

ODI series Ep. 1 | Social protection provisions to refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic

Jo Sharpe: Hello, you're listening to the Social Protection Podcast.

Over the next two months, we're hosting a special six part series that asks: has COVID-19 marked a turning point for social protection? It will take a detailed look at the effectiveness of social protection responses across the globe and the implications for policies and systems in the longer term. The series is brought to you by ODI and GIZ in partnership with socialprotection.org.

We are very excited to welcome [Francesca Bastagli](#) as our guest host for the series. Francesca is the director of the Equity and Social Policy Program and Principal Research Fellow at ODI. So over to her and we'll be back in your feed with a regular episode in August.

Francesca Bastagli: Hello, I'm [Francesca Bastagli](#) and I'll be your host on today's and the next five episodes of the Social Protection Podcast.

COVID-19 has brought new attention to social protection. The number of measures adopted across countries worldwide since the onset of the pandemic is unprecedented. As countries have stepped up efforts to contain the effects of the health threat of movement restrictions and job losses, but COVID-19 has also exposed social protection gaps in equities.

Some of the population groups most negatively affected by the crisis are also those excluded from or underserved by social protection. These six episodes are part of an [ODI](#) research project funded by [GIZ](#). That asks how effective have these responses been, especially for some of those hardest hit by the pandemic, including refugees, women, informal workers, and people living in urban areas.

What policies have enabled or hindered effective crisis response? And when many of the measures are temporary, what are their implications for social protection in the longterm? What are the risks and opportunities for strengthening social protection moving forward?

Over the six part series we'll be asking: has COVID-19 marked a turning point for social protection? In our ODI study with GIZ, we covered six thematic areas each with an accompanying paper. Each week of this podcast special series, I'll be joined by the lead author of one of the papers along with an expert discussing.

In this first episode, we're looking at social protection and refugees.

Even before, COVID-19 refugees were among the most marginalized in their host countries with restrictions on their access to employment, social protection, healthcare, and other public services. This left them especially exposed to the impacts of the pandemic. They're more likely than host populations to be working in highly impacted sectors, they've experienced job losses and eviction at higher rates and found themselves with fewer resources to rely on as earnings dried up. Efforts to extend or step up provision to refugees

include the extension of national social protection policies to cover them and the alignment or integration of humanitarian that responses with social protection government measures.

How effective have these been? What are the emerging lessons? And is this a turning point for extending social protection to refugees in a more permanent fashion?

Here to discuss with us today are Jessica Hagen-Zanker and [Andrew Mitchell](#). Jessica Hagen-Zanker is Senior Research Fellow at [ODI](#) and co-author with Nathalie Both of the paper "Social protection provisions to refugees during COVID-19: lessons learned from government and humanitarian responses. Andrew Mitchell is Senior Social Protection Officer at the division of resilience and solutions at the UN refugee agency [UNHCR](#). Jessica and Andrew, welcome to the Social Protection Podcast.

Jessica Hagen-Zanker: Thanks for having me Francesca.

Andrew Mitchell: Thanks Francesca.

Francesca Bastagli: Andrew, what do we know about the impact of COVID-19 on refugees?

Andrew Mitchell: What we're seeing basically is a conjunction of three crises. It's a protection crisis. There's a health crisis, which is now extending to how vaccinations do or don't roll out in refugee hosting countries.

And of course, an economic crisis. And I just want to remind everyone, you know, at the start of 2020, there are 80 million people who have been forcibly displaced. And the bulk of these are in low and middle income countries. Where we're seen GDP in decline due to COVID-19. So in terms of the protection crisis, which is important to remember because they have this additional vulnerability compared to nationals or citizens.

What we're seeing in the middle east is about 1.1 million Syrian refugees, and internally displaced Iraqis who have been pushed into poverty due to COVID. We're also seeing that there are many people who are fleeing conflict and persecution, because conflict continues queue to the border closures.

In about 144 countries, there have been problems in terms of refugees seeking asylum, and at least 60 of those countries have made no exemptions for those seeking asylum. We're also seeing increased risk in terms of violence for displaced women and girls, where there is xenophobia and unfavorable views towards refugees before COVID-19.

Because of the increased pressure on the economy, this is also increasing that type of xenophobia. So in summary, where we've got to deal with all three types of crises and neither are only trying to, in particularly with regards to social protection, look at how do we offset some of the social and economic challenges due to COVID. We have to weave in an approach that takes into account this extra dimensionality of protection.

Francesca Bastagli: Jessica, refugees are typically excluded or underserved from social protection. Where they do exist, what are the types of social protection instruments available to refugees?

Jessica Hagen-Zanker: There are two main groups of instruments, government led and humanitarian led instruments.

So on the one hand, refugees may be included in government led responses, which means that they are eligible for the same benefits as the host population. So for example, legal frameworks in South Africa extend the right to social assistance for every resident, including refugees and asylum seeker. The important element here is the fact that they extended to residents, so not to citizens. However in many countries, only citizens have the right to access government led social protection. In these cases, we would typically see humanitarian led responses for refugees, either instruments, which would specifically cover refugees and other vulnerable populations often imply asylum seekers as well, including sometimes also sub groups of the host population.

Some of these humanitarian responses align or integrated with government responses in terms of their objectives, the program design and or implementation. So to give you an example, Francesca, the UNHCR cash transfer for refugees in Morocco mirrors the government COVID response in terms of its fan size, in terms of duration and delivering mechanism, either humanitarian responses and maybe set up in parallel, which means they don't align or integrate with government response.

Francesca Bastagli: During the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen a high number of social protection adjustments and new instruments adopted in countries worldwide. What efforts have been made to step up social protection provision for refugees and what are some of the most effective responses you've seen during COVID?

Andrew Mitchell: There are certain countries where inclusion in COVID-19 responses is happening, and there are other countries where there's a clear decision not to include refugees. And really this plays out differently in developed countries where we know most refugees and asylum seekers on paper have access.

There's been a whole series of measures of certain countries, I'm thinking of Portugal, where they really added flexibility to administrative processes to access this. Middle income countries, we see examples like Brazil that have opened up a COVID-19 access in terms of the cash transfers, and this is domestically funded.

And we're also seeing in some of the countries in Africa that have nascent systems. And again, I'm thinking of Sudan that also opened up access to refugee and asylum seekers to food assistance. Having said that, and again, it's complicated. We see that there, the ESSN, the major social safety net in Turkey, which was including around 1.5 million refugees before COVID chose not to include those same refugees in the government COVID-19 response. So really it's a very context specific, but again, the way the inclusion agenda was playing out

before COVID-19, we see a direct relationship between how COVID-19 social protection responses plays out as well.

Francesca Bastagli: Yes ago we've just heard from Andrew different experiences and efforts to extend or did not adjust social protection to incorporate refugees across different contexts.

What are some of the drivers of effective crisis response for refugees, both for humanitarian and government responses and what are some of the trade-offs governments and other players face?

Jessica Hagen-Zanker: So in our study, we identified a number of drivers of more effective COVID responses and the most obvious one is maturity of the social protection system.

And Andrew just touched upon that as well. For example, Colombia has a mature circuit protection system. It has existing systems. It could draw on including databases and strong local and central government capacity. And as a result of that, Columbia was able to respond very quickly to the COVID crisis. Where social protection system is on nascent and capacity is more limited, the system will be less effective at meeting the needs of refugees and other vulnerable populations and in doing so quickly. The same holds for humanitarian actors in delivering provisions to refugees. So to give you an example, UNHCR Pakistan was able to deliver a cash transfer for the first time, but asked, this was the first time that they had a cash transfer setting up the system, including beneficiary databases took time as they aligned their cash transfers with EHSAS government COVID cash transfer. And UNHCR was able to draw on the existing payment delivery system used by the Pakistani government, they were able to speed up part of the response. This brings me through another important driver, which is coordination between humanitarian development and government office. Strong, positive, and longstanding relationships, open dialogue and ongoing collaboration that existed pre COVID between international humanitarian development and government actors lead to more effective responses.

Part of the design is also of course critical, including targeting criteria, benefit levels and duration. We found that with regards to targeting requirements placed on refugees in terms of their regularized status, links of residence and so on may exclude specific groups of refugees with then receive no support.

There's one particular trade off, which came out very strongly out of our study, which is the setting of benefit levels. When refugees are included in government responses or when humanitarian responses are aligned, benefit levels may not always be adequate for refugees if they often have greater needs or expenses, for example, in terms of housing. And the such aligning benefit values does not always lead to the most effective outcome for refugees. In setting these benefit values, government and humanitarian actors to face with in the right two competing objectives. One to make it fair and to reduce social tensions between the host and refugee population and two, to ensure that all groups meet their basic needs.

And this trade off is not new. It reflects a longstanding tension between humanitarian systems and government transfers, and it's important to be aware of it and to be explicit, where to land on this trade off and why.

Francesca Bastagli: Andrew, you touched earlier on the question of refugees eligibility for social protection versus what they receive in practice. We know that social protection only reaches a fraction of refugees. What are some of the factors that determined the differences between eligibility and whether or not they are in fact receiving social protection?

Andrew Mitchell: So if we focus on where systems are nascent indeed there is a fraction of refugees that are covered.

However, I guess, in the last five years, and I'm thinking of the World Bank investments, the EU trust investments, in some of those countries, we are seeing that, you know, 10 to 50% of the refugee caseload are receiving some actually, or will, are a plan to receive some type of social protection benefit and all of these refugees will be put on the social registry. So in those countries, we wouldn't be calling it a fraction. But we come back to Jessica's point about the adequacy of benefits in terms of actually how much does that cover basic needs. In terms of a difference between having access in policy to different socioeconomic rights, so that allows access to social protection systems versus the enjoyment of those rights at the local level. And what I mean by that, that refugees actually get the cash transfers are able to take. Part in public works or in income generating activities at the local level, in many countries, there's a difference between that access and enjoyment of rights.

Why there is that difference? I think Jessica has alluded to that. One of the key drivers is whether the social protection agencies are present in many refugee hosting areas of a country. It's in a very underdeveloped part of a country with the full social protection system hasn't been rolled out in many low-income countries that they start in urban centers and then move out to the rural areas for very obvious logistical reasons. And I'm thinking of the very remote area of the Republic of Congo, where the World Bank project is opening up access to a significant percentage of that population group. But the bulk of those people live in a very underdeveloped area on the border of Central African Republic and that the main challenges there are completely linked to government capacity, logistical access, so it's very challenging in many areas.

I think the second area where we have problems is also bottlenecks in terms of the identification requirements or administrative requirements -19 because of the impact on the functioning of local government has really further made that a real challenge, even with the best intentions of the government and with people ready to fund that at that local level, it's very difficult to meet those requirements. And I think the last key challenges really linked to a set of protection issues. What I mean by that is even though the government and local government have agreed to open up different social protection programs to refugees that may be preexisting, social cohesion problems or xenophobia that impacts refugees that want to start a productive activities or engage in public works in terms of access to land, in

terms of being able to rent land, in terms of being able to access economic infrastructure and particularly with women who may have had a more traditional role in the family, trying to empower them to be able to be going out into take decisions to diversify the way they contribute to family economies. There can be attitudes from host communities that doesn't allow them to move around freely and to engage in these activities. So beyond the protection dimension, we also have to look at different vulnerable groups within the refugees.

And so women and girls is a very key thing that we really need to look at in terms of some of the bottlenecks.

Francesca Bastagli: Yes, he could. Can you tell us a little bit more about what are some of the barriers that stop governments from including refugees in their regular social protection responses?

Jessica Hagen-Zanker: So their decision to include refugees is a political one and a lack of political will can be a major barrier in all contexts, including high, middle, and low income countries.

Refugees are by definition, not citizens and not part of the political constituencies. So politicians have little to gain from including refugees. Politicians may also argue that access to benefits could attract more refugees. So that opening up the social protection system is a pool factor. And this is a line of argument we've seen all over the world in recent years, despite a lack of evidence for this, but there are some legitimate concerns, particularly for low-income countries where coverage of citizens is also low and particularly now is the economic shocks as a result of COVID, and in those countries, the inclusion of refugees will be a difficult case to make.

For example, in Jordan discussions have been ongoing for years about the potential inclusion of refugees in the national social pension scheme, in the national social assistance scheme, and as a result of COVID, this issue has first shifted further down the agenda. It's just not politically viable at the moment.

We did find stuff COVID may have shifted political considerations in some countries. For example, in Colombia, the government did include refugees in that emergency cash responses for the first time until now they have never been included in a government cash transfer before. And this was partly because refugees needs in this time of crisis became much more pressing, but it also became much more clearer to policy makers.

I would say though, that despite this being such a major barrier, it doesn't mean it's unsurmountable. Most countries will include refugees as Andrew also talked about and they include them for different reasons, including humanitarian concerns, which might outweigh the lack of political will and development and humanitarian actors can also use financial incentives to overcome selfie political barriers.

Francesca Bastagli: Jessica mentioned financial resources as a key enabler. Andrew, what are some of the innovative approaches to financing that you've seen in recent years? And has anything changed since the onset of COVID? Is that making a difference?

Andrew Mitchell: I want to stress I think one of the changes in recent years, specifically with social protection is to really put a pragmatic business case on the table to governments to support them to respect these commitments that they've made. I think this is at the heart of the global compact on refugees, which has come out in the last three years and where there's a lot of effort. That's now been put into trying to build that business case and trying to ensure governments can meet some of those political concerns. And so what I mean by that is that when we talk about inclusion of refugees and government social protection systems, we're talking about an area based approach. That must also scale up coverage to host communities. And normally when we were dealing with governments that the entry point is host communities and not refugees.

This has led, I think, to some of the innovative financial mechanisms that are being put in place to help support governments, to take on this extra case load and to help develop social protection systems in some of the parts of the country that have been traditionally underdeveloped. So for example, we have the World Bank, either refugee sub window mechanism. Which basically has targeted, I think it's for social protection, it's targeting around 11 countries now. And what that does is it takes an area based approach. And some of that investment goes to strengthening, for example, the social registry system of the government, the actual social protection agency in terms of staffing, in terms of some of the delivery mechanisms.

And when we look at a split of who receives the benefits, it's clear that many of those benefits favor the host communities, and then a more minor part of those benefits are received by refugees. And that's the way it should be. These governments, particularly in many of these refugee sub window countries hosting large amounts of refugees in a protracted situation. What I mean by that is that they've been there 5, 10, 15, 20 years, and that the humanitarian system was never designed for that. And they've continued to support this population for long periods of time. So it's only just that, we step up with long-term investments that help them to strengthen the coverage of their system.

Again, in terms of COVID-19, I think some of the innovative mechanisms build on these projects. And for example, in some of these projects, they have a mechanism that can be triggered to redistribute funding in terms of emergencies. This is called the CERC mechanism. And so for example, that was triggered in the DRC from the IDA 18 funds. 50 million US dollars went to Kinshasa to put in place the COVID cash transfers for around 250,000 Congolese. The other thing that we're seeing is a linkage between the IDA investments and the World Bank funded Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program that tries to offer cash top-ups during times of food security crisis.

So some of the innovative things that we're seeing in effect is a montage of investment instruments in the same refugee hosting area, covering the needs of both host communities and refugees against an increasing set of different household and widespread shocks. And I think the way that we're seeing this play out in some of those countries in the Sahel is not only the governments, the World Bank, but I think some of the operation agencies that are supporting some of these initiatives are gaining a lot of experience that we can see how we replicate that in other countries.

Francesca Bastagli: So the overarching question of the special podcast series is: Is COVID-19 a turning point for social protection? My closing question to you both is are the ongoing crisis and the crisis responses taken to date, do these present a turning point for the provision of social protection to refugees in hosting countries?

Jessica, what are your thoughts?

Jessica Hagen-Zanker: I would not say COVID-19 is a turning point as such, but we have seen some marginal and also symbolic changes in the past year. And we've also learned some very important lessons, which will allow actors to build on progress made. So some of the important lessons we've learned is the importance of preparedness for future crises.

So that been is strengthening the foundations, voting systems, ordering collaborations, all of these have been extremely useful for the countries that it's already. Another critical lesson is keeping refugee specific needs in mind to design effective responses. So the conscious copy paste responses for refugees.

And I think this is something that needs to be repeated again and again. The implementation of responses during the pandemic has highlighted some of the risks as a result of trying to align responses or integrate refugees and government responses such as differences in need and barriers to inclusion and so for registries, for refugees.

And it's such a drive to align or integrate humanitarian assistance and government social protection group be considered with some caution and not be seen as an end goal in itself. And as Andrew emphasized does, now, those kinds of decisions must always take account of national country.

I can finish on a somewhat positive note though. This definitely being some marginal progress made, and this includes refugees being included in national socioeconomic and poverty surveys for the first time. And this has symbolic value and shows refugees needs alongside the host population. Other examples of some countries for moving some barriers to access for refugees, as we've discussed on the podcast and intensified collaboration between humanitarian development and government actors and all of these may contribute to more effective responses in the future.

Andrew Mitchell: I think a recurring message that I want to pass during this podcast is that I think that the battleground really is at the country level now. And to simplify I think it is potential a turning point in those countries where pre-existing to COVID-19, the inclusion

agenda was opening up and it is going to be more difficult in those countries where the inclusion agenda was stalled. There in those countries it's definitely not an opportunity. So in a way COVID is to simplify that has sort of magnified what was happening with the longer-term inclusion agenda in social protection programs before COVID hit. And so what I think pragmatically, this means is that we should really focus our efforts on trying to learn the additional lessons from COVID-19.

Again how do you drape different COVID investments on top of other preexisting investments? How do you expand the use of shock responsive approaches to cover a larger part of the risk landscape? We can focus on learning in those countries where opportunities did open up and perhaps at least in the medium term response, we can start to prioritize because again, governments, donors and operation agencies, don't have unlimited financing. We can prioritize where there is an enabling environment for inclusion to scale up working together on an area based approach. There's been an interesting dynamic that I think Jessica sort of alluded to and that's we saw a scaling up of refugees included in the national primary health response.

We saw inclusion in certain countries where the inclusion agenda was not progressing before, we saw access of refugees taken up into national socioeconomic surveys, that were then going to help act as a blueprint for the medium term response. And this has definitely opened up conversations with governments, where there had been progress in terms of inclusion in the health system to start to look at other socioeconomic systems.

So the final message is there's a lot to do the COVID-19 impacts have accelerated or further blocked their long term inclusion agenda. And so be interesting to work together, to identify those countries that we can help build back better whilst putting additional resources to open up area-based inclusion.

Francesca Bastagli: Thank you, Andrew and Jessica for the very rich exchange on one of the most pressing matters of our times.

Jessica Hagen-Zanker: Really enjoyed the discussion today.

Andrew Mitchell: Yeah, just to reiterate, it's been a fantastic exchange and a really important issue moving ahead.

Francesca Bastagli: We'll post links to key resources on this topic in the show notes of this episode, and you can find the ODI research since at [ODI.org](https://www.odi.org).

Stay tuned for the next episode in our series, where we look at social protection implementation and delivering and asked: What are the opportunities and risks of innovations made since the onset of COVID-19 for system capacity and response to future crisis?

Jo Sharpe: The Social Protection Podcast is a production of socialprotection.org, which is the place to go online for free information, research and community on all things, social



protection. This week, we have a special request. We're running our annual survey to learn more about how you use the socialprotection.org knowledge platform, what you think of our products, including this podcast and how we could better support your work.

The survey is open until the 5th of July. It only takes five minutes to fill out and you'll find the link in the show notes. You can follow us on [Twitter](#) at SP_gateway and find us on [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [LinkedIn](#), subscribe to this podcast by your favorite podcast provider and maybe even leave a review.