



Panama. Nicaraguan asylum-seekers receive pre-paid cash cards ©UNHCR/Angela Florez

# Social protection responses to COVID-19 for forcibly displaced persons

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Refugees and other Persons of Concern (PoC)<sup>1</sup> to UNHCR have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to serious health, socio-economic and protection impacts. Some governments have included certain of these persons in national social protection<sup>2</sup> COVID-19 responses, including flexible administrative and enrolment processes. UNHCR and partners support the access of forcibly displaced persons to the cash- and in-kind transfers of social assistance programmes to contribute to meeting protection and basic needs and to help boost incomes through support to informal and formal workers.

This paper provides examples of the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons to government social protection programmes. It is intended to support the building of evidence and further advocacy for the inclusion of forcibly displaced people in government responses to COVID-19 and demonstrate how the international community can support this.

## Refugees and others of concern to UNHCR are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected forcibly displaced persons around the world because of their specific legal status and because they largely rely on the informal sector for income.<sup>3</sup> In addition, refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR have limited access to government health and social services, and are particularly vulnerable where not formally registered by a host government.



Kenya. Refugees and host community access maternal health during COVID-19 ©UNHCR/Samuel Otieno

### Joint Government of Kenya, World Bank and UNHCR COVID-19 Socio-Economic Impact Phone Survey

UNHCR works with the World Bank and the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics to include four refugee sites in urban areas (Nairobi) camps/settlements Kalobeyei,

Kakuma and Dadaab) and one stateless population group (the Shona) in Kenya for measuring the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. The joint data collection is led by a data collection firm who interviews a list of families provided by UNHCR. Monthly datasets and a dashboard for key indicators will be produced for 6 months from June to December 2020. The results are used to inform socio-economic responses, including social protection measures by the government and international actors.

Forcibly displaced persons, who often have precarious and informal livelihoods and income sources, have had their movement severely restricted including border closures. As a result they have seen a decline in remittances sent to them from abroad and access to income has been cut off putting people at risk of pursuing harmful coping mechanisms to compensate for this loss.<sup>4</sup>

A new set of protection risks due to restrictions in movements, halting of asylum processes, and a hardening of host-community and government attitudes towards forcibly displaced persons further threatens their wellbeing. For example, In the Americas, more than 80% of refugees and

asylum seekers live in urban centres. The vast majority has lost their jobs in the informal sector due to lockdown measures and a lack of recourse to government income support.<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 impacts are also coinciding with other major disasters threatening the lives and livelihoods of forcibly displaced persons: more than five million people have faced severe food insecurity in the lean season across the Sahel region in Africa.<sup>6</sup>

## A long-term commitment for inclusion to government social protection systems

UNHCR worked already before the onset of COVID-19 with governments and international actors to include refugees and asylum seekers to national social protection systems, meeting specific obligations contained in the 1951 Convention on Refugees<sup>7</sup>, and commitments made in the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants,<sup>8</sup> and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees.<sup>9</sup> For decades, the international assistance provided through UNHCR and partners have acted as a form of social protection whilst government systems and long-term funding were reinforced to allow the referral of forcibly displaced persons to government social protection programmes, where possible.<sup>10</sup>

UNHCR works to align its assistance to national systems where possible, and support governments who have committed to include forcibly displaced persons to their national programmes.<sup>11</sup> UNHCR links both of these efforts under national policies to set out a transition action plan for refugees and others of concern. This can also include building preparedness mechanisms into national social assistance programmes<sup>12</sup> that trigger emergency support and that protect self-reliance and livelihoods.

*Inclusion of refugees in social protection systems has a solid legal basis in the Refugee Conventions and was recently reaffirmed in the New York Declaration on Migrants and Refugees and the Global Compact on Refugees.*

## Social Protection responses to COVID-19 and inclusion of forcibly displaced persons

Governments are modifying their national social protection systems to meet the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.<sup>13</sup> While this amount is limited when compared to the social protection needs, these interventions are critical and will be reinforced by economic stimulus packages supported in some instances by the international community over the medium-term. Refugees and asylum seekers benefit from government social protection responses through:

1. added flexibility of administrative processes for refugees and asylum seekers as the gateway to government support;
2. non-contributory social assistance and family service benefits;
3. access to labour market support, and;
4. added flexibility to contributory social health insurance and workplace benefits<sup>14</sup>

The inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in these responses builds on pre-COVID-19 government commitments as well as ongoing advocacy efforts and funding.

UNHCR and partners are complementing these measures where access to government social protection responses for forcibly displaced is not possible.



Jordan. UNHCR provides life-saving cash assistance for refugees ©UNHCR/Mohammad Hawari

## Refugees' access to government social assistance programmes

UNHCR works with government social protection ministries to open up access to cash transfers, public work schemes and training, and a range of economic and social services. Eight countries across Africa and Asia, funded by the World Bank IDA 18 regional sub-window for refugees and host communities (WB IDA 18 RSW) are working to include refugees in government programmes. For example, as part of the

Lisungi Social Safety Net in the Republic of Congo refugees are eligible to be enrolled to the national social registry with 2000 households to receive cash transfers and 4000 refugees receiving income-generating support packages, with health posts and schools capacities reinforced. The government is channeling part of its COVID-19 response via the Lisungi Social Safety Net and including refugees: as of November, 3161 refugee applications were received through the social registry with around 480 households already receiving support, with more refugee families anticipated to benefit.

## Flexible administrative and enrolment processes for refugees and asylum seekers to access government support

The ability to register and process an asylum claim and to meet national administrative criteria is critical for people's access to government social protection programmes. National asylum systems across Europe impacted by COVID-19 resulted in instances of temporary suspension of registration of asylum claims, backlogs in asylum procedures and the expiry of permits and documentation, all creating challenges in accessing government services.

Most European countries have responded to these challenges by adapting their asylum systems, for example by accepting written or online asylum applications, the automatic extension of documentation, adjustments to interviewing facilities or the use of remote means of conducting interviews. UNHCR has harnessed these good practices to promote and support practical recommendations for the adaptation of national asylum systems,<sup>15</sup> ensuring entry to national services.

## Adapted asylum and refugee systems in Portugal

In light of COVID-19-related difficulties to obtain or renew necessary documents, the Government of Portugal decided to extend the validity of all documents, including

those related to the asylum status and residence permits, which expired after 24 February 2020 until at least 30 October thereby ensuring continued access to social protection services such as national health services and social security benefits, as applicable at their respective stage of the asylum procedure.

## Social assistance to meet basic needs and reduce protection risks

Governments are extending COVID-19 cash and in-kind transfer packages to forcibly displaced persons who are already enrolled in government social assistance programmes, often requesting the international community to complement and align their assistance to these programmes for less developed social protection systems. Governments across the Americas ([Brazil](#), [Colombia](#), [Ecuador](#), [Mexico](#), [Panama](#) and [Uruguay](#)), some European governments and others including [South Africa](#) and the [Republic of Congo](#) are allowing access of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons to COVID-19 social assistance programmes.

Some governments are working to channel assistance to refugees via shock-responsive mechanisms, for example, linked to the WB IDA 18 RSW government social assistance programmes: [Mauritania](#), [Burkina Faso](#), [Niger](#), [Chad](#) and [Cameroon](#).

UNHCR and other partners have aligned cash and in-kind assistance to forcibly displaced populations with government social assistance programmes ([Pakistan](#), [Morocco](#), [Rwanda](#), [Uganda](#), [Costa Rica](#), [Turkey](#), [Iraq](#), [Kenya](#), [Sudan](#), [Cameroon](#) and [Ukraine](#)). UNHCR typically frontloads payments, scales up digital cash payments and promotes access to formal financial services. UNHCR also promotes delivery methodologies that reduce COVID-19 transmission including increased hygiene measures and contactless technical solutions for registration, delivery and monitoring (for example, contactless biometrics, contactless cash delivery through cards, phones, ATM codes, and on-line and telephone surveys).

## Refugee inclusion to South African government COVID-19 social protection responses

The government of South Africa increased payments of social grants for vulnerable groups such as children (USD 30/month) and the disabled and the elderly (USD 15 / month each) for up to six months. Registered

refugees who are already recipients of such grants have automatically benefited from the increase. In addition, a new form of support has been put in place benefitting refugees: COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant unemployment benefits (USD 21/month). UNHCR supports refugee families to apply for this assistance through an online system that is also used by South Africans.

## UNHCR Pakistan cash transfer project aligned to the government social assistance programme

UNHCR has launched a large-scale emergency cash grant distribution in Pakistan to over 36,000 refugee households to meet the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. Sudden lockdowns restricting population movement and the resulting economic slowdown have greatly impacted citizens in Pakistan, as well as

refugee communities that do not have access to the Government's social security system. UNHCR's cash assistance programme, set up in close coordination with the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, mirrors the targeting strategy and grant size of the Government's Ehsaas Emergency Cash Programme. The USD 75 cash grants are delivered country-wide through Pakistan Post Office's digital Urgent Order Money service, which has been made accessible to refugees in the context of COVID-19. Distributions will be followed up by remote Post Distribution Monitoring conducted through phone calls.

## Labour market support to boost incomes

Several governments target refugee workers to help offset their loss of income and to stimulate other labour opportunities. A range of countries provide wage subsidies through the government social protection system to formal workers ([Ireland](#), [Portugal](#), [New Zealand](#), [Canada](#), [Germany](#) and [Italy](#)). Both formal and informal workers (including those self-employed) are recognised for support in other countries ([Costa Rica](#), [Brazil](#) and [South Africa](#)) receiving payments over several months and including refugees.

Governments have also adjusted working regulations to recognise foreign health professional qualifications across the Americas ([Argentina](#), [Peru](#), [Chile](#), [Cuba](#), [Colombia](#) and [Mexico](#)) as well as in other countries with well-developed social protection systems ([France](#), [Germany](#), [UK](#), [USA](#), [Australia](#), [Austria](#), [Denmark](#), [Ireland](#), [Spain](#) and [Iran](#)). Refugees are included in Europe through the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. Simplified access has also been opened in other industries (supplemented by additional training) including agriculture, forestry, horticulture and fisheries ([Finland](#) and [Germany](#)).

## Refugee inclusion to Brazil government COVID-19 social protection responses

In April 2020 the government of Brazil introduced a monthly Emergency Basic Income Benefit for unemployed informal and formal workers of 600 BRL (USD 120) until December 2020 (with a reduction to 300 BRL per month in the last quarter), including refugees.

UNHCR and partners are providing support to help 1364 Venezuelan families access this fund, providing information and supporting enrolment in partnership with the Ministry of Citizenship and IOM. UNHCR also aligns its cash-based assistance to help these refugees meet their basic needs whilst the necessary enrolment and administrative steps are undertaken. This assistance uses new remote beneficiary assessment procedures put in place to reduce the risk of infection of COVID-19 during the delivery of this assistance.

Adjusted work regulations are also complemented by investments in scaling up ongoing or new employment programmes,<sup>16</sup> for example, providing business linkages between small-scale agricultural households and large businesses.<sup>17</sup> Initiatives should build on social assistance programmes to provide training, mentoring, grants and finance allowing refugees to earn an income.

As such, UNHCR and other actors are supporting the continuation and opening up of new job opportunities for refugees during COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> They continue to pay teacher incentives during the closure of schools ([Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea and Liberia](#)) and also hire health and education workers ([Mozambique and Kenya](#)). UNHCR and partners are supporting the production of masks and soap in support of the national health response utilising UNHCR-supported MADE 51 local social enterprises ([Kenya, Rwanda India, Malaysia, Egypt, Turkey and Thailand](#)) and through newly set up livelihoods initiatives ([DRC, Cameroon, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Niger, Ukraine and Iran](#)). UNHCR also works with financial institutions to support refugees to restructure loans ([Kenya and Uganda](#)) or extend access to bank accounts (e.g. [South Africa](#)).

## Social insurance to add further protection against COVID-19 impacts

Health insurance and workplace benefits are open to forcibly displaced persons already registered and/or contributing to national social security systems. Many European countries favour access to benefits that refugees and/or employees pay into, rather than to social assistance benefits normally financed by government taxes. Some governments are assuring or reinforcing social insurance benefits ([Estonia, Belgium, Iceland, Italy, Moldova, Sweden and Brazil](#)), whilst other governments are increasing the temporary access to health insurance contingent on registration ([Greece and Peru](#)).

UNHCR continues to support inclusion in health insurance schemes where feasible on par with host-country citizens. This is most relevant for refugees living in urban settings ([Kenya, Iran, Rwanda, Ghana and Sudan](#)) and has been achieved in partnership with the ILO in some countries. Although refugees may have access to COVID-19 diagnosis and care as part of the national health preparedness and response plans, UNHCR, ILO and other international health actors will continue to promote progress towards further inclusion of refugees in national health systems and universal health coverage.

## Moving Forward

COVID-19 social protection responses have opened or accelerated opportunities for the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers to government social protection programmes where there is political willingness and resources available to do so. Conversely, exclusion from government social protection programmes usually results from restrictive legal systems, perceived or real pressure on existing programmes with limited resources due to the inclusion of additional (foreign) populations and/or a hardening of attitudes towards forcibly displaced persons. For example, around 70% of refugees live in countries with a restricted right to work<sup>19</sup> preventing inclusion in, and support from, the formal labour market. Further efforts are required to build on the progress in some countries for including forcibly displaced people in government social protection responses, particularly as government economic stimulus packages are rolled out across the world.

The High Commissioner has called for the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers to social safety nets (social assistance) and emergency planning to address specific protection needs in the shorter term, and the inclusion in national services and social protection policy in the medium and longer-term to build resilience. These actions support the specific social protection COVID-19 measures called for in the ongoing Joint UN COVID-19 Plans including the [Global Humanitarian Response Plan](#) and the [Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund](#), and the [United Nations Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19](#).

## Endnotes

1 **UNHCR Persons of Concern** include refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, stateless persons and the internally displaced.

2 **Social protection** is a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life-course, with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups ([Social Protection Interagency Coordination Board](#)).

3 Summarised in [UNHCR 2020: Global COVID-19 emergency response](#) (June, 2); UNSG (2020): Policy Brief: COVID-19 and people on the move.

4 See [World Bank Predicts Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History](#)

5 [UNHCR Americas COVID-19 Response Update](#), No. 12, June 19, 2020.

6 [Famine Early Warning System Network – West Africa](#)

7 See in particular Chapter III on Gainful Employment articles and Chapter IV on Welfare. Article 20 on *Rationing*, 21 on *Housing*, 23 on *Public Relief* (“... States shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory the same treatment with respect to public relief and assistance as is accorded to their nationals”) and 24 on *Labour Legislation and Social Security* (including Public Health) are particularly relevant.

8 In particular, paragraph 83 of the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants which commits the development of national strategies within the framework of national social protection systems.

9 Section 2.1.1, [Global Compact on Refugees Indicator Framework](#)

10 These national programmes collectively cover access to non-contributory cash and in-kind transfers, subsidies and family welfare services (**social assistance**), contributory access to education, health and work-place benefits (**social insurance**), and decent income, labour and employment opportunities (**labour-market interventions**).

11 For example the WB IDA 18 RSW social assistance projects in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Djibouti, DRC, Mauritania, Republic of Congo.

12 Termed ‘**shock-responsive**’ or ‘**adaptive**’ **social protection**: ‘the ability of the social protection system to anticipate shocks to maintain its regular programme/s, to scale up and/or flex to accommodate new populations and needs as a result of the shocks, and to contribute to resilience building of individuals, households, communities and systems against future shocks (UNICEF, 2019 - [UNICEF’s Global Social Protection Programme Framework](#)).

13 [Weekly WB-ILO-UNICEF](#) government updates on countries planned or ongoing social protection responses to COVID-19; [IMF government policy tracker](#).

14 Country examples are drawn from consultations with the seven UNHCR regional bureau complemented by [UNHCR regional, thematic and country operations updates](#).

15 UNHCR (2020): [Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#); UNHCR (2020): [Remote Interviewing: Practical Considerations for States in Europe](#).

16 See for example ILO’s the [Employment Intensive Investments Programme](#), [Better Work Programme](#), or [Promoting Decent Employment Through Inclusive Growth Policies and Investments in the Care Economy](#).

17 Refer to UNSDG paper for a [joint initiative on refugees and migrants](#).

18 UNHCR (2020): [COVID-19 emerging practices on livelihoods and economic inclusion](#).

19 <https://www.unhcr.org/5ecfacab4>