



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

UNHCR and partners are providing support to help 1364 Venezuelan families access this fund, providing

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