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## **From Evidence to Action: Finding Evidence-based Means of Improving the Lives of Children in East Asia and Pacific**

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Since 2018, the Social Protection Support Initiative at the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office has contributed to improving the quality, timeliness, consistency and continuity of evidence-based social protection policy-making. Originally designed for East Asia and the Pacific, the initiative was made available to other countries in Asia and then to other regions. It was devised with the intention of strengthening the amount of available evidence in the East Asia and Pacific region, where there has traditionally been less evidence generated on social protection compared to other regions such as Latin America or Africa (e.g., the Transfer Project). The collaboration has resulted in more than 70 research papers in 23 countries in six regions, making it a true knowledge hub.

Based on the wealth of knowledge gained during these years, UNICEF organized the Regional Conference on Social Protection Research and Policy in Asia and the Pacific in May 2021. During the conference, participants reflected on how the evidence generated has influenced public debate and policy-making in the field of child-focused social protection. By documenting the use and impact, researchers and social policy experts reflected together on the regional challenges and the way forward.

This book takes stock of both impacts and results for children generated by those analytical products under UNICEF's Initiative as well as related technical assistance. Further, the idea is to present the on-the-ground story of social protection programmes in each country and the role of research in informing policy. It aims at strengthening the evidence base on social protection in East Asia and Pacific, while including additional examples from South Asia and Africa.

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The approach taken is that those who have been involved in the process in each country have contributed to the writing of the chapters in this book. These include UNICEF personnel, researchers and key government officials involved in the policy dialogue resulting from the research. The contributions of these individuals allow for a more complete account of the history of the programme and the research in each country.

The book focuses on providing a narrative for each country case study on the specific objectives and design of the social protection programme, its impact, the relationship between research and social protection policy and programmes, and the lessons that can be learned from the policy dialogue and implementation. After summarizing the research process followed and the results, the curated chapters describe the practical implications of the government's uptake to influence and guide their social protection policies and programmes. Each one of them highlights the impact of these policies and programmes over children's lives and wellbeing. A final chapter includes a synthesis of the results, political economy, and policy implications from a regional perspective.

Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 summarizes 12 years of evidence generated by the Transfer Project on the impacts of government-run cash transfer programmes across sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence shows that cash transfers that are mainly unconditional have wide-ranging positive impacts across domains such as food security and diet, schooling, material and subjective well-being, consumption and poverty reduction, assets and production, and multiplier effects on the local economy.

The work of the Transfer Project has also refuted many common myths such as those that claim that cash transfers are spent on alcohol or tobacco or contribute to increased fertility. Close collaboration with governments has led to remarkable use of the evidence, with the research influencing decisions to increase cash benefits, expand cash transfer programmes and increase government funding for such programmes. To maximise the effectiveness of cash transfers, a growing number of programmes in sub-Saharan Africa combine cash transfers with complementary interventions and linkages to services – an approach known as 'cash plus' or 'integrated social protection'.

As well as continuing to build evidence on the role of cash plus programmes, the future work of the Transfer Project will address knowledge gaps around the design and implementation of cash transfers in development and emergency settings, including the COVID-19 pandemic; sustainability of impacts; shock-responsiveness of cash transfers; financing sustainability; and returns of investing in cash transfers. Further research in these areas will strengthen the investment case for cash transfers in sub-Saharan Africa and ultimately help governments to establish integrated, effective, inclusive and domestically financed statutory social protection systems.

Chapter 3 introduces Viet Nam's ongoing reform of the country's social protection system. The robust evidence base generated and technical advice provided to the Government has promoted child-sensitive and shock-responsive social assistance. Overall, the social assistance system in Viet Nam is an important safeguard of children's rights and has seen major advances in the last decade. There remains room for improvement, however, in meeting the specific needs of vulnerable children. This cannot be achieved without cross-sectoral cooperation and adequate financial resources dedicated to social assistance and the social services workforce. Current challenges in the design, institutional capacity and implementation of social assistance limit its effectiveness.

Children are targeted using rigid and fragmented approaches, and the burdensome implementation process creates bottlenecks for both applicants and staff. Moving towards simpler, more inclusive targeting approaches (such as targeting by age and/or geographic location) could substantially reduce exclusion errors and achieve higher coverage of children in need of assistance. At the ground level, further investments in the social workforce could improve the take-up and effectiveness of social assistance and other social services for children.

Emergency social assistance faces similar challenges. Considering that Viet Nam is one of the most natural disaster-affected countries in the world, the Government should prioritize the creation of a more flexible targeting mechanism that captures vulnerable households that slip into poverty after an emergency situation. In addition, early warning systems could improve the resilience of the population and make emergency response planning more effective and efficient.

Chapter 4 presents the results from the research, policy dialogue and advocacy undertaken in Sri Lanka in 2020 to explore the feasibility and potential impact of including a universal child benefit as part of a national response to the socio-economic crisis caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter examines specifically the potential impacts on the well-being of two options for a universal child benefit, as well as the macroeconomic effects of a universal lifecycle approach to social protection stimulus measures in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is based on multiple sources, including available literature and administrative data, key informant interviews, and secondary analysis of Sri Lanka's 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey to produce microsimulations.

This evidence has resulted in gradual but significant policy developments in the country, including the expansion of the existing voucher programme for pregnant and lactating women in Sri Lanka to ensure support for all children from pregnancy until their second birthday. To continue building commitment for a universal child grant, this chapter argues that a shift in paradigm is required. By implementing permanent social protection reforms for a more inclusive system, families with children in Sri Lanka could access essential support, leading to more sustainable impacts resulting from efforts to reduce poverty and promote child development.

Chapter 5 elaborates further on from the argument in the previous chapter on Leaving No One Behind by focusing on Thailand's Disability Grant. The chapter addresses some of the key questions around the inclusiveness and adequacy of social protection measures in Thailand for people with disabilities, including children with disabilities. People with disabilities, including children, face significant social and economic vulnerabilities. The findings from Thailand are consistent with those of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) midpoint review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, which states that "differences in poverty rates between persons with disabilities and the overall population range from 3.9 per cent to 20.6 per cent".

While the Disability Grant has played a critical role since 2010 in addressing vulnerabilities and the poverty faced by people with disabilities in Thailand, certain gaps in policy implementation needed to be addressed for the scheme to be more inclusive and adequate. National Disability Survey 2017 statistics show that despite the universal nature of the Disability Grant, only 44.4 per cent of people with disabilities applied for the disability ID card and just 43.8 per cent of people with disabilities received the grant, highlighting a significant gap in the Disability Grant's coverage. Against this backdrop, UNICEF and policymakers were compelled to further explore the reasons for the limited reach through this study. The findings have subsequently informed necessary adjustments to improve the uptake of the Disability Grant and more effectively meet the needs of children with disabilities in Thailand.

In chapter 6, the Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana (MKUY), a new conditional cash transfer programme that consolidates six existing cash transfers and four new cash transfers in Bihar, India, provides an ideal setting to explore the question of the importance of integrated social protection systems in meeting children's interconnected needs across the lifecycle. Despite growing recognition of the importance of integrated social protection systems in meeting children's interconnected needs across the lifecycle, social protection programmes in many low- and middle-income countries remain fragmented and uncoordinated. This is partly because a range of bottlenecks can make coordination and integration difficult in practice as shown in broader social policy settings. Bottlenecks include (i) deeply entrenched institutional structures causing competition issues, (ii) divergent organizational priorities and culture undermining coordination, (iii) limited capacity hindering effective change management, and (iv) the transition to an integrated system being aggravated by legacy information systems.

Among social assistance programmes, particularly in the case of conditional cash transfers, there is little evidence to date of how these bottlenecks manifest themselves. The integrated conditional cash transfer MKUY aims to address vulnerabilities along the life course of a girl child in a coherent manner over 21 years of a girl's life. The 23 universal tranches aimed at improving girl child survival, school retention until graduation, and delaying age at marriage via a

cumulative benefit of USD700. MKUY was implemented by the Departments of Social Welfare, Health, and Education. UNICEF worked with the Government of Bihar through technical advisory on its design (i.e., on the scheme's process monitoring and scoping study on integrated Management Information Systems) and implementation research to guide optimal rollout.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore further options for integrated social protection systems. Chapter 7 discusses Cambodia's Family Package as a suite of integrated benefits that comprehensively addresses risks throughout the lifecycle for poor and vulnerable families and children. Chapter 8 explores the potential for management information system strengthening in China's national and local governments to create more child-supportive social assistance management information system.

In a series of strategic investments to strengthen the social protection system, the Government of Cambodia transitioned from having multiple fragmented social assistance programmes in 2015 to designing four consolidated lifecycle-based social assistance programmes. The Government recognizes, however, the potential efficiency gains (in terms of better awareness and coverage, streamlined operations and operational improvements) that would result from integrating these programmes.

The Family Package is the culmination of this vision to deliver social protection comprehensively, effectively and efficiently to all poor and vulnerable families and children, covering the needs of Cambodian citizens from conception until death. Under the leadership of the National Social Protection Council, and in close collaboration with key ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation and development partners, the Government of Cambodia undertook a series of assessments and engaged in wide stakeholder consultations to develop and refine the concept of the Family Package.

To fill gaps in data and evidence (particularly on capacity gaps and implementation challenges) and identify the best model for the package, the various assessments and evidence pieces were coupled with wide stakeholder consultations across all social sector ministries and from non-governmental organizations and development partners. The cost of the Family Package design led to the development of a five-year expansion plan for the package, encouraging the Government to think about a gradual scale-up and to plan for annual targets covering pregnant women, children, people with disabilities, elderly people and people living with HIV/AIDS. Consequently, the final Family Package represents a fundamental shift in thinking and a significant change in the way that social protection is implemented in Cambodia.

In China, management information technology is widely used in social welfare, but its full potential for children has not yet been realized. Currently, the use of management information systems is mainly limited to the management of a

particular system, while the data could potentially be repurposed and expanded to better identify, address and track children's multidimensional development.

Ideas for management information system strengthening tend to focus on issues to do with information and communication technology (such as hardware, software, information and communication technology systems analysis, data flows) which are, understandably, vital aspects of such strengthening efforts. To guide those efforts towards greater 'child supportiveness' however, stronger linkages are needed to core social protection issues such as the monitoring and tracking of multidimensional vulnerabilities, the linking of people facing multidimensional vulnerabilities to social services, the monitoring of service interventions and, ultimately, and the reduction of multidimensional vulnerabilities.

The analysis in this chapter is based on a desk review of the literature on China's management information systems for social assistance at national and local levels. It also draws on the practices of a few countries that employ management information technology for social assistance. Ensuring a child-supportive system relies on more than advanced technology; it also involves designing the management information system to better track and respond to the multidimensional vulnerabilities experienced by children and their families.

Chapter 9 provides a sample of the evidence and experience generated beyond Asia and Pacific. Drawing on the GirlsEmpoweringGirls programme in Uganda, this chapter explores how a social protection programme can contribute to the strengthening of the social protection system and, conversely, how a systems approach to social protection can influence the success of a social protection programme. Uganda's rapid urbanization and high population growth rates translate into ever-increasing proportions of children and youth living in urban areas. While young people in urban areas are considered better off than their rural counterparts (having greater access to services and more diverse income-generating opportunities) they are also more vulnerable to homelessness, exploitation and abuse.

Among urban-dwelling young people, adolescent girls and young women disproportionately bear the burden of poverty, lack of access to social services and a higher likelihood of exploitation, gender-based violence and exclusion. In 2019, Kampala Capital City Authority launched the GirlsEmpoweringGirls programme, the first urban social protection programme for adolescent girls in Kampala, Uganda. GirlsEmpoweringGirls targets in- and out-of-school adolescent girls in selected parishes and schools across the city. The programme combines peer-to-peer mentoring, referral to services and a cash transfer to empower, engage and enable adolescent girls to live up to their potential. At the same time, the scheme contributes to the strengthening of the social protection system in Kampala and in Uganda more widely. The referral component connects adolescent girls to available services and local volunteer networks and integrates non-governmental service providers into the government social protection

response. Both the mentor coordination platform and referral component are critical for strengthening the social protection system for adolescent girls in Kampala.

The notion of system-strengthening is particularly appealing among social protection practitioners. Strong, integrated systems can efficiently and effectively deliver social protection results that are better than what fragmented interventions can achieve on their own. At the same time, system strengthening enables social protection practitioners to comprehensively address the build-up of poverty and vulnerability from childhood, through adulthood and into old age. There are multiple pathways towards the strengthening of social protection systems, which is in part a reflection of the interrelated and interdependent nature of the components within a system and the multitude of leverage points for systemic change. The experience from Uganda is therefore highly relevant to the Asia-Pacific context, where urbanization and system integration are two of the most pressing issues.

Chapter 10 offers an overview of the social protection responses during COVID-19 in East Asia and Pacific. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an extraordinary social protection response to support households withstand its socioeconomic effects. Despite its relative success, the social and economic reverberations of the pandemic have been severe. Countries in the region have taken different approaches towards adapting or scaling up existing systems and programmes to meet the sudden and expanded needs of larger numbers of households in the context of the pandemic. Countries have developed new schemes, building on varied levels of existing programmatic infrastructure for social protection. All cases are in turn determined by the different stages of social protection system maturity and capacity for closing prior coverage gaps.

The chapter draws on a systematic review of social protection responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in East Asia and Pacific from January 2020 to August 2021. It also takes stock of the evidence-based policy influence and advocacy undertaken by UNICEF to reimagining social protection systems in the region post-COVID-19. The systematic approach reviewed social protection responses in East-Asian and Pacific countries through the lens of a conceptual framework that conceives pandemic-related and shock-responsive social protection interventions in terms of their adequacy, design, appropriateness, financing, and timeliness. The objective of the review was to assess the programmes and to identify lessons, best practices, and opportunities for expanding investments in comprehensive, child-sensitive and shock-responsive social protection in the region. This regional overview serves thus as a preamble to the Philippines case presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 11 goes on to synthesize findings from three studies carried out during COVID-19 in the Philippines. Beyond the severe impacts of the health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly morphed into an unprecedented socio-economic

crisis, with severe effects on the well-being of households and particularly children. To better understand the socio-economic effects of COVID-19, between 2020 and 2021 UNICEF Philippines and the Department of Social Welfare and Development conducted three complementary studies that examined the effects of COVID-19 on poverty and child poverty, the efficacy of the Social Amelioration Program, and the Emergency Social Protection programme – introduced by the Government of the Philippines in response to the crisis.

The assessment of socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in National Capital Region found that the coronavirus had had far greater effects on poor households than had initially been anticipated. As the pandemic and related containment measures persisted for far longer than expected, the negative impacts of COVID-19 escalated further. These findings align with those of the ex ante microsimulation, which found that in the worst case scenario, COVID-19 increased the national poverty headcount from 18 million to 37 million people. Child poverty is especially likely to have increased substantially, with the number of children living in poverty almost doubling from 9.7 million to 18.5 million children (nearly 45 per cent of all Philippine children). The introduction of the Government's social protection response, through the Social Amelioration Program, is estimated to have prevented 2 million children from falling into poverty nationwide.

These findings from the microsimulation were corroborated with findings from the primary qualitative data collection. Policymakers and implementers of the scheme perceive the programme as the most important social protection measure implemented in the Philippines to alleviate household vulnerabilities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the Social Amelioration Program could not completely offset the income shock, and the microsimulation suggests that poverty is set to increase compared with pre-COVID-19 levels. Furthermore, existing disparities are likely to worsen, with child poverty increasing further and the gap between the country's poorest regions and poverty's national average growing wider. As such, further policy options should be considered to alleviate long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The closing chapter discusses the policy issues and options for moving towards social protection for all children in East Asia and Pacific. It draws on the main challenges currently faced by children not only in EAP, but also across the whole region, including the COVID-induced rise in child poverty and inequality as well as higher vulnerability to natural disasters across the board. Furthermore, the nonmonetary dimensions of the pandemic and its impacts may ultimately prove to be more costly than the monetary dimensions. Despite these pressing needs, the effectiveness of existing social protection systems in addressing these challenges facing children and their families is questionable. Less than half of the population in Asia and Pacific is protected by at least one social protection scheme, and even larger coverage gaps remain in the areas of child and family benefits and disability benefits.

The global crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the fundamental role that strong, universal, integrated and accessible social protection systems can play in protecting children and their caregivers from the negative effects of all sorts of crises. Cash transfers alone are not enough; we need comprehensive, accessible and affordable social services. Bringing childhood back on track is both an obligation to fulfil children's rights, and also an essential condition to allow countries to recover. Without a daring vision of the future of social protection for children in the region we not only risk losing the hard-won developmental gains in recent years, but we also risk losing the capacity of countries to grow in the future. Without the right investments, the shadow of COVID-19 may hang over countries for a generation or more to come.