

Georgia

BEING PREPARED AND ACTING FAST:

A series of case studies on UNICEF's role in the delivery of effective social protection responses to COVID-19

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Georgia:

Enhancing the social protection system through a child poverty analysis and systems readiness assessment

As part of the response to COVID-19, UNICEF led the development of a microsimulation model for estimating the impact of COVID-19 on child poverty, which contributed to the government providing a one-time emergency cash benefit to all children. A social protection systems readiness assessment was conducted to determine whether the system was prepared to expand and absorb new recipients. Since 2013, UNICEF and the World Bank have supported the reform of the Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) programme, which targets the most vulnerable families. Reforms included the launch of a child benefit programme for all vulnerable families with children under 16 years of age. UNICEF and the World Bank continue to support the government in the further refinement of the TSA programme, including revision of the eligibility criteria, benefit amounts, and improvement of the overall programme performance. Since 2009, UNICEF has also been conducting a Welfare Monitoring Survey (WMS), which tracks poverty and inequality trends and is a key tool for policy decisions on social protection. UNICEF continues to work with the Government of Georgia on systems strengthening and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its social protection programmes.

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Source:

<https://www.unicef.org/georgia/stories/unicef-helps-vulnerable-families-affected-covid-19-pandemic>

Ketevan shares her bedroom with her three children, and soon will have to make space for the fourth one. “I’m expecting soon,” she says as she makes dinner in a rundown kitchen, where bricks peek through the crumbling plaster on the walls.

With her husband away, serving in Georgia’s peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, the 28-year-old makes a hand-to-mouth living in the Georgian village of Nikozi, an area fraught with separatist tensions. “I don’t work, but the children are keeping me busy,” she says.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, UNICEF, in cooperation with government authorities and with support from the UK government, delivered essential supplies. That was part of the humanitarian support provided to vulnerable households particularly affected by the restrictions, including those in the vicinity of conflict zones. Through this programme, Ketevan and her family received an assistance package containing essential food and hygiene items. “The kids don’t really like to eat a lot, but in that box we found some of their favorite food items,” says Ketevan.

Context

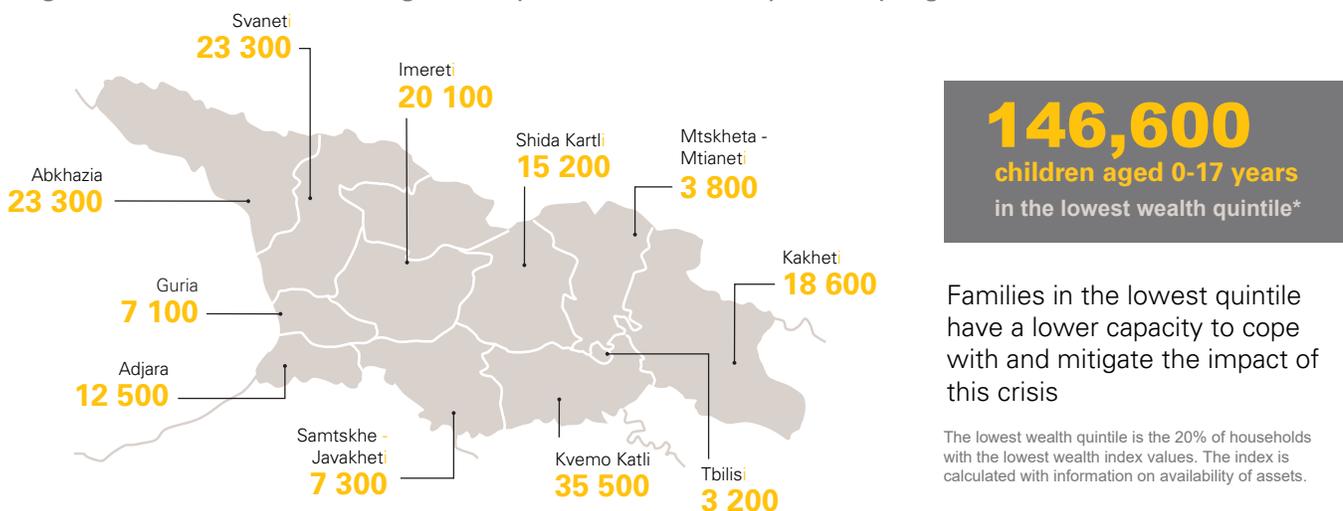
Poverty dynamics in Georgia are such that there is significant movement of families in and out of poverty. This fluctuation is caused by various shocks including unemployment, illness¹ or death in the family, and most recently sudden loss of income caused by COVID-19. The absolute poverty rate is higher for children at 26.4 per cent compared to 21.3 per cent for the total population (National Statistics Office of Georgia (GEOSTAT), 2020).

A state of emergency was declared in March 2020 with significant restrictions including closing schools and borders. The map in Figure 1 provides a disaggregated illustration of the number of children in the lowest wealth quintile and indicates their varying levels of vulnerability to the crisis across the country. The socio-economic impact

of the pandemic has been devastating to the people of Georgia, resulting in many families falling further into poverty, particularly the most vulnerable families living in over-crowded households.

Georgia invests 7 per cent of GDP in social protection initiatives (UNICEF, 2020). However, its GDP is predicted to contract by 6 per cent due to the pandemic (IMF, 2021). There are three main cash transfer programmes, which have all been implemented for at least 15 years: Targeted Social Assistance (TSA), the old-age pension and a social package, with 67 per cent of households having access to at least one of these cash transfers. TSA, the flagship social protection programme, is a proxy means-tested transfer that covers 11 per cent of households and reaches 133,725 families.

Figure 1: Number of children aged 0-17 years in the lowest quintile by region



UNICEF's Response and Results

Generating evidence and analysis to formulate the appropriate response:

A series of UNICEF-led analyses supported the government in the process of vertical and horizontal expansion of the TSA programme and to ensure the most vulnerable families were being reached. The analyses conducted included the following:

- *Microsimulation model for estimating the impact of COVID-19 on child poverty:* UNICEF, in collaboration with national partners, commissioned a microsimulation model using the biennial panel household survey (the 2017 WMS) as the primary data source, using a sample of 4,697 households. Child poverty and inequality were recalculated based on a low, medium and severe shock, and were linked to various cash transfer

1 Out-of-pocket health expenditures represented nearly 48 per cent of current health expenditure in Georgia in 2018, a rate more than double the European and Central Asian average. Unplanned health expenditure is therefore a significant source of vulnerability for households in Georgia.

options including universal and targeted options. The analysis assessed the rate of poverty reduction, cost effectiveness, benefit incidence and coverage for each scenario. A key conclusion was that in all scenarios, a universal child grant for children from 0 to 17 years of age, or targeting the bottom 40 percentile of non-TSA households, would lead to the most significant reduction in poverty.

- *Social protection systems readiness assessment:* Recognizing the need to strengthen social protection initiatives across the humanitarian and development nexus, UNICEF developed a tool prior to the pandemic, piloted in five countries (Armenia, Tajikistan, Serbia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), to understand the opportunities and challenges in delivering cash transfers through national social protection systems during crises. The tool provided insights on the political, technical, operational and financial feasibility of the national social protection system to support the most vulnerable families during shocks and disasters. Georgia's social protection system was assessed as being able to handle shocks, including from COVID-19, and the TSA programme was identified as the optimal instrument for distributing emergency cash transfers.
- *MICS+ Real-Time Monitoring (RTM) Survey:* This is an ongoing initiative conducted by GEOSTAT and UNICEF, with financial support from USAID, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and UNICEF. This mechanism was used to monitor the situation of families affected by the pandemic. The RTM was conducted using a mobile phone-based survey targeting a sample of the MICS population (over 2,000 households), as part of a series of five surveys conducted every quarter initiated in August 2020. The survey gathered information on the effect of the pandemic on household incomes and employment; perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccination; access to health services; the mental health of children; disciplining methods during the pandemic; and early childhood development. The range of protective measures used to cope with COVID-19 employed by households, as well as the impact on children's education, were also explored. The survey found that at least 32 per cent of households had lost a job temporarily or permanently during March to December

2020, with the average monthly income of 53 per cent of households decreasing.

- *Targeted Social Assistance Programme (TSA) impact evaluation:* An impact evaluation of Georgia's TSA was carried out based on data from 7,000 families, as well as administrative data, to assess the impact of the TSA on reducing child poverty, in addition to assessing if these contributions considered equity and child rights. The results will be used to enhance the TSA and other social protection initiatives

Supporting the policy response to ensure the most vulnerable families and children are protected:

At the onset of the pandemic, before the government introduced measures to support vulnerable families and to demonstrate another model of assistance, UNICEF provided direct humanitarian support to families with multiple children and families living in less accessible geographical locations. Humanitarian boxes containing basic food and hygiene items were distributed with support from representatives of the central government and respective local authorities. Families found this support necessary and timely during the hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy measures subsequently introduced by the Government of Georgia to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on families and children included:

- *Horizontal expansion of the TSA – 70,000 families* previously registered in the database who had not qualified given their welfare score were entitled to a cash transfer of 70-100 GEL (US\$22-30) for six months.
- *One-time child benefit of 200 GEL for all children under 18 years –* this benefit covered approximately 900,000 children, amounting to approximately US\$65 million from the state budget. In addition, TSA recipients with three or more children registered in the database with a welfare score below a minimal threshold (approximately 21,000 families) received 50 GEL (US\$16) per month per child.
- *A top up of the social package cash transfer for 40,000 persons with severe disability,* while children with disabilities received an additional 100 GEL (US\$31) per month for six months.

In June 2021, the Prime Minister announced a further increase in child benefits. Given the importance of the existing system of targeted social assistance to better meet the needs of families with children, children living in socially vulnerable families with a welfare score of less than 100,000 received a 100 per cent increase in child benefit from 50 GEL to 100 GEL (US\$16-32) per month. In addition, a supplement of GEL 100 per child was issued to families with children with a welfare score of less than 120,000. An additional 145 million GEL (US\$46 million) from the state budget was allocated for this purpose and an additional 25,000 children entered the system. The total number of children covered across the TSA system reached 215,000 children (around 25 per cent of the child population, slightly lower than the official poverty figure for children, which is 26.4 per cent).

Evidence-based advocacy to promote disability-inclusive social protection: The response was also an important opportunity to strengthen the inclusive components of the social protection system in Georgia through analytical contributions and advocacy. UNICEF had previously conducted a mapping of social protection measures for children with disabilities in Georgia, which was presented to state agencies, organizations for persons with disabilities, UN sister agencies and other stakeholders, to support national efforts to optimize social protection measures for children with disabilities. UNICEF also initiated work to conduct a study on the goods and services required for the inclusion of children with disabilities and is supporting the costing of social protection measures for children with disabilities. This evidence will be used to design new packages of social protection measures for children with disabilities that better reflect their needs, in collaboration with DPOs and state partners.

Partnerships

UNICEF works closely with government partners, particularly the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, and the committee on health and social affairs of the Parliament of Georgia. This work comprises providing evidence and data as well as policy recommendations based on UNICEF global, regional and country-wide experience.

UNICEF maintains close cooperation with GEOSTAT in producing real-time data reflecting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Georgian households. UNICEF provides methodological support as well as support to identify modules for the survey and concrete questionnaires. Apart from producing valuable data, UNICEF is supporting the capacity development of GEOSTAT to create data in relatively short period using telephone/mobile surveys.

UNICEF has also worked closely with the World Bank on the shared objective of ensuring that the most vulnerable children and families are effectively reached and that social inclusion is at the forefront of TSA reform. Both organizations also previously produced a joint statement which established a vision and principles for a fiscally sustainable and progressive social protection system.

Lessons Learned

Producing timely, relevant, and rigorous analysis was key to the success of the response: UNICEF's strategy to engage in timely and relevant evidence-based advocacy was successful in promoting reforms that focused on the most vulnerable children and families. The evidence generated through child poverty analyses and simulations, as well as through the real-time monitoring of household socio-economic parameters, supported the policy developments necessary to strengthen the social protection system, making it more adaptable to shocks. The assessments also provided comparative analyses on concrete child benefit modalities and insights on which programmes would have the largest impact. UNICEF's support in providing evidence at a critical time in the decision-making process provided the government with a clear and specific set of policy options as well as strong analysis of costs and potential impacts.

Long-term investments in systems strengthening led to results: Investment in systems strengthening to promote comprehensive programmes for children was a precursor to the effective work on shock response, allowing UNICEF and the government to build on and adapt existing programmes to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Prior to the pandemic, the work on supporting TSA design, implementation, adaptation and expansion was key in the

timely and relevant response provided by UNICEF to the Government of Georgia.

Strong intensive partnerships with government and other stakeholders kept the focus on children's needs:

During the pandemic, UNICEF was part of stakeholder platforms developed by the Government of Georgia to coordinate the country's COVID-19 response and sustain the well-being of Georgian households. In addition, UNICEF was part of intensive consultations and partnerships with the Government Administration, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, GEOSTAT and the Parliament of Georgia. UNICEF utilized its global, regional and country-wide experience, as well as knowledge and evidence generated before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that approaches and policies applied by the government considered the best interests of the child. Through this approach, UNICEF ensured that the focus on children was maintained, and that meeting children's needs stayed high on the government agenda.

Way Forward

Strengthening the coverage and delivery of social protection programmes at the local level:

UNICEF is currently engaging with municipalities to support the implementation and delivery of social protection programmes. In 2019, Georgia adopted the Code on the Rights of the Child, supported by UNICEF, covering all rights and freedoms of the child, and providing stronger mechanisms for their protection and realization. This includes a particular focus on social protection and strengthens the role of municipalities to support the process of identifying the most vulnerable children who are currently excluded from the TSA and providing them with needs-specific support.

Supporting the government in strengthening the social protection system:

Together with other development partners, UNICEF plans to support the Government of Georgia in developing a comprehensive legal act – the Social Code – that will define the legal framework for the future social protection system in Georgia. The government has already expressed its broad vision in respect to the Social Code and highlighted its importance to support Georgian citizens from an early age. The WMS in 2022 will provide evidence on poverty resulting from the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, and this study is intended to contribute to the new Social Code. In July 2021, the Chair of the Parliament and the Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs announced the launch of this initiative. The overarching legal act will unite all social protection measures and provide a new approach to social protection in Georgia, with child social protection forming an important part of this legislation. EU delegation and UN agencies, including UNICEF, have been invited to support the government in this undertaking. UNICEF plans to provide technical expertise to ensure that children's best interests and their right to dignified standards of living and social security are protected and fully reflected in this new legal framework.

Continuing to provide data and evidence to inform policy decisions:

UNICEF plans to conduct a new round of the WMS, which will inform the government about the welfare of the Georgian population and reflect the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of vulnerable social groups. This study will also serve as a baseline for the development of the Social Code. UNICEF will continue to support GEOSTAT in conducting a new series of real-time monitoring to further track the effects of the pandemic on Georgian households. This latter activity will also strengthen capacity of GEOSTAT to perform and administer mobile surveys, which provide valuable basic information about different aspects of the societal life and can be applicable during emergencies.

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