

Universal social security for the realisation of human rights

A collection of briefs



*Universal Declaration
of Human Rights 1948*

DEVELOPMENT

PATHWAYS

"Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality."

Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

This year has brought challenges to social security systems across the globe, including the war in Ukraine, a push for fiscal austerity threatening investment in social security, continuous humanitarian crises, and terrible climate-related disasters.

Although Article 22 and other human rights frameworks have recognised the right to social security and the right to a minimum standard of living, we can say that in 2022, countries across the globe still find themselves in a situation in which millions of people are being left behind and falling through the cracks of social security systems. The fragmented nature of social security delivery in many countries, as well as the existing coverage gaps, are linked to the deficient levels of investment in the sector, in addition to some of the policy choices countries have made over the past decades.

A key aspect of a human rights approach to social security is that it provides the base for establishing inclusive, universal and lifecycle systems so as to better address the number of shocks and vulnerabilities that rights holders might face at certain stages of their lives. Inclusive lifecycle social security systems are based on the principle that everyone is entitled to some form of protection from risks and vulnerabilities, instead of focusing just on those "deserving" protection, such as is the case with palliative poverty targeting social assistance programmes.

International instruments have also recognised the value of social security in preventing and reducing poverty, inequality, social exclusion and social insecurity; promoting equal opportunity and gender and racial equality; supporting the transition from informal to formal employment; empowering individuals to adjust to changes in the economy and in the labour market; and finally, in acting as an automatic social and economic stabiliser.

Our work in 2022 has brought to the fore the importance of Article 22 for the further consolidation of social security systems across the globe. This collection brings together, in brief, a small number of ways in which approaching social security and human rights together can support the vision of Article 22 as we move forwards.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barrantes'.

Alexandra Barrantes, Senior Social Policy Specialist
December 2022

SOCIAL SECURITY FOR REFUGEES: A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE



In 2022, the number of forcibly displaced people globally passed 100 million people for the first time in history.

Approximately 27 million are refugees who have either been granted asylum in a foreign country or are in the process of seeking it. Worsened by the armed conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, Afghanistan's crisis and the South Sudan emergency, protecting the human rights of refugees around the world has never been more pressing.

Violations of human rights are a leading cause for mass exodus and internal displacement. Refugees are an extremely vulnerable group, both during the migration journey from their home to their host country, and during the asylum-seeking process upon arrival, which puts them at risk of grave human rights transgressions. They face, among others, economic, housing, health and social insecurity, and numerous legal, cultural and systemic barriers to obtaining security.

Unsurprisingly refugees report experiences of discrimination, material deprivation, and precarity.

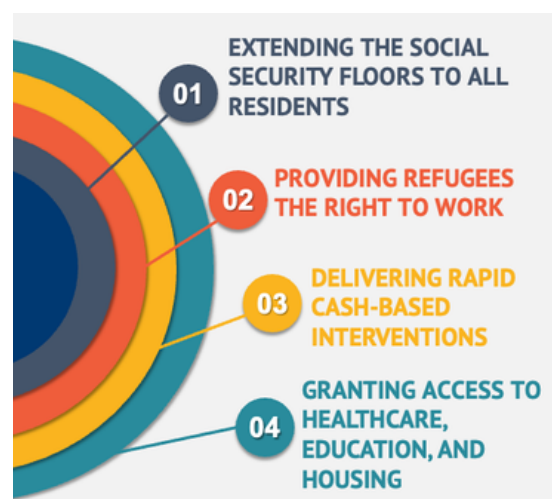
Social security is a fundamental human right under Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Establishing universal, lifecycle-based social security for all is critical to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable people in society are met, and can therefore play an instrumental role in protecting the rights of refugees.



In line with ILO Recommendation 202 and its commitment to non-discrimination, integrating refugees into national systems can provide them with the essential support they require. It also constitutes a move away from reliance on charitable assistance and towards human rights-based approaches to social security.

A crucial step towards ensuring refugees can access social security systems is to eliminate barriers to the labour market, allowing them to participate in paid and regulated employment. Many host countries have contributory social security systems that require periods of formal employment to be eligible, forcing many refugees into informal or hidden employment and locking them out of earnings-related entitlements. In addition, extending tax-financed social security guarantees not just to citizens, but to all residents of a country, ensures refugees not in paid employment still have basic security.

Cash-based interventions are a vital element of any effective, human rights-based social security response, but complementary social security provisions - such as health care, education, or affordable housing - are also necessary to protect the human rights of refugees. Reducing access barriers and upholding the right of refugees to participate in both contributory and non-contributory schemes can reduce poverty, boost economic growth, and encourage their inclusion in their host country's social and economic life.



Steps to integrating refugees into national social security systems

Under the EU's Temporary Protection Scheme, many European countries are already taking the first steps to incorporate Ukrainian refugees into their national coverage, like Ireland, Slovakia, or Spain.

Looking forward, it is critical that all governments commit to building inclusive, universal, lifecycle social security systems to ensure the human rights of those most vulnerable are respected, protected and fulfilled.

The COVID-19 pandemic renewed impetus to fix gaps in the coverage and adequacy of social security systems worldwide. Today's world is fraught with further compounding covariate shocks: in addition to the pandemic, war and economic turmoil have led to rapid fuel price increases, food insecurity, and, in many countries, pervasive unemployment.

While initial enthusiasm to guard against future shocks following COVID-19 was apparent, too little progress has been made to realise the universal right to social security, with many people still vulnerable to income insecurity and deteriorating living standards.

The primary social security response to unemployment is unemployment benefits, which have a dual purpose to i) provide income security during periods of unemployment and ii) to provide support with reintegration into the labour market.

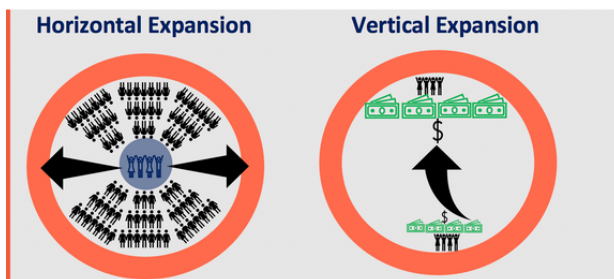
Entitlement to social security is often conditional on participation in the formal labour market, which means that in low- and middle-income countries, where the majority of the workforce is informal, many are left unprotected and without income security.

"Universal, inclusive social security systems can be immediately scaled up to extend coverage to the unemployed and all those affected"

This has been the case in [Sri Lanka](#), where informal workers have been left unable to access income security amid its worsening debt and economic crisis. This results in the implementation of ad hoc emergency measures to plug gaps in protection.

In contexts where there are high rates of structural unemployment, not only are ad hoc emergency measures inefficient in reaching the most vulnerable unemployed people because the unemployed population is already very large, but their ability to guarantee income security during protracted crises is extremely limited.

When comprehensive social security systems are already in place, these can be immediately scaled up to extend coverage to the unemployed and all those affected:



Horizontal expansion involves increasing the number of recipients; vertical expansion involves increasing the value of cash transfers to existing recipients.

Underdeveloped and weak social security systems have limited expansion capacity to respond adequately to crises, particularly those that rely on predominantly poverty-targeted schemes. Global experience tells us that these schemes are not well-targeted, are ineffective in protecting the poor and exclude, by design, the majority of the population (those on middle incomes). During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries characterised by these low coverage social security systems, like Indonesia and Bangladesh, covered just 42 per cent and 23 per cent of their respective populations through social security. As a result, a high proportion of those most affected by the crisis were unable to access protection.

Universal social security systems, comprising lifecycle schemes, such as old age pensions and disability and child benefits, reach a larger proportion of the population and can be more effectively scaled up during crises. For example, during the pandemic, the Bolivian government vertically and horizontally expanded their existing social security system. From this, approximately 95 per cent of Bolivia's population had direct or indirect access to support from a lifecycle benefit such as child benefits or old-age pensions as a member of a recipient household.

The horizontal expansion of Bolivia's system included the introduction of a Universal Bonus, implemented to address the exclusion of informally employed workers and self-employed people. The "Family Bonus" was a vertical expansion of existing child, school and old-age benefits.

Universal, inclusive social security systems can be immediately scaled up to extend coverage to the unemployed and all those affected, upholding the rights of unemployed people by ensuring that they are protected either directly or indirectly through a lifecycle benefit.

Equality and non-discrimination are fundamental human rights. A rights-based approach to social security therefore points towards universal social security.

Despite the link between human rights, non-discrimination and universal social security, women across the globe are systematically disadvantaged in their use and access to social security systems. This is often due to intersecting life course and labour market inequalities. Such unequal access to social security creates barriers for all genders to realise their full social and economic rights.

Social protection design choices can help to address these inequalities, but they can also exacerbate them. For example, poverty-targeted tax-financed benefits are typically granted to households, rather than individuals, often with the male head of household receiving the transfer. This design assumes that men and women have equal bargaining power within the household, and can lead to women becoming dependent on male family figures or being denied

full access to social security benefits because of inequalities within the household.

Instead, ensuring that citizens have a right to social security as individuals can counter such inequalities and increase women's relative bargaining power.

Correcting imbalances within the household can also have its challenges. For example, simply paying benefits to women without considering existing gendered power dynamics does not automatically lead to greater gender parity.

"Maternity benefits provide income replacement and maintain the attachment to the labour market for women in paid employment"

In fact, targeted programmes, particularly conditional programmes, risk perpetuating gender inequalities by placing further care responsibilities on women. This is because benefits are tied to conditions such as providing nutrition and education for their children. As such, the focus on women is not on recognising their rights; it's more as an instrument for benefiting their children.



Another challenge is that inequalities are often exacerbated during periods of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has left deeply gendered impacts. For example in Indonesia, there has been an increase in violence against women and girls, a rise in unpaid care workload and higher rates of job losses and unemployment amongst women.

If designed from a rights-based approach, social security systems can counter inequalities at the micro- and macro level, by acting as a vehicle for addressing gender-based inequalities in the labour market and in households.

For example, maternity benefits provide income replacement and maintain the attachment to the labour market for women in paid employment. Tax-financed maternity benefits can also be a way of recognising the economic constraints faced by female members of households who often do the bulk of unpaid care work.

In this way, effective social security systems stimulate social and economic growth at multiple levels, by empowering all genders within the household and lowering the costs of labour market participation. According to OECD, “If women participated in the economy identically to men, it would add up to USD 28 trillion, or 26%, to annual GDP in 2025 compared with a business-as-usual scenario.”

Gender-responsive social security programming is therefore a powerful mechanism to counter social and economic inequalities, and by extension, to uphold human rights.

STRENGTHENING HUMAN RIGHTS IN A CLIMATE CRISIS: HOW SOCIAL SECURITY CAN HELP



Climate-related disasters have characterised 2022: floods in South Asia, wildfires in North America and water shortages in East Africa and Europe. In the face of these catastrophic events, social security is one of the most effective response tools to protect people's human rights.

Being prepared for disasters ahead of time by having social security systems in place is fundamental. In particular, investing in universal social security prior to a crisis better enables governments to reach more households with support when a crisis hits. These systems provide a foundation that helps governments respond quickly by scaling up schemes and programmes they already have in place.

For example, in Kenya, the Hunger Safety Net Programme's unconditional cash transfer is designed to rapidly scale up in times of crisis, such as drought. Earlier this year, the National Drought Management Authority disbursed funds through the programme in response to a food security emergency.

"Investment in universal social security systems prior to a crisis better enables governments to reach more households with support"

Likewise, following floods that submerged one third of Pakistan, the government was able to utilise the existing Benazir Income Support Programme to deliver additional cash quickly.

While having existing systems in place gives countries a better chance of responding quickly to shocks, not all approaches are equally effective. In particular, existing programmes that are narrowly targeted at the poorest are unlikely to offer a broad platform for scaling up, as COVID-19 clearly showed.

Further, evidence shows that the populations affected by disasters and climate-related events are not always the same as those deemed most vulnerable outside of the crisis context.

As such, programmes covering core lifecycle groups (for example, children or older people) that select recipients on a universal (non means-tested) basis are much more effective in a crisis. This is especially true in contexts where the majority of the population are on low or insecure incomes. Therefore, in a disaster, universal social security presents the best opportunity for states to realise the human right to social security for all, without leaving anyone behind.

"In times of disaster, universal social security presents the best opportunity for states to realise the right to social security for all citizens"

While the focus of COP27 this year was largely on loss and damage, in addition to funding the recovery process in the aftermath of a climate disaster, countries can use social security to mitigate against climate change.

One example of this is through pension systems. By investing vast pensions funds in green initiatives, governments can make net zero a possibility and promote green sectors and jobs, enabling just transitions in countries of all income levels.

As more countries recognise the value of investing both in universal social security systems and green initiatives, they start to realise the rights of every member of society, protecting them from increasingly severe and frequent climate shocks.

Acknowledgements



The contributors of the 22 for 2022 briefs are Angela Barca, Kia Howson, Lucy Forster and Giorgia De Sabato.

The authors would like to thank Holly Seglah, Shea McClanahan and Laura Ulanowski for their guidance and editing support on this project.
