



No Time to Waste: The Urgent Need to Build Inclusive Social Protection for Children in Vulnerable Situations. The Role of Early Childhood Education and Care.

In today's global context children under eighteen make up 30% of humanity and are disproportionately affected by multiple, often overlapping crises, due to conflicts, displacement, climate change, natural disasters, violation of human rights, poverty. The approximate, available data, is shocking¹.

The impact, is both immediate and lifelong, leading to rights violations, such as child labor and child marriage, trafficking and smuggling, sexual exploitation and recruitment into criminal, armed and violent extremist groups.

Protective and preventative measures can counter the stressors in the lives of these children and families with quality education for all, including culturally congruent Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and physical and mental healthcare together with safe wage-earning employment, safety from violence for women and girls, protection of the environment, financial aid, and social integration.

Particularly at risk are the youngest children in vulnerable situations. There is need to make urgent investments in ECEC, combined with inclusive child-sensitive social protection, a core human right under international law, clearly reaffirmed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Goals (SDG 1.3).

Thirty-six years from the declaration of the CRC that recognized every child the right to social protection (art.26), only 26% of children age 0-15 are covered by benefits, leaving the majority vulnerable to poverty, exclusion and multidimensional deprivation.

¹ 160 million children are trapped in child labor; 1 billion are exposed to climate change risks, a multiplier of violence against them; more than 1 in 6 children are living in conflict zones, the highest proportion in 20 years; 43.3 million children are displaced as a consequence of conflicts and violence; too many children are still held in arbitrary migration detention and separated from their parents/caregivers – a violation of their legal right to family unity.

The science is clear; experiences during early childhood, mainly in the first 1,000 days, shape the very architecture of the developing brain, establishing the foundations for later learning, behavior and well-being.

Investment in high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) pays rich dividends throughout the lifespan of children, reducing socioeconomic disparities and the risk of intergenerational transmission of poverty. ECEC is particularly beneficial in crisis situations, where danger, instability and insecurity, as in the case of children in migration, affect individuals, family unity, communities.

To reinforce children's effective access to basic services, and, in particular, to ECEC, one of the best interventions is to provide a minimum level of income in the form of cash transfers directly to families.

The Universal Child Benefit system (UCBs) improves child health, increases access to education, prevents chronic malnutrition, reduces child mortality, child marriage and child labor (ILO-UNICEF, 2023)².

However, current investments are insufficient. Upper-middle-income countries spend just 0.5% and lower-income countries 0.1% of GDP on children's social protection (ILO, 2024). This represents a moral, social and economic catastrophe.

Furthermore, it is of deep concern that the world is ill-prepared to address the long-term impacts on social development arising from emergencies.

Only recently, social protection has been considered a mechanism to help communities, prepare for, and recover from shocks, including climate disasters by strengthening the humanitarian-development-peace nexus with the final goal to 'leave no one behind'. There is urgent need to invest in Shock-Responsive Social Protection (SRSP) focused on prevention, preparedness and resilience-building, starting with children and their right to ECEC. Cash transfers, access to essential goods and services, and other forms of assistance reduce the impact of shocks, in particular on children. Policymakers must therefore ensure that ECCE is accessible for all, by embedding it within humanitarian and social protection frameworks (UNICEF, 2023).

² In higher-income countries evidence has long shown the cost-effectiveness of UCBs in addressing child poverty, and in middle-income countries simulations show that an annual expenditure of 1% of gross domestic product (GDP) can reduce poverty for the whole population by 20 % (ILO-UNICEF 2023).

A number of case studies in India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Brazil, Timor Lest, Morocco, Ethiopia, Philippines, Madagascar and Jordan demonstrated that humanitarian cash and voucher assistance programs can help vulnerable and marginalized communities, in particular children, recover from shocks more quickly and effectively, with both immediate and longer-term returns ((UNICEF, 2023).

Policy makers, in formulating Shock-Responsive Social Protection, must avoid a minimalist response, by systematically prioritizing a comprehensive child-centered approach.

Children’s rights are indivisible, interdependent and interconnected and their protection must be coordinated, ensuring that all actors and systems – education, health, welfare, justice, civil society, community, and family – cooperate to prevent abuse, exploitation, neglect, even amid a crisis.

In this way, inclusive social protection for children can become an act of social justice, that contributes to a more cohesive and peaceful society.

The costs of inaction are enormous; it would be irrational and imprudent not to invest in children, starting with the youngest ones.

Recommendations

- Fill disaggregated data gaps on social protection coverage
- Set up a social protection system based on a ‘leave no one behind’, life-cycle approach
- Encourage progressive implementation of the UCBs without discrimination, and integrate them with complementary services
- Ensure a child rights approach to inclusive social protection
- Develop legislative frameworks for the provision of quality, adequately resourced Early Childhood Education and Care services,
- Accelerate progress towards universal coverage for children
- Build child sensitive social protection systems able to effectively respond to shocks and crises