilise in the future.

Edward Archibald: A major shift that I've seen that I think has received less attention, I don't know if that's just the way that I've been doing these issues, but it's the leveraging of social insurance mechanisms. So, two of the countries I've worked on in the past year where that's occurred are Jordan and Fiji. In Jordan, it wasn't just about using the social insurance mechanism to provide financial support.

It was also about a drive to register as many informal workers and firms as possible, and they were able to register the same number of firms in 12 months that they usually registered in four to five years. So, there's a huge push for that formalization agenda and I think that social assistance is so dominant for many social protection practitioners, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and I count myself amongst that, but perhaps we don't always fully grasp the potential opportunities presented by social insurance. So, I think it would be really good to give more prominence to those issues going forward.

Joanne Sharpe: Maya, what about mistakes or missteps? What have we learned about what not to do?

Maya Hammad: So, what we've learned from the COVID response is definitely that, during a crisis, there's never a one size fits all solution, at all. Redundancies, or in other words, multiple pathways for registration and for payment delivery are vital to ensure that all people can access these services.

I've previously mentioned how digitization can be a double-edged sword and this is where we can consider the importance of having multiple pathways. One really interesting example that I've read in the literature is about fingerprints, biometric verification, and how it was used during COVID to verify the identities of beneficiaries in some countries.

But one thing about fingerprints verification is that persons with disabilities, for example, or those who have been engaged in manual labour for a long time might have eroded fingerprints, which means their identity can't be verified through this mechanism. So that's just an example for why different approaches to registration, to payments or to just beneficiary identification mechanisms are important for persons with disabilities, for people living in remote areas, and people who just generally don't have that much access to technology. It is needed so that we can reach all and ensure that inclusion covers all people.

Edward Archibald: I certainly agree on the accessibility and the inclusion point that Maya raised and another lesson I think is planning for the entire delivery chain right from the start.

I worked on one country where there was a new cash transfer programme, which involved a huge registration process, a couple of hundred thousand households, and the selected

payment modality was to use mobile money. Now the assumption of the registration phase was that the information provided to enumerators would be accurate, you know, the right phone number, the right ID, or the name whatever.

So, they took that as given, eligibility was determined, it went into the MIS and then they tried to make payments to these people and then they realised that, for so many of the households, the information that was in the mobile wallet did not match the information held by the MIS. So, the mobile network operators needed to do a huge process of verifying, getting new information and verifying this know your customer information.

So, I think planning for that right from the start, perhaps by getting the mobile network operators involved at the registration phase. It might've prevented issues arising further down the track.

Joanne Sharpe: So, considering all of these changes, advances, some of the setbacks, what do you think are the changes that will persist and the lessons that we may have ultimately learned?

Edward Archibald: I think some of these things will persist and time will tell. There's certainly a lot of talk, advice, and suggestions that things should change. It's not the first time that people have talked about the missing middle. It's not the first time people have talked about the importance of formalization. But, you know, if I think back to previous crisis of 2008 and 2009, there were steps taken after that to strengthen systems, which then have been leveraged in this response.

So, you know, I can look at a glass half-full and say optimistically that some lessons will be learned and carried through, but, at the moment, I'd say it's probably still too early to tell whether there'll be a sustained effort for the coming years.

Maya Hammad: I think some of the changes in processes related to social protection might stick for the future.

Building this on digitization as an example. In lots of countries who piloted or utilise digital payment mechanisms or digital registration mechanisms during COVID, we've seen them shift towards utilising that across the majority of their social assistance programmes. One example here is Egypt, which had utilised prepaid cards for the first time during the pandemic and this is something that they're considering implementing for their main cash assistance programme, even beyond the emergency response.

I think one thing that is more of a hope for the future is to maintain the strong coordination and communication between different governmental agencies and also what Ed was saying about the communication between different international agencies and governments as well, just so we can shift away from parallel social protection systems and move towards like strengthening actual national social protection systems.

This is a hope, but hopefully it can happen or be achieved.

Joanne Sharpe: The nature of the COVID pandemic and, of course, the response has changed a lot since those early lockdowns in 2020, that first triggered the major need for social protection. Vaccines have since become a focus, there is less tolerance than ever for those kinds of lockdowns and all the wild variants have continued to power the rapid spread of virus. How are social protection responses changing to meet the emerging needs and demands? Where should the focus be on terms of research and knowledge sharing for the future?

Edward Archibald: In terms of research and knowledge, one thing I want to suggest is just for us to be mindful as social protection practitioners of how a Ministry of Finance might view a continued investment in social protection for the coming years.

So, it'd be mindful of that and perhaps thinking differently in thinking to what extent does social protection contribute to other issues that might be on the mind of a Ministry of Finance:

To what extent does it support stability? How does it underpin prosperity? How does it contribute to multiplier effect in the local economy? What impact does it have on reducing income, poverty, and then potentially growth? How does it support human capital? How does it support economic reforms? How can it be climate smart? If the government wants their country or their economy to be climate smart, how can social protection help?

So, I think just putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, perhaps in, and thinking about their interests and how social protection can also support their agenda.

Maya Hammad: So, what we've seen from social protection measures being implemented is that as lockdowns were ease, as the economies opened up, countries moved away from providing social assistance benefits, and they were thinking more about how to plan for social insurance and labour markets measures. So, in some cases, this was also more industry-specific benefits, for example, tailored towards hard-to-hit sectors.

We've seen Egypt targeting the tourism industry a lot. So that's something interesting to consider and it links back to what Ed was saying about bringing more people into the conversation, such as the Ministry of Finance and this is where you can talk about the effect of social protection on economic recovery as a whole for the country and considering it as one of the vital pillars for economic recovery in the future.

But another thing within research and knowledge sharing that I would be interested to see in the future is more process evaluations of country's main emergency responses.

Ed mentioned a good point about thinking through the entire delivery chain from the beginning of planning for different programmes and, within process evaluation, it's always good to look at grievance redress mechanisms, which are often terribly excluded and not so focused on, because the mechanisms would entail either utilising a helpline or utilising a web-based platform and this is where also accessibility concerns come in as well. In terms of research, I think that's what I would be interested in seeing.

Joanne Sharpe: How can global initiatives like IPC-IG's tracker and initiatives of that ilk remain relevant as the pandemic evolves?

Maya Hammad: So, I think the tracker is a great way for us to get a global sense of the social protection response and see what has worked and what hasn't worked, what has been a programme that's allowed, for example, an extension in the duration of its provision and so on.

But I think a focus on recovery would require adhering more to country-specific research outputs that, at the end of the day, consider what the country priorities are and what their needs are in the upcoming period.

Edward Archibald: I think the living papers, the IPC dashboard had a huge role, but staying up to date is really crucial for those sorts of products and that's a massive task because staying up to date across so many different countries can be very substantial.

And one thing I want to flag here, I've just done some recent work that involved going back to look at what happened in previous crises, and it was so useful to have evidence documented of the impact of those different crises and very useful to draw on that now in understanding and advising on the role for social protection over the coming period.

So, I think that sort of work is relevant in real time for what should we do right now in the next six months, the next 12 months, 24 months. But then also, perhaps in 5 years, 7 years, or 10 years that information, the documented evidence, could still be extremely useful to decision makers in the future.

Joanne Sharpe: Just to finish off today, I'd be interested in your personal reflections on this global effort to provide a fast track and share knowledge on the COVID response. I mean, did you ever think that social protection would receive so much attention until reflections on why this kind of work is important.

Maya Hammad: I actually never envisaged social protection to receive so much attention. But then with COVID this became like everyday words that we heard on the news, we heard in conversation, we heard in speeches, and I think this is genuinely great because it sheds light just on how important social protection is to every society.

Edward Archibald: For me, I think of a number of dimensions. First, I've never been able to tell my parents what I do. And now it's a very concrete example of the work that I did. And relatedly, a very large proportion of the population, including in developed countries, recognise the importance of social protection and previously might've not given the credence or realised that it was significant and so that is critical

Joanne Sharpe: Edward and Maya. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today.

Edward Archibald: Pleasure to be here.

Maya Hammad: Thanks so much, Jo. I am really glad to be part of this.

Joanne Sharpe: Before we go, we'll end with our quick wins segment. This month we've asked our guests, Maya and Edward, to each bring in a piece of news or research that have sparked their interest and that we think you, the audience, should know more about.

Joanne Sharpe: Maya, what have you brought for us today?

Maya Hammad: Thanks, Jo. So personally, I'm very interested in the role of an obligatory donation that Muslims have to make, which is called Zakat. It's basically the social welfare system in Islam and what I was very impressed with, during the pandemic, is the increased role of state-led zakat funds, which collect Zakat. In the social protection response, generally, and, most particularly, was that we've seen them coordinate a lot more with governmental social assistance providers.

So, a great example that I'd like to highlight here is the informal workers cash-assistance programme in Egypt, which was coordinated and jointly implemented between the Ministry of Labour and the Zakat House so to speak. So, the Ministry of Labour provided cash assistance for informal workers for a three-month period, and, after that, the Egyptian Zakat House financed an additional six months to those that were not able to benefit from the Ministry's cash assistance.

So, they utilise the same eligibility criteria, almost the same registration mechanism and just the same benefits amount and so on. Before the pandemic, at the IPC, we've conducted some research on the operation of the zakat funds in the social protection sector and what we've seen was that, in the past, zakat funds often operated in isolation from social protection institutions or other governmental social assistance providers and they had really limited coordination with these entities, despite having similar objectives and eligibility criteria sometimes. So, for this reason, this coordination example that I gave you is the great win in my books really.

Joanne Sharpe: Thank you, Maya. It's fascinating to hear how those informal and formal safety nets are coming together in a relatively new way as the result of the pandemic. Thank you so much for bringing that example. Ed, over to you. What do you have for us today?

Edward Archibald: Thanks, Jo. So, I've got two resources that I've been using a lot in the last year or so. They both came out last year and I think they've been extremely helpful and timing.

One is by Thomas Bowen and Gabrielle Smith and it's about adaptive social protection and the delivery chain. It spells out the nine stages of the delivery chain with the lens of shock-responsive or adaptive social practice and I've been using it in reviewing and analysing responses and also in thinking about the design of social protection responses.

So, another key resource is the TRANSFORM component and the TRANSFORM guidance on shock-responsive social protection and, in particular, there's a table seven, which I find

incredibly useful as like a one- or two-page summary of key issues to consider when trying to diagnose the social protection system and understand what the priority issues should be.

Quite a few countries come to SPACE during COVID and say: Look, I want to make my social protection system here more shock-responsive, what should I do? And so, there's this summary table, which has a description of key actions, separated into themes, so you could potentially tackle one or more of those themes or those areas and it gives you questions to ask and against each of those themes to try and understand what's going to be of most use, what is going to be technically feasible, but also, very importantly, what's going to be politically feasible.

Joanne Sharpe: Thank you again to Edward and Maya and we'll put links to all of those resources in the show notes for this episode.

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Links from this episode:

[SPACE Useful COVID-19 and Social Protection Materials](#)

[Other SPACE publications](#)

[Methodological note for IPC-IG's dashboard](#)

[What are the lessons learned from the social protection response to the COVID-19 pandemic?](#)

[TRANSFORM: Full Document - SRSP](#)

[Adaptive Social Protection: The delivery chain and shock response](#)