



RISING PRICES, GROWING PROTESTS

THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION



AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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Authorities use water cannons against university students in Sri Lanka protesting in the context of the economic and political crisis, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 19 May 2022 © Tharaka Basnayaka/NurPhoto via Getty Images



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“A toxic combination of mutually-reinforcing crises – inflation, debt, food and fuel price rises, geopolitical tensions and conflict, climate change – are threatening to increase poverty, inequality and discrimination worldwide. They are also fuelling social tensions. Yet, while policymakers focus on the need for progress on economic and environmental issues, less attention is being paid to the third pillar necessary for recovery – social progress.”

Gilbert F. Hounqbo, Director-General, International Labour Organization

The world has been reeling under wave after wave of crises that have resulted in loss of jobs, skyrocketing inflation, growing hunger, and increasing unrest on a global scale – all in a context in which billions of people have no access to social protection measures such as family and child benefits and income support in case of unemployment, sickness, disability and older age.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a cataclysmic event that wiped out almost four years of progress in global poverty reduction and pushed an additional 93 million people into extreme poverty. This came at a time when the climate crisis was already unfolding, with impacts being felt particularly by marginalized people and those on the lowest incomes, and as many people including in Ethiopia, Syria, Myanmar and Yemen continued to face armed conflict. Then, in February 2022, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led to another contraction of the global economy and dealt a further hammer blow to global food security through rising food and energy prices.

Together, these multiple crises have had profound human rights implications. In addition to a significant rise in global poverty, working hours equivalent to 40 million full time jobs have been lost, wages have not kept up with inflation and a ‘cost-of-living’ crisis has developed where the cost of essential items like food, housing, energy, transport, and healthcare have all risen dramatically. The gender gap in this context has also remained high. In the third quarter for 2022, for every

100 hours of paid work done by men, there were only 57.5 paid hours of work for women.

An extra 200 million people have been pushed into food insecurity since 2020, and 828 million go hungry every night. This has all happened in a context of growing inequality in which the poorest half of the population owns just 2% of the world’s wealth, and the richest 10% own 76%.

This downward spiral impacting people’s right to an adequate standard of living has also led to many protests around the world – as it has done throughout history. According to the Carnegie Endowment Global Protest Tracker, from January to November 2022, protests around inflation and ‘other economic woes’ soared compared to those in previous years, with most of these protests calling for greater economic support for those living in poverty. Yet, around the world, including in Iran, Sri Lanka, and Sierra Leone, rather than tackle the economic and social rights issues at the heart of such protests, states have employed repression and unnecessary and excessive use of force.

A key factor behind the economic insecurity driving many protests is the fact that the vast majority of people simply do not enjoy their right to social security, realized through the implementation of social protection measures, in a way that would protect them from crises and precarity and support them to recover.

Indeed, over half of the world’s population - 4.1 billion people - are not protected by any social protection measure other than healthcare, rising to over 80% in Africa. In low-

income countries, just 1% of people receive cash benefits in the case of unemployment. This gap is particularly important for people living in poverty who often face mutually reinforcing deprivations such as precarious and unsafe work, inadequate housing and sanitation, lack of access to healthcare, and lack of adequate and nutritious food. As a result, their capacity to cope with shocks is eroded.

Investing in social protection measures has proven to be effective in many contexts. For example, according to the ILO, Ghana's National Health Scheme significantly reduced the incidence of child labour by 22%. It also had a positive impact on boys' school attendance and a greater reduction in girls' engagement in child labour. However, such programmes must be designed to be inclusive and, where possible, avoid a focus on narrow poverty-based targeting that can often lead to stigmatization, high administration costs and exclusion. For example, in Sri Lanka, the World Bank found that 44% of people eligible for social assistance through *Sammurdhi*, the country's flagship social protection programme, were in fact excluded from it. A growing number of organizations including the ILO have therefore called for states to move progressively towards universal social protection models, providing equitable access to all people and protecting them throughout their lives against poverty and risks to their livelihoods and well-being.

Of course, a robust social protection system cannot be built overnight. It needs financing, administrative and legal mechanisms for its delivery, strategies that ensure that people are protected without discrimination throughout their life cycles, and mechanisms for monitoring, review, accountability, and remedy. Resources are key. The ILO estimates

that low-income countries would need to invest an additional US\$77.9 billion per year (15.9% of GDP) and lower-middle-income countries an additional US\$362.9 billion per year (5.1% of GDP) to guarantee basic social protection coverage to all.

Such significant financing gaps could be progressively closed, however, if states met their human rights obligations to mobilize the 'maximum available resources' to realize the right to social security, seek and provide international assistance, provide debt relief for countries whose repayments are too high, and tackle illicit financial flows and tax abuse. As part of this, states should support the establishment of a global fund for social protection, as proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, the UN Secretary General and the ILO.

This briefing reflects research and analysis by the ILO, UN agencies, UN Special Procedures including the UN Special Rapporteur on poverty and other experts, and civil society organizations, as well as Amnesty International's previously published work on these issues.

In a world facing multiple crises and increasingly vulnerable to climate shocks, the right to social security can play a critical role in protecting people from poverty and the violation of other human rights. Amnesty International joins a growing coalition of experts and civil society organizations calling for the redoubling of efforts to progressively realize universal coverage without discrimination so that every person is protected from current and future shocks – whether they are caused by health emergencies, the climate crisis, conflict, or other events.

2. BACKGROUND

Millions of people around the world have been facing multiple and overlapping crises – from the Covid-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and ever-growing cases of armed conflict and extreme weather events such as droughts and floods exacerbated by climate change. These crises have resulted in loss of jobs, skyrocketing inflation, growing hunger, and increasing unrest.

The pandemic pushed 93 million more people into extreme poverty

The Covid-19 pandemic came at a time when the climate crisis was already unfolding, with impacts being felt in most parts of the world and particularly by marginalized people and those living in poverty. Simultaneously, many parts of the world were also facing armed conflict including in Ethiopia, Syria, Myanmar, and Yemen. The pandemic caused a major setback to the gains being made in poverty reduction in the pre-pandemic years. It wiped out almost four years of progress in this regard, and an additional 93 million people were pushed into extreme poverty.¹ Lockdown and quarantine measures, restrictions on labour mobility, and the contraction of trade in goods and services deeply impacted the global economy. Then, two years into the pandemic, Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. This has contributed towards a further

contraction of the global economy and slowing of growth.²

Contraction of the global economy also led to loss of work and rise in unemployment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) the continuing impact of the multiple crises, despite short instances of recovery, have resulted in the loss of working hours equivalent to 40 million full time jobs. The gender gap in this context has also remained high. For every 100 hours of paid work done by men, there were only 57.5 paid hours of work for women.³ At the same time, wages have not kept up with inflation. In 2022 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that inflation in many economies had been the highest in 40 years.⁴ This situation has led to a ‘cost-of-living’ crisis where the cost of essential items like food, housing, energy, transport, and healthcare have risen dramatically. These developments have also led to increasing inequality in a context where “[t]he poorest half of the global population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of the total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth.”⁵

The growth of poverty has serious human rights implications. People living in poverty often face mutually reinforcing deprivations such as precarious and unsafe work, inadequate housing and sanitation and, lack of access to healthcare and lack of adequate and nutritious food.⁶ As a result, their capacity to cope with shocks is further eroded.

¹ United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022*, unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022.pdf, p. 3.

International poverty lines are calculated as the median of national poverty lines in low-income countries (LICs), lower-middle-income countries (LMICs), and upper-middle-income countries (UMICs), converted to US dollars using Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) exchange rates. The extreme poverty line of US\$1.90 (2011 PPP) increased to US\$2.15 (2017 PPP) in September 2022. World Bank Group, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022: Correcting Course*, 2022, doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1893-6 openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/37739/9781464818936.pdf?sequence=73&isAllowed=y, p. 3.

² According to the World Bank, global growth is expected to take a sharp downturn to 1.7% in 2023. This is 1.3 percentage points below earlier forecasts. World Bank, *Sharp, Long-lasting Slowdown to Hit Developing Countries Hard*, 10 January 2023, [worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/01/10/global-economic-prospects](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/01/10/global-economic-prospects), p. XVII.

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), *ILO Monitor on the World of Work. Tenth edition - Multiple Crises Threaten the Global Labour Market Recovery*, 31 October 2022, [ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/briefingnote/wcms_859255.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/briefingnote/wcms_859255.pdf), pp. 1 and 6.

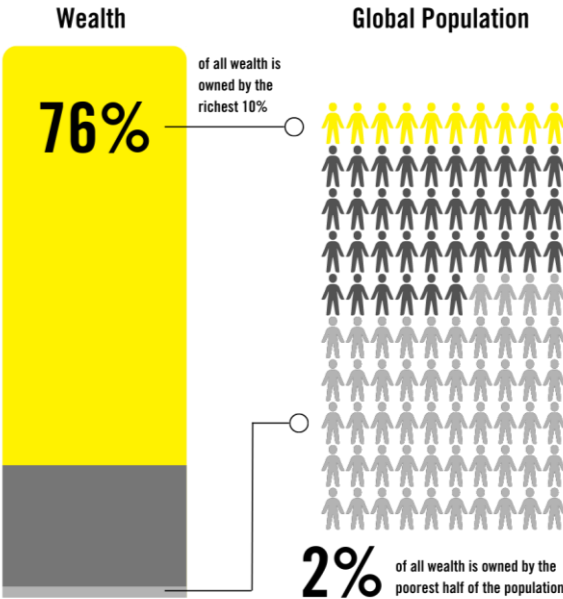
⁴ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Report - Countering the Cost Of Living Crisis*, October 2022, [imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/10/11/world-economic-outlook-october-2022](https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/10/11/world-economic-outlook-october-2022), p.51

⁵ Lucas Chancel and others, *World Inequality Report 2022*, World Inequality Lab, [wir2022.wid.world](https://www.wir2022.wid.world), p. 10.

⁶ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*, Resolution 21/11 adopted on 27 September 2012, [ohchr.org/en/publications/reference-publications/guiding-principles-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights](https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/reference-publications/guiding-principles-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights), p. 2.

The multiple crises have had a profound impact on people’s right to an adequate standard of living and has led to many protests around the world. According to the Carnegie Endowment Global Protest Tracker, from January to November 2022, protests around inflation and ‘other economic woes’ soared compared to those in previous years, with most of these protests calling for greater economic support for those living in poverty.⁷

This briefing highlights the ways in which multiple crises - caused by climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine - have increased poverty and inequality, and impacted hunger around the world. It highlights the link between the impacts of the crises, such as inflation and unemployment, and some of the protests that followed. The briefing calls on states to respect the rights to freedom of expression and assembly, and to also address the economic and social drivers of these protests. It proposes the realization of the right to social security and the provision of universal social protection as a path by which states can respond to crises and protests in a manner grounded in human rights. Recognizing that provision of universal social protection has serious resource implications, the briefing calls on states to fully utilize their maximum available resources, including through the duty to seek and provide international cooperation and assistance. In this context, the briefing calls on states to explore the establishment of a global fund for social protection that will provide the necessary resources for the fulfilment of the right to social security for all.



Source: World Inequality Report 2022 © Amnesty International

⁷ Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Feldman, “Economic anger dominated global protests in 2022”, 8 December 2022, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/08/economic-anger-dominated-global-protests-in-2022-pub-88587 The Global Protest Tracker tracks what it calls ‘significant anti-government protests’ therefore there may be protests that are not captured by the tracker. For 2022 it recorded 58 protests over inflation and ‘other economic woes’ – a huge rise over 16 such protests recorded by the tracker in 2021 and 19 in 2020. In October 2022, the BBC recorded protests over fuel had gripped more than 90 countries. BBC, “Fuel protests gripping more than 90 countries”, 17 October 2022, [bbc.com/news/world-63185186](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-63185186)



Demonstrators take part in a protest march from Victoria station to Parliament Square in London, UK, 23 July 2022 © Niklas Halle'n/AFP via Getty Images

3. THE CRISES AND GROWING HUNGER

“The world is grappling with catastrophic food insecurity and unprecedented humanitarian needs, fuelled by conflict, climate shocks and the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic. The increasing costs of food, fuel and fertilizer have driven millions of people closer to starvation and triggered a wave of hunger and unrest.”

World Food Programme (WFP), Emergency Operations Division⁸



Food distribution at Berley Camp for internally displaced persons, Ethiopia, 10 January 2023 © Eduardo Soteras/AFP via Getty Images

Multiple and often mutually reinforcing crises have undermined the right to food. In 2012, the United Nations Secretary General launched the ‘Zero Hunger Challenge’, which

includes commitments to end hunger, eliminate all forms of malnutrition, and build inclusive and sustainable food systems.⁹ A decade later, that goal seems to be even

⁸ World Food Programme (WFP) Emergency Operations Division, *WFP Global Operational Response Plan 2022: Update #6*, 14 November 2022, wfp.org/publications/wfp-global-operational-response-plan-update-6-november-2022 This estimate is the seventh update of WFP’s acute food insecurity estimate for its Global Operational Response Plan, starting in June 2020, covering 79 countries with WFP operational presence and data available.

⁹ IISD SDG Knowledge Hub, “UN Secretary-General launches ‘Zero Hunger Challenge’”, 22 June 2012, sdg.iisd.org/news/un-secretary-general-launches-zero-hunger-challenge/

further away than in 2012. In November 2022, the World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that as many as 828 million people, more than one in ten of the world's population – still go to bed hungry each night and 349 million people were acutely food insecure in 2022, an increase of 200 million people when compared to before the pandemic.¹⁰ Furthermore, 45 countries need external aid for food, of which 33 are in Africa.¹¹



Source: World Food Programme © Amnesty International

Three of the major drivers of hunger are economic shocks, continued armed conflict and extreme weather conditions brought about by the climate crisis.¹² The combined effect of all three drivers is playing havoc in the lives of millions of people in Afghanistan. In January 2023, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates, two-thirds of people in the country (28.3 million people) are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance as they face the third consecutive year of drought-like conditions, a second year of economic shock

and the ongoing impacts of decades of conflict.¹³

3.1 ECONOMIC SHOCK

Economic shock has been one of the major outcomes of the multiple crises. According to the World Bank's Food Security Update of December 2022, almost all low- and middle-income countries have experienced high rates of inflation between July and October 2022. Some of the worst affected states include Zimbabwe at 321%, Lebanon at 203%, Venezuela at 158%, Türkiye at 99%, Argentina at 92%, Iran at 84%, Sri Lanka at 81%, Rwanda at 57%, Suriname at 51% and Ghana at 44%.¹⁴ Even in wealthy states like the United Kingdom (UK), inflation in food prices in a context where wages have not kept pace has seen an increasing number of people on lower incomes dependent on food banks or charitable organizations providing food. According to research by the Independent Food Aid Network, almost 90% of food banks surveyed in the UK reported increased demand in December 2022 and January 2023 compared with a year earlier.¹⁵

Around 60% of the poorest countries are in debt distress or at a high risk of debt distress

The crises have also dealt a body blow to the financial health of many states, increasing debt distress and shrinking fiscal space. Around 60% of low income countries are in debt distress or at a high risk of debt distress – a situation where a country is not able to meet its debt related financial obligations and therefore at risk of defaulting on the debt repayment.¹⁶

¹⁰ WFP, *WFP Global Operational Response Plan: Update #6* (previously cited), p. 4.

¹¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), GIEWS - Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture, Countries Requiring External Assistance for Food, March 2023, [fao.org/giews/country-analysis/external-assistance/en/](https://www.fao.org/giews/country-analysis/external-assistance/en/) (accessed on 20 March 2023).

¹² WFP, *Global Report on Food Crises – 2022*, 4 May 2022, [wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-2022](https://www.wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-2022), p. 50.

¹³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan*, 23 January 2023, reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023

¹⁴ World Bank, *Food Security Update*, 1 December 2022, [thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/40ebbf38f5a6b68bfc11e5273e1405d4-0090012022/related/Food-Security-Update-LXXIV-December-1-2022.pdf](https://www.thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/40ebbf38f5a6b68bfc11e5273e1405d4-0090012022/related/Food-Security-Update-LXXIV-December-1-2022.pdf), p. 3. These are nominal year on year rates.

¹⁵ Guardian, "Revealed: Record number of households in UK depending on food banks", 19 February 2023, [the-guardian.com/society/2023/feb/19/record-number-of-uk-households-depending-on-food-banks](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/feb/19/record-number-of-uk-households-depending-on-food-banks)

¹⁶ IMF, *Crisis Upon Crisis: IMF Annual Report 2022*, September 2022, [imf.org/external/pubs/ft/ar/2022/english/](https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/ar/2022/english/), p. 19.



Women wait for free bread outside a bakery in Kabul, Afghanistan, 16 September 2021 © Bulent Kilic/AFP via Getty Images

High levels of debt and the high cost of servicing these debts not only means that states will default on their payments, but it also means that public spending necessary to realize economic, social and cultural rights is often also cut. For example, according to the organization Debt Justice, Zambia’s external debt payments increased from 4% of government revenue in 2014 to a projected 35.5% by the end of 2021. Even before the pandemic, Zambia was spending four times more on debt repayments than on public healthcare.¹⁷ This situation is not specific to Zambia alone. Oxfam has reported that on average, low-income countries spent 27.5% of their budgets on debt repayment – four times more than on health service provision and 12 times more than on social protection.¹⁸

While the impact of the crises is global, some states are in a better position to cope with the resulting economic shock and shortage in essential items than others. People living in middle- and low-income countries are worse-off than those in high-income countries. According to the IMF, expenditure on food accounts for 17% of consumer spending in advanced economies, but 40% of spending in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹ Within countries as well, households on lower incomes bear the brunt of inflation in food and other essential commodities as food costs often take up a significantly larger proportion of their expenses than the expenses of wealthier households.²⁰

As of March 2023, around 21 countries are projected to be nearing simultaneous debt and food crises, including Afghanistan, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Haiti, Lebanon, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.²¹

¹⁷ Debt Justice, “Cancel the debt”, March 2021, debtjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Supporter-briefing.pdf, p. 4.

¹⁸ Oxfam International, “G20 must tackle the ‘cost of profit’ crisis causing chaos worldwide”, 14 November 2022, oxfam.org/en/press-releases/g20-must-tackle-cost-profit-crisis-causing-chaos-worldwide

¹⁹ Christian Bogmans and others, “War-fueled surge in food prices to hit poorer nations hardest”, 16 March 2022, IMF Blog, imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/03/16/war-fueled-surge-in-food-prices-to-hit-poorer-nations-hardest

²⁰ European Central Bank, “The impact of the recent rise in inflation on low-income households”, ECB Economic Bulletin, Issue July 2022, ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/focus/2022/html/ecb.ebbox202207_04-a89ec1a6fe.en.html

²¹ International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, *Breaking the Cycle of Unsustainable Food Systems, Hunger, and Debt*, March 2023, ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/DebtFoodCrisis.pdf, p. 7.

ECONOMIC CRISIS, DEBT DISTRESS AND PROTESTS IN SRI LANKA



Protestors beat utensils during a march against inflation and shortages in essential commodities in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 3 April 2022 © Ishara S. Kodikara/AFP via Getty Images

In 2022, Sri Lanka experienced a severe economic crisis that led to huge shortages in essential items including in food and fuel and a fall in incomes. Multiple factors including corruption, high levels of debt, tax cuts, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry and remittances have been attributed to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. In 2022 Sri Lanka's public debt reached 108.6% of GDP. In March 2022, the IMF said that Sri Lanka's public debt was unsustainable. In May 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on its debt payments for the first time. This has had a severe impact on numerous aspects of life in Sri Lanka including the country's ability to procure medicines, grain and fuel. The shortages in essential items with the accompanying inflation put economic and social rights at risk. Steep increases in the price of food, combined with reductions in household income and loss of livelihood, mean that people are either unable to afford sufficient and nutritious food, or must spend a much larger proportion of their income on food-related expenses, often at the cost of other essential services like healthcare, housing and education. Even prior to the crisis, malnutrition in children under five was widespread in Sri Lanka. The crisis worsened the problem.

Amnesty International released a report on the impact of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka in October 2022. Almost all the people in Sri Lanka Amnesty International spoke with, described being unable to provide adequate and nutritious food for themselves and their families as one of the main impacts of the economic crisis. The difficulties are further compounded for people who have experienced long standing economic, social and political marginalization such as those belonging to the Malayaha Tamil community.

As the economic crisis intensified, people in Sri Lanka began protesting and calling for the government to take responsibility for the economic crisis. Peaceful protests were often met with brutal and repressive responses from authorities, and attacks from supporters of the ruling party. In some cases, the protests also turned into attacks targeting parliamentarians, damaging their vehicles and acts of arson against their homes, businesses, and party offices. Nine people, including a parliamentarian, were killed and 220 were injured. The government's responses to protests have resulted in serious human rights concerns and violations: the army has been deployed with shooting orders to contain the protests; the government has regularly used unnecessary and excessive force that has led to the deaths of at least three protesters, has issued emergency regulations giving law enforcement broad powers, and has imposed multiple curfews restricting human rights; police have unlawfully arrested peaceful protesters, in some cases flouting due process safeguards and have slapped terror charges on protesters.²²

²² Amnesty International, "We Are Near Total Breakdown": *Protecting the Rights to Health, Food and Social Security in Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis* (Index: ASA 37/6052/2022), 4 October 2022, [amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/6052/2022/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/6052/2022/en/)

3.2 CLIMATE CRISIS AND IMPACT ON FOOD

Climate change has led, and will continue to lead, to the increased intensity and frequency of certain weather events, such as extreme heat, wildfires and extreme rainfall from tropical storms. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), because of rising global temperatures, the annual occurrence of disasters is now more than three times that of the 1970s and 1980s. Further, between 2008 and 2018, around US\$280 billion was lost in low-, middle- and high-income countries from declines in crop and livestock production due to the impacts of disasters. This loss of crop and livestock has been particularly devastating for small-scale and subsistence farmers and pastoralists. FAO's research identifies drought as the single greatest contributor to agricultural production loss, followed by floods, storms, pests and diseases, and wildfires.²³

For example, southern Angola has been in the throes of a series of consecutive droughts since 2012. These droughts have had a serious impact on hunger and food insecurity where millions of people in south-western Angola are living in acute food insecurity. Amnesty International has documented the impact of the drought combined with the diversion of grazing land away from pastoralists communities, which has included widespread hunger, migration in search of livelihood options and food security, and loss of livelihoods.²⁴ Similarly, floods in Pakistan in October 2022 impacted 33 million people. Around 1.9 million people were in need of food security and agricultural assistance, and according to the FAO nearly 510,000 people were only one step away from catastrophic levels of food insecurity. The crisis also worsened already high rates of child malnutrition, with 1.6 million children at risk of severe acute malnutrition and requiring treatment for it in Sindh and Balochistan flood-affected areas.²⁵



Record monsoon rains and melting glaciers in Pakistan's northern mountains have brought floods that have affected 33 million people and killed at least 1,314, including 458 children, the Pakistan's National Disaster Management Agency said. Daddu district, Pakistan, 7 September 2022 © Farhan Khan/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

²³ FAO, *The Impact of Disasters and Crises on Agriculture and Food Security*: 2021, doi.org/10.4060/cb3673en, p. 28.

²⁴ Amnesty International, "Millions facing hunger, as thousands flee their homes as drought ravages the south of Angola", 22 July 2021, amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/angola-millions-facing-hunger-as-thousands-flee-their-homes-as-drought-ravages-the-south-of-angola/

²⁵ Amnesty International, "Drowned: The human cost of deadly floods in Pakistan" (Index: ASA 33/6214/2022), 15 November 2022, amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/6214/2022/en/

3.3 INVASION OF UKRAINE AND IMPACT ON FOOD

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has devastated food security in the country and dealt a massive blow to global food security. In Ukraine, the price of essential items including food has seen a sharp rise particularly in areas with active fighting. The agricultural sector has been severely affected due to reduction in the area under cultivation, damage to agricultural machinery, storage facilities, infrastructure including irrigation, and to field crops, livestock and processing units.²⁶ The National Bank of Ukraine recorded inflation at 21.3% for March 2023.²⁷

The invasion has also impacted food security globally as Ukraine and Russia are major food producers. Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the combined total of Russia and Ukraine's share of global trade amounted to 53% of sunflower oil and seeds, and 27% of wheat. Ukraine also typically provides 14% of the world's corn exports.²⁸ Some countries are particularly reliant on food exports from Russia and Ukraine. For example, prior to the invasion, Russia and Ukraine were responsible for 90 % of the wheat supply in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Georgia, Mongolia and Somalia. Ukraine is also a major source of wheat for the World Food Programme, which provides food assistance to 115.5 million people in more than 120 countries.²⁹

The curtailment of wheat production, harvesting, and exports in Ukraine has had a knock-on impact on global grain prices. The disruption of exports from Ukraine pushed the

FAO's food price index in March 2022 to its highest point since records began in 1990.³⁰ Although export of grain has since increased due to measures like the Black Sea Grain Initiative,³¹ the shortfall in export of grain created in the early months of the invasion and prior to the Black Sea Grain Initiative has not been covered. In March 2023 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) noted a gap of 11.8 million tonnes in wheat exports compared to the previous year's level. For corn and barley, it noted a gap of 41% and 82% respectively.³²

The cost of food has also been impacted by the rising cost of fertilizer. In December 2022, WFP reported that fertilizer prices rose by 199% since May 2020.³³ This is in part because of the surge in energy prices, and a decrease in the supply of mineral fertilizer.³⁴ This significant rise also leads farmers to use less fertilizer, often leading to lower yields,



A fire destroys a wheat field in Ukraine as Russian troops shell fields in Polohy district, Zaporizhzhia Region, 17 July 2022 © Photo via Reuters

²⁶ FAO, *Note on the Impact of the War on Food Security in Ukraine*, 20 July 2022, doi.org/10.4060/cc1025en, p. 8.

²⁷ National Bank of Ukraine, "NBU March 2023 Inflation Update", 11 April 2023, bank.gov.ua/en/news/all/komentar-natsionalnogo-banku-schodovrivnya-inflyatsiyi-v-berezni-2023-roku

²⁸ Erhan Artuc and others, "War-induced food price inflation imperils the poor", 1 April 2022, The Economic Consequences of War VOXEU/CEPR Debate, cepr.org/voxeu/columns/war-induced-food-price-inflation-imperils-poor

²⁹ UN Women, "Ukraine and the food and fuel crisis: 4 things to know", 22 September 2022, Feature, unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2022/09/ukraine-and-the-food-and-fuel-crisis-4-things-to-know

³⁰ Dea Bankova and others, "The war in Ukraine is fuelling a global food crisis", 30 May 2022, Reuters Graphics, reuters.com/graphics/UKRAINE-CRISIS/FOOD/zjvqkgomjvx/; Josep Borrell, "The fight continues against the food insecurity that Russia's war is creating", 21 November 2022, External Action, The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, eeas.europa.eu/eeas/fight-continues-against-food-insecurity-russia-s-war-creating_en

³¹ The Black Sea Grain Initiative is an agreement signed in July 2022 by the Russian Federation, Türkiye, Ukraine, and witnessed by the United Nations to allow the safe export of grain, fertilizers and other foodstuff from Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea. UN, Black Sea Grain Initiative Joint Coordination Centre, un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative

³² United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *A Trade Hope: The impact of the Black Sea Grain Initiative*, March 2023, unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osginf2023d3_en.pdf, p. 9.

³³ WFP, "How a donation of fertilizers for countries in Africa comes not a minute too soon", 9 December 2022, wfp.org/stories/how-donation-fertilizers-countries-africa-comes-not-minute-too-soon.

³⁴ World Economic Forum, "This is how war in Europe is disrupting fertilizer supplies and threatening global food security", 1 March 2023, weforum.org/agenda/2023/03/ukraine-fertilizer-food-security/

further driving up the price of food for the average consumer.³⁵

The increasing cost of food has also impacted humanitarian operations. According to WFP, since the invasion of Ukraine, the agency is paying US\$73.6 million more a month for

operations than in 2019 amounting to an increase of 44%.³⁶ The increasing costs for food are particularly significant given that OCHA stated that it received only 47% of the total funding requirements for humanitarian assistance globally in 2022.³⁷

4. GROWING DISCONTENT, PROTESTS AND STATE RESPONSE

“When there is an imbalance between economic growth and social policy, political instability and unrest often follow.”

UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed³⁸



A peasant holds a bunch of cobs during a demonstration in Mexico City against the price rise of corn, basic food of the low-income people in Mexico, 31 January 2007 © Luis Acosta/AFP via Getty Images

³⁵ UN Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance, *Global Impact of the War in Ukraine: Billions of People Face the Greatest Cost-of-living Crisis in a Generation* (previously cited), p. 13.

³⁶ WFP, WFP at a glance: A regular guide to the facts, figures and frontline work of the World Food Programme, 2 March 2023, wfp.org/stories/wfp-glance (accessed on 20 March 2023).

³⁷ OCHA, Humanitarian Action Analysing Needs and Response, “At a glance”, 20 November 2022, humanitarianaction.info/article/glance-0

³⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “On World Day of Social Justice, deeper dialogue across ‘real economy’ can drive progress”, 20 February 2023, un.org/en/desa/world-day-social-justice-deeper-dialogue-across-%E2%80%99real-economy%E2%80%99-can-drive-progress-un-deputy

As the multiple crises continue to impact the lives and livelihoods of millions of people around the world, there is also growing frustration and discontent about the lack of effective measures by states to adequately uphold the economic, social and cultural rights of affected people. Thousands of people in different parts of the world have taken to the streets to protest against inflation, unemployment, and government inaction.

Historically too, significant increases in the price of food, fuel and other essential items coupled with rising unemployment, and reductions in real wages have often been contributing factors to protest and social unrest. In a study on key issues raised in protests in the 21st century, scholars examined 2,809 events across the world between 2006 to 2020. Of these 1,484 protests were focused on economic and social rights including issues related to jobs, wages, conditions of work, reform of public services; corporate influence, deregulation and privatization; inequality; tax and fiscal justice; low living standards; agrarian/land reform; high fuel and energy prices; pension reform; and housing and high food prices.³⁹

This includes the last period of global economic turmoil following the global economic crisis of 2008. Rising food prices and shrinking economies in this period, saw protests around food prices and labour issues in countries around the world, including the ‘tortilla riots’ in Mexico City against rising prices of corn in 2007, and protests in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Haiti, among other countries.⁴⁰ Similarly, in September 2010, protests in Mozambique were driven by a 30% rise in the price of bread and high levels of inflation in the costs of fuel and water.⁴¹ This was also the time when protests against cuts to government spending

impacting wages and pensions were taking place in Spain, Greece, Ireland and Latvia.⁴² The ‘Arab Spring’ that saw mass protests in a number of countries across the Middle East and North Africa region was essentially rooted in discontent regarding several issues including rising unemployment, poverty, corruption and authoritarianism. The protests that started in Tunisia in December 2010 soon spread to Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen.⁴³ In 2011, hundreds of thousands of people who were part of the ‘Occupy’ movement protested growing economic inequality in different parts of the world including in North America, South America, Europe and Asia.⁴⁴

More recently, 2019 saw another wave of protests in a number of countries including Chile, Lebanon, Sudan, Iran and India triggered by price rises in basic items and services such as transport, fuel and energy and food prices.⁴⁵

Even before the unprecedented popular uprising sparked by the death in custody of Mahsa (Zhin) Amini in September 2022, Iran saw widespread protests as a result of rising food prices in Khuzestan province, as well as Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. At the beginning of May 2022, the Iranian authorities eliminated an official subsidized exchange rate for the import of wheat and other essential foods and considerably increased the price of bread and other food items. The sudden and significant increase in the price of basic foods triggered thousands of people already beleaguered by widespread poverty to take to the streets in various parts of the country. The multiple rounds of protests in Iran during May 2022 reflected deepening outrage among people in the country about state corruption, high inflation, high levels of unemployment, low or unpaid wages, food insecurity and loss

³⁹ Isabel Ortiz and others, *World Protests: A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century*, 2022, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York, Initiative for Policy Dialogue/Global Social Justice, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88513-7, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Judy L. Baker, “Impacts of financial, food and fuel crisis on the urban poor”, December 2008, The World Bank, Directions in Urban Development, openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/12d3388d-65f9-52cd-95a5-46545442e094/content

⁴¹ Guardian, “Mozambique’s food riots – The true face of global warming”, 5 September 2010, The Observer, theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/sep/05/mozambique-food-riots-patel

⁴² BBC, “European cities hit by anti-austerity protests”, 29 September 2010, bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11432579

⁴³ Al Jazeera, “What is the Arab Spring, and how did it start?”, 17 December 2020, aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/17/what-is-the-arab-spring-and-how-did-it-start

⁴⁴ Guardian, “Occupy Wall Street swept the world and achieved a lot, even if it may not feel like it”, 6 October 2021 theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/06/occupy-wall-street-achieved-a-lot-even-if-it-may-not-feel-like-it

⁴⁵ New Yorker, “The story of 2019: Protests in every corner of the globe”, 30 December 2019, newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-story-of-2019-protests-in-every-corner-of-the-globe



Alaa Salah addresses protesters during a demonstration in front of the military headquarters in the capital Khartoum, Sudan, 10 April 2019 © AFP via Getty Images

of livelihood, as well as political repression and systemic impunity over protest killings and other crimes under international law. Consistent with well-documented practices of the Iranian authorities' response to people expressing their legitimate grievances, security forces swiftly and brutally crushed the demonstrations, while labelling the protesters "rioters" or "counterrevolutionaries". Amnesty International found that, during the protests over rising food prices in May 2022, security forces used force and firearms without any regard for the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality.⁴⁶

Instead of viewing protests as an expression of people's discontent and a manifestation of people's attempts to be heard and claim their rights, time and again, authorities around the world have violently cracked down on them and responded with unnecessary or excessive use of force. From Russia to Sri Lanka, France to Senegal, and Iran to Nicaragua, state authorities have implemented an expanding array of measures to suppress organized dissent. Protesters across the globe are facing a potent mix of pushbacks, with a growing number of laws and other measures to restrict the right to protest; the misuse of force, the expansion of unlawful mass and targeted surveillance; internet shutdowns and online censorship; and abuse and stigmatization.⁴⁷

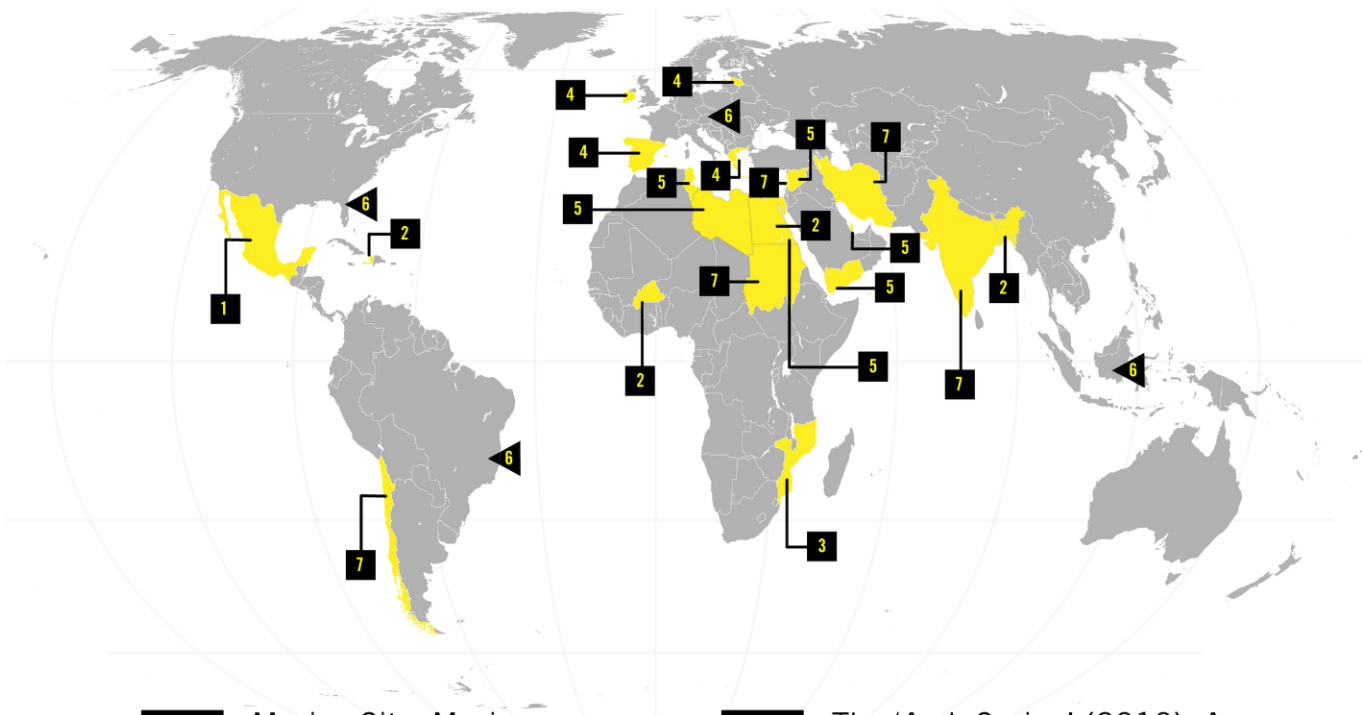
International human rights law protects the right to protest through a number of provisions enshrined in various international and regional treaties which, taken together, provide protesters with comprehensive protection. Throughout history, protests have enabled individuals and groups to express dissent, opinions and ideas, expose injustice and abuse, and demand accountability from those in power. When people are engaged in protest, they are often exercising a number of their human rights including freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Amnesty International, *They Are Shooting Brazenly: Iran's Militarized Response to May 2022 Protests* (Index: MDE 13/5789/2022), 3 August 2022, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/5789/2022/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/5789/2022/en)

⁴⁷ Amnesty International, "Protect the Protest: Join the campaign", 19 July 2022, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/07/protect-the-protest/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/07/protect-the-protest/)

⁴⁸ Amnesty International, *Protect the Protest: Why we must save our right to protest* (Index: ACT 30/5856/2022), July 2022, [amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT30/5856/2022/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT30/5856/2022/en/) p. 4.

SOME EXAMPLES FROM THE RECENT PAST OF PROTESTS AGAINST LACK OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS



1

Mexico City, Mexico (2007): 'Tortilla riots' against rising prices of corn.

2

Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, and Haiti (2008): These countries among others saw protests around food prices and labour issues.

3

Mozambique (September 2010): Protests were driven by a 30% rise in the price of bread and high levels of inflation in the costs of fuel and water.

4

Spain, Greece, Ireland, and Latvia (2010): Protests against cuts to government spending, impacting wages and pensions.

5

The 'Arab Spring' (2010): A number of countries across the Middle East and North Africa region including Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen saw mass protest rooted in discontent regarding several issues including rising unemployment, poverty, corruption and authoritarianism.

6

The 'Occupy' movement (2011): Different parts of the world including in North America, South America, Europe and Asia protested growing economic inequality.

7

Chile, Lebanon, Sudan, Iran and India (2019): Protests triggered by price rises in basic items and services such as transport, fuel and energy and food prices.

Protests against lack of economic and social rights © Amnesty International

** Countries highlighted are only examples – protests related to economic and social rights have taken place in a much larger number of countries across the world.*



1,484
OUT OF
2,809

**PROTESTS BETWEEN 2006
TO 2020, WERE FOCUSED
ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
RIGHTS.**

Source: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New York 2022

INFLATION AND PROTEST IN SIERRA LEONE



A health worker stands amongst the coffins of the twenty-seven protestors, ahead of a mass burial in Freetown, Sierra Leone, 17 October 2022 © Saidu Bah/AFP via Getty Images

Sierra Leone witnessed large-scale protests in August 2022, with hundreds of people on the streets of Freetown, Makeni and Kamakwie, protesting against the high cost of living and asking the President to resign.⁴⁹

In most of the cities, protests turned violent, with videos of violence including one of an unarmed police officer being beaten to death, circulating online. During and in the aftermath of the protests, at least 27 protesters and six police officers died. Some of the protesters died from

gunshot wounds. Law enforcement used tear gas and live shots to try to control the crowds. Amnesty International collected testimonies alleging excessive use of force by Sierra Leonean security forces to crack down on protests which turned violent in Freetown, Makeni and Kamakwie. A member of staff from a hospital in Makeni witnessed on 10 and 11 August a total of 11 people severely injured seeking care, including two men who had gunshot wounds from the back, a 16-year-old girl who was shot in the pelvic area and a man with a gunshot wound near his left eye. Moreover, families of some of the victims told Amnesty International that they were denied the opportunity to bury their loved ones themselves and according to their beliefs, as the government buried all the victims together in a government cemetery.

During the protests and its aftermath, more than 500 people, including children, were initially arrested in several cities. Although many protesters and children were released, the exact number of people remaining in detention is uncertain. One of the detainees' lawyers told Amnesty International: "since 10 August, we have made several efforts as a team to visit them, but all efforts have been in vain. We have made efforts at the Criminal Investigations Department headquarters to see them, but we have not been given access. We tried at the correctional centre, but we were still not given access. Efforts were made by my elders, still no access. I only saw them a month later, in court, when they were charged."

Internet was also sporadically cut between 10 and 11 August. Initially, the authorities blamed the opposition for inciting the riot and accused protesters of being terrorists who wanted to overthrow a democratically elected government. They also argued that protesters did not have any authorization to protest. Contrary to international human rights standards, people in Sierra Leone are required by law to notify the authorities in advance even in the case of spontaneous protests.

Sierra Leone is one of the countries with lowest incomes in the world. According to its Human Development Index it is ranked 181 over a total of 191 countries⁵⁰. It is also one of the countries with the lowest levels of investment in social protection allocating just a 0.7% of GDP to social protection expenditures (excluding healthcare).⁵¹ In addition to this fragile economic and social situation during the past eight years, people in Sierra Leone have been affected by multiple crises, including the 2015 Ebola outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This series of crises has led to an increase in inflation with the latest data pointing to an inflation rate of 38.48% in January 2023.⁵² The increasing cost of living has created strong political and social tensions which culminated in the August 2022 protests.

⁴⁹ Amnesty International, "Sierra Leone: Seven months after August's protests which turned violent in some locations, no justice yet for those injured or the families of those killed", 20 March 2023, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/sierra-leone-seven-months-after-augusts-protests-which-turned-violent-in-some-locations-no-justice-yet-for-those-injured-or-the-families-of-those-killed/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/sierra-leone-seven-months-after-augusts-protests-which-turned-violent-in-some-locations-no-justice-yet-for-those-injured-or-the-families-of-those-killed/)

⁵⁰ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Insights, hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights/#/ranks (accessed on 20 March 2023).

⁵¹ ILO, Social Protection Platform: World Social Protection Dashboard, Sierra Leone, social-protection.org/gimi/ShowCountryProfile.action?iso=SL (accessed on 20 March 2023).

⁵² Trading Economics, Sierra Leone Inflation Rate, February 2023 Data, tradingeconomics.com/sierra-leone/inflation-cpi (accessed on 20 March 2023).

5. SOCIAL PROTECTION: A HUMAN RIGHTS RESPONSE

“Social protection plays a stabilizing role in times of economic downturn because of its poverty-alleviation impacts and its ability to raise consumption levels of low-income households. Social protection also allows households to increase their savings, protecting them from having to sell productive assets in times of crisis and from being driven into destitution because of catastrophic health payments. It is also critical to ensure inclusive and sustainable growth, favouring a form of development that is more equally shared, with more significant poverty-reduction impacts.”

UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights⁵³

One answer to many of the concerns raised by people protesting against increasing cost-of-living, unemployment and poverty lies in stronger social protection measures by States. In this context of multiple and recurring shocks and progressively diminishing coping capacities, states need to invest in providing people with protection that can prevent crises from turning into catastrophes.

Social protection guarantees a degree of predictability, especially for people facing crises. It is particularly valuable in turbulent times – both at the level of the individual and the community. Guaranteeing the right to social security through social protection, including shock responsive measures (measures that can be scaled up and adapted to meet the requirement of entire communities facing crises), can shield against future shocks and allow for healing and recovery.

Even though it is a recognized human right, only 46.9% of people around the world are effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit (excluding healthcare and sickness) such as unemployment benefit, child support or older age pensions. An estimated 4.1 billion people are unprotected from life-cycle risks and other shocks.⁵⁴ There are also vast geographic disparities in the level of protection provided globally. Coverage rates in Europe and Central Asia are at around 83.9%, the Americas at 64.3%, Asia and the Pacific at 44.1%, the Arab States at 40.0% and Africa at 17.4%. The disparity is even more stark when looking at cash benefits for unemployed people - over half of the people who are unemployed in high-income countries receive cash benefits compared with 1% in low-income countries.⁵⁵

⁵³ UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (UN Special Rapporteur on poverty), Report: *Global Fund for Social Protection: International Solidarity in the Service of Poverty Eradication*, 22 April 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/47/36, para. 22.

⁵⁴ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future*, 1 September 2021, ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_817572/lang--en/index.htm, p.19.

⁵⁵ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (previously cited), p. 19.



SOCIAL PROTECTION AND THE RIGHT TO SOCIAL SECURITY

Social security is a stand-alone human right recognized in Articles 22 and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and enshrined in a number of international human rights instruments.⁵⁶ It includes the right to access and maintain benefits to secure protection from a range of adverse circumstances, including a lack of work-related income, unaffordable access to healthcare, and insufficient family support.⁵⁷

The right to social security includes nine principal branches including access to affordable and adequate healthcare, income support in case of loss of earnings due to sickness or unemployment, older age benefits, family and child benefits, paid parental leave, and disability benefits. All these measures are also inextricably linked to the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to health as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Social Protection measures are policy level public measures that are put in place to realize the right to social security. Social protection includes benefits for children and families, maternity, unemployment, employment injury, sickness, older age, disability, as well as health protection.

Social protection systems address all these policy areas by a mix of contributory schemes (social insurance) and non-contributory tax-financed benefits, including social assistance.⁵⁸

However, as noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (UN Special Rapporteur on poverty), regardless of the level of coverage, large groups of people are excluded from social protection schemes due to a variety of factors including discrimination and lack of information.⁵⁹ Research by Amnesty International and the Finnish League for Human Rights has highlighted the worrying lack of data and analysis, on access to social security for several groups in Finland who are marginalized and at risk of discrimination, including the Indigenous Sámi people, LGBTI people, people with disabilities, Roma people and foreign nationals.⁶⁰

There is an urgent need for states to take concerted action to bridge these gaps. Without the necessary action, there is a very real risk of

further devastation of lives and livelihoods accompanied by intensification and escalation of human rights violations particularly economic, social, and cultural rights, with some of the most marginalized bearing the brunt of these impacts.

There are several examples that highlight how social protection measures can protect people's economic and social rights and shield them from the impacts of poverty. For example, a study on the Economics of Early Response and Resilience showed that every US\$1.0 spent on disaster resilience (which included shock responsive social protection systems) resulted in reduced humanitarian spending, avoided losses, and led to development gains of US\$2.8 in Ethiopia and US\$2.9 in Kenya.⁶¹

⁵⁶ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 9. The right to social security is also enshrined in Article 5(e)(iv), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; Article 26, Convention on the Rights of the Child; Article 28, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and in several Conventions of the International Labour Organization, in particular Convention 102 on Minimum Standards of Social Security.

⁵⁷ UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR), General Comment 19: The Right to Social Security (Art. 9), 4 February 2008, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19.

⁵⁸ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017 – 2019: Universal Social Protection to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals* (previously cited), p. XXIX.

⁵⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *Non-take-up of Rights in the Context of Social Protection*, 19 April 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/38, para. 3.

⁶⁰ Amnesty International, “*I live under constant duress and in a state of emergency*”: *Inadequate Social Security in Finland*, (Index: EUR 20/4804/2021), 21 August 2021, [amnesty.org/en/documents/eur20/4804/2021/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur20/4804/2021/en/)

⁶¹ Ritu Bharadwaj and Tom Mitchell, *Strengthening Anticipatory Risk Response and Financing Mechanisms for Social Protection: A Practical Approach to Tackling Loss and Damage*, December 2022, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Working Paper, pubs.iied.org/212861IED, p. 12.

POPULATION COVERED BY AT LEAST ONE SOCIAL PROTECTION BENEFIT (EXCLUDING HEALTHCARE AND SICKNESS) BY PERCENTAGE



Source: ILO

In Bolivia, with the introduction in 2007 of the non-contributory older-age pension, *Renta Dignidad*, the country achieved universal coverage reaching close to 100% of the population over the age of 60 years.⁶²

According to ILO, Ghana's National Health Scheme significantly reduced the incidence of child labour by 22%. It also had a positive impact on boys' school attendance and a greater reduction in girls' engagement in child labour.⁶³

A comprehensive social protection system is also extremely relevant in the context of the required transition to a zero-carbon economy which involves the phasing out of industrial and economic activities deemed to be incompatible with achieving climate mitigation

targets. Social protection measures can assist 'just transition'⁶⁴ through measures such as employment guarantee schemes, cash and in-kind transfers for individuals impacted.⁶⁵

As articulated by Guy Rider, the Director General for the ILO, "*We must recognize that effective and comprehensive social protection is not just essential for social justice and decent work but for creating a sustainable and resilient future too.*"⁶⁶

5.1 MOVING TOWARDS UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION

There are two main approaches to providing social protection – 'Poverty Targeting' and

⁶² ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (previously cited), pp. 73–74.

⁶³ ILO and UNICEF, *The Role of Social Protection in the Elimination of Child Labour: Evidence Review and Policy Implications*, 2022, [ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_845168.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_845168.pdf), p. 47.

⁶⁴ A 'just transition' is a transition to a zero-carbon economy to combat climate change where the rights of workers and communities dependent on activities deemed to be incompatible with achieving climate mitigation targets are protected through interventions that can help them sustainably transition to sustainable livelihood options. ITUC Just Transition Centre, *Just Transition: A Report for the OECD*, 2017, [oecd.org/environment/cc/g20-climate/collapsecontents/JustTransition-Centre-report-just-transition.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/environment/cc/g20-climate/collapsecontents/JustTransition-Centre-report-just-transition.pdf)

⁶⁵ ILO, *Social Protection for a Just Transition and a Sustainable Future for All: Communication Strategy 2021–25*, [social-protection.org/gimi/RessourcePDF.action?ressource.ressourceId=57240](https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/RessourcePDF.action?ressource.ressourceId=57240), p. 5.

⁶⁶ ILO, "More than 4 billion people still lack any social protection, ILO report finds", 1 September 2021, [ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_817653/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_817653/lang--en/index.htm)

‘Universal Social Protection’. The differences lie in the methods used to identify the people who will have access to the specific social protection scheme.

Poverty targeting is a commonly used method by states to attempt to reach people living in the lowest income groups. Here, an individual’s or household’s income and/or assets are assessed against an officially defined threshold and used to determine whether the applicants are eligible for particular social security benefits.⁶⁷ Targeting based on levels of poverty has been criticized in practice for excluding people who should actually be covered, stigmatizing effects, and higher administrative costs.⁶⁸ For example, Sri Lanka’s flagship social assistance programme, *Sammurdhi*, which provides benefits to people on low incomes has been criticized for high exclusion. The World Bank estimated that based on 2016 data for *Sammurdhi*, “[u]nder-coverage, defined as the percentage of the poor not receiving a transfer, was 44%.”⁶⁹

In contrast, the Universal Social Protection (USP) approach, moves away from narrow targeting based on people’s incomes. USP refers to an integrated set of policies and programmes that provide equitable access to all people and protect them throughout their lives against poverty and risks to their livelihoods and well-being. This includes benefits for all who need them such as child benefits; support for people of working age in case of maternity/paternity, disability, work injury or for those without jobs; and pensions

for all older persons.⁷⁰ However, this does not mean that everybody receives the same benefit at every point in time. USP allows for inclusion of eligibility criteria based on age, disability or unemployment.⁷¹ USP ensures that people can access particular benefits as and when needed. For example, universal pension schemes are available to all who are above a certain age.⁷²

The two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be used to complement each other in a manner where poverty targeted schemes are used to supplement universal measures and where the targeting is part of deliberate steps to progressively achieve universal coverage.⁷³

In times of financial crises, where fiscal space has shrunk, many countries seek to reduce public expenditure by opting for narrower poverty targeting. However, as highlighted by Isabel Ortiz, (then) director of the Social Protection Department at the International Labour Organization, “[r]eforms driven by a fiscal objective tend to cut social subsidies and expenditures that benefit the majority of the population, replacing them with a safety net for the poorest, thus punishing the middle classes – sometimes dubbed “the missing middle” – in terms of development results. In developing economies, the middle classes have very low incomes and must be supported by development policies, including by adequate social protection.”⁷⁴

In their 2020 report on poverty eradication, the UN Special Rapporteur on poverty noted that

⁶⁷ Shahra Razavi, “Building universal social protection systems for all: What role for targeting?”, 2 June 2022, socialprotection.org/discover/blog/building-universal-social-protection-systems-all-what-role-targeting-0

⁶⁸ See, for example, Shahra Razavi, “The case for universal social protection is more self-evident than ever”, 2 June 2020, Development Pathways, developmentpathways.co.uk/blog/the-case-for-universal-social-protection-is-more-self-evident-than-ever/; Isabel Ortiz, “The Case for Universal Social Protection”, December 2018, IMF, Finance & Development, imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2018/12/casefor-universal-social-protection-ortiz; Stephen Kidd and Diloá Athias, *Hit and Miss: An Assessment of Targeting Effectiveness in Social Protection with Additional Analysis*, June 2020, Development Pathways, Working Paper, developmentpathways.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Hit-and-miss-longreport-.pdf; and UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *The Role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Relation to Social Protection*, 8 May 2018, UN Doc. A/HRC/38/33.

⁶⁹ World Bank, *Sri Lanka Poverty Update: Background report to Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment*, 2021, documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/703091634229318506/pdf/Sri-Lanka-Poverty-Update-Background-Report-to-Sri-Lanka-Poverty-Assessment.pdf, p. 46

⁷⁰ ILO, *Universal Social Protection 2030*, usp2030.org/#why

⁷¹ World Bank and ILO, “A shared mission for universal social protection: Concept note”, ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/genericdocument/wcms_378996.pdf, p. 1.

⁷² USP however, is different from Universal Basic Income (UBI), which is an unconditional cash transfer to all people in a particular jurisdiction. While there have been some pilot projects to test the effectiveness of UBI, there are concerns that models where UBI replaces existing social protection schemes could lead to increasing inequality and poverty. See, for example, Isabel Ortiz and others, *Universal Basic Income proposals in Light of ILO Standards: Key Issues and Global Costing*, 2018, ILO Social Protection Department, ESS – Working Paper No. 62, ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_648602.pdf, p. 3.

⁷³ Shahra Razavi, “Building universal social protection systems for all: What role for targeting?” (previously cited).

⁷⁴ Isabel Ortiz, “The Case for Universal Social Protection”, December 2018, IMF, Finance & Development, imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2018/12/case-for-universal-social-protection-ortiz, p. 2.

implementing universal social protection is key to eliminating poverty.⁷⁵ In a 2022 report, the Special Rapporteur said that “moving from strictly targeted, means-tested benefits towards universal benefits reduces the shame involved in having to prove that one is sufficiently poor. Universal benefits also tend to build trust and are considered more legitimate than selective, needs-based schemes, because they are built on simpler and more clear-cut rules.”⁷⁶

A key instrument for achieving USP is the ILO’s Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202). As articulated by the Recommendation 202, social protection floors are nationally defined sets of social security guarantees that should provide access to essential healthcare and to basic income security for all those in need over the life cycle. ILO Recommendation 202 states that national social protection floors should include at least four essential guarantees: (a) Access to at least essential healthcare, including maternity care; (b) Basic income security for children, providing access to nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services; (c) Basic income security for persons of working age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; (d) Basic income security for older persons.⁷⁷

Recognizing that States have different resource and administrative capacities, Social Protection Floors provide a way to progressively realize universal and comprehensive social protection coverage and guarantee the right to social security for all.

5.2 FUNDING SOCIAL PROTECTION

A robust social protection system cannot be built over night. It needs financing, setting up of administrative and legal mechanisms for its delivery, strategies that ensure that people are protected without discrimination throughout their lifecycles from childhood to older age,

and mechanisms for monitoring, review, accountability, and remedy.

According to the ILO, prior to Covid-19, states spent an average of 12.9% of their GDP on social protection (excluding health) - but the difference between countries was vast. High-income countries spent 16.4%, upper-middle-income countries spent 8%, lower-middle-income countries, 2.5%, and low-income countries only 1.1% of their GDP on social protection.⁷⁸

To close the funding gap and guarantee at least basic social protection coverage (essential healthcare, parental and child benefits, basic income security for persons unable to earn a sufficient income because of sickness, unemployment, maternity/paternity, disability; and basic income security for older persons), the ILO estimates that low-income countries would need to invest an additional US\$77.9 billion per year (15.9% of GDP), lower-middle-income countries an additional US\$362.9 billion per year (5.1% of GDP) and upper-middle-income countries a further US\$750.8 billion per year (3.1%). These financing gaps have now widened by approximately 30% since the pandemic mainly due to the increased need for access to healthcare and income security and the contraction of many national economies.⁷⁹

Social security like any other human right requires financial and other resources for its realization. International human rights law is clear that states must, individually and collectively, seek to mobilize resources to realize human rights including the right to social security. For example, under Article 2(1) of the ICESCR states have the obligation to take steps, individually and through international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, to progressively achieve the full realization of economic, social, and cultural rights. ‘Maximum available resources’ are generally understood as resources that governments can

⁷⁵ UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *The Parlous State of Poverty Eradication*, 19 November 2020, UN Doc. A/HRC/44/40, p. 18.

⁷⁶ UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *Non-take-up of Rights in the Context of Social Protection* (previously cited), para. 57.

⁷⁷ ILO, *Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)*, ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:3065524, para. 5.

⁷⁸ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (previously cited), p. 58.

⁷⁹ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (previously cited), p. 59.

raise through a variety of means including taxes, revenue earned through royalties on natural resource use, profits from public sector enterprises, overseas development assistance in the form of grants and loans from bilateral and multilateral donors, and debt and deficit financing.⁸⁰

5.2.1 TAXATION

Taxes constitute a major part of government revenues that are often used to finance social protection systems. As highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, “[t]axes are not the only source of government revenue, but they are arguably the most important, because

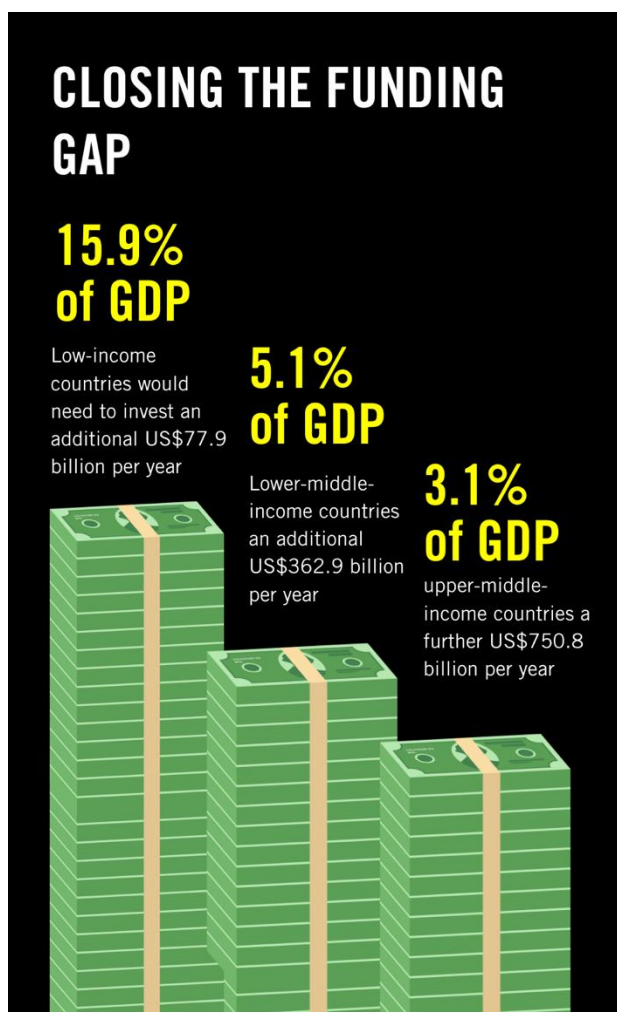
they combine three critical functions, addressed below: (a) the generation of revenue for the realization of rights; (b) achieving equality and tackling discrimination; and (c) strengthening governance and accountability.”⁸¹

The key to ensuring that taxes and tax collection achieves equality and non-discrimination is to implement a progressive tax system whereby the tax burden is greater on those with higher levels of income and wealth. By implementing such a progressive tax system on both individuals and corporations, governments can ensure that wealthier individuals and businesses pay their fair share.

Another key area for governments to cooperate on to increase available resources is through addressing tax abuse which includes both illegal tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance, as these can undermine human rights enjoyment. An estimated US\$500 billion a year is lost to tax havens by states around the world.⁸² According to the Global Alliance for Tax Justice, Public Services International and the Tax Justice Network, the amount lost to tax havens globally (US\$483 billion) in 2021 was enough to fully vaccinate the global population against Covid-19 three times over in that year.⁸³ In terms of the funding gap to resource basic social protection, the amount lost to tax abuse is also more than the ILO’s estimates of the total amount needed to cover this in all low- and low-to-middle-income countries (US\$440.8 billion).⁸⁴

5.2.2 MANAGING STATE DEBT

States raise funds for public spending through borrowing from a range of state, private, and multilateral institutions. While debt as an option for maximizing available resources may not in itself be harmful, the terms of this debt,



Source: ILO

⁸⁰ Center for Women’s Global Leadership, *Maximum Available Resources & Human Rights: Analytical Report*, June 2011, available at: escr-net.org/sites/default/files/marreport.pdf, p. 10.

⁸¹ UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *Taxation and Human Rights*, 22 May 2014, UN Doc. A/HRC/26/28, para. 36.

⁸² Tax Justice Network, “Businesses, campaigners back global tax standard to tackle \$500bn corporate tax abuse epidemic”, 5 December 2019, taxjustice.net/press/businesses-campaigners-back-global-tax-standard-to-tackle-500bn-corporate-tax-abuse-epidemic/

⁸³ Global Alliance for Tax Justice, Public Services International and the Tax Justice Network, *The State of Tax Justice 2021*, November 2021, taxjustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/State_of_Tax_Justice_Report_2021_ENGLISH.pdf, p. 14.

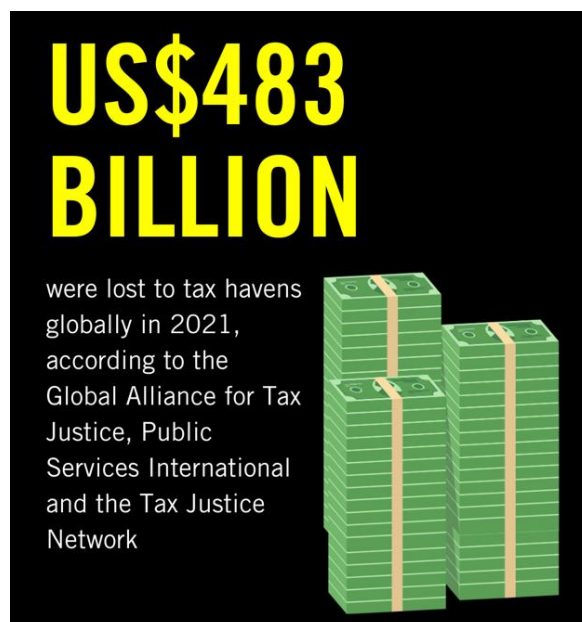
⁸⁴ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (previously cited).

and the amount of this debt, can often lead to serious human rights concerns. Many states reach unsustainable levels of indebtedness which then push them into economic crises. For example, the debt servicing amounts for least developed countries had tripled between 2011 and 2019 – from US\$10 billion to US\$33 billion. For 2022, this was estimated to rise to US\$43 billion.⁸⁵ Public debt may also involve terms of debt repayment or servicing that leave little room for public spending on the realization of human rights. Therefore, renegotiating the terms of loan repayments (debt restructuring) can expand fiscal space allowing states to invest in social protection measures. Debt restructuring and relief should enable countries to service external debts without compromising their capacity to fulfil international human rights obligations, and all options for debt relief should be on the table, including debt cancellation if necessary.⁸⁶

The UN Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt has noted, “[w]here countries have had their foreign debt forgiven, they have been able to invest more in public services, such as healthcare, education, water and sanitation, and to abolish user fees for some of these services (previously introduced as part of austerity measures prescribed by international financial institutions) thereby enhancing the enjoyment of the rights to, inter alia, health, education, water and sanitation”.⁸⁷

5.2.3 INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE AND A GLOBAL FUND FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION

For many low- and middle-income countries, seeking resources through international assistance is critical for realizing economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to social security. As clarified by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the obligation of states to use the maximum available resources also includes utilizing resources offered by the international community’s international cooperation and



Source: Global Alliance for Tax Justice

assistance.⁸⁸ The obligation of international cooperation and assistance also means that states who are able to do so, must adequately respond to calls for assistance from states that seek it.

In the context of the climate crisis, all states in a position to do so must provide financial resources, capacity-building and technology transfer according to their capacity, capability and respective responsibility in causing climate change. Providing sufficient and dedicated resources to strengthen social protection systems in lower-income countries is crucial to protect the rights of communities at risk of climate shocks and facing loss and damage as the result of climate change.

With regards to funding social protection coverage in countries that are unable to raise the necessary funds domestically, current and past UN Special Rapporteurs on poverty have proposed the setting up of a Global Fund for Social Protection (the Fund).⁸⁹ The proposal of

⁸⁵ UNCTAD, “Soaring debt burden jeopardizes recovery of least developed countries”, unctad.org/topic/least-developed-countries/chart-march-2022

⁸⁶ UN Independent Expert on the Effects of Foreign Debt and Other Related International Financial Obligations of States on the Full Enjoyment of All Human Rights, Particularly Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN Independent Expert on Foreign Debt), Report: *Guiding Principles on Foreign Debt and Human Rights*, 11 April 2011, UN Doc. A/HRC/20/23.

⁸⁷ UN Independent Expert on foreign debt, Report: *Guiding Principles on Foreign Debt and Human Rights* (previously cited), para. 6.

⁸⁸ CESCR, “An evaluation of the obligation to take steps to the ‘maximum of available resources’ under an optional protocol to the Covenant”, 21 September 2007, UN Doc. E/C.12/2007/1, para. 5.

⁸⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, *Underwriting the Poor: A Global Fund for Social Protection*, October 2012, Briefing Note 07, srpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20121009_GFSP_en.pdf; and UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *Global Fund for Social Protection: International Solidarity in the Service of Poverty Eradication* (previously cited).

the Fund is grounded in the principles of international solidarity and will be aimed at ensuring that states receive the necessary technical and financial support to meet their obligations under the right to social security. The Fund will also aim to build the capacity of national social protection systems to scale up their response in case of crises.

As highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, a global mechanism would be particularly helpful in low-income countries with less diversified economies which are particularly vulnerable to disasters or financial crises. In such countries it is often that the need for social protection rises at the same time as the fall in government revenues.⁹⁰ In such circumstances, a global mechanism could increase its level of support to national social protection systems to bridge the gap.⁹¹

The idea for the Global Fund has received widespread support with the International Labour Conference calling on the ILO in June

2021 to “initiate and engage in discussions on concrete proposals for a new international financing mechanism, such as a Global Social Protection Fund, which could complement and support domestic resource mobilization efforts in order to achieve universal social protection.”⁹² In September 2021 the UN Secretary General stated: “[t]he establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection, being explored by the International Labour Organization (ILO), could support countries in increasing levels of funding devoted to social protection over time.”⁹³

While the specifics of the creation and implementation of such a fund will need to be agreed upon, the current situation triggered by the pandemic, the climate crisis, and the fallout from the invasion of Ukraine has made it clear that there is an urgent need for a global mechanism that will facilitate comprehensive social protection coverage from current and future shocks.

⁹⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *Global Fund for Social Protection: International Solidarity in the Service of Poverty Eradication* (previously cited), para. 46.

⁹¹ UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *Global Fund for Social Protection: International Solidarity in the Service of Poverty Eradication* (previously cited), para. 50.

⁹² ILO, *Record of proceedings 7A, International Labour Conference – 109th Session, 2021, 18 June 2021*, ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_804457.pdf

⁹³ UN, *Our Common Agenda - Report of the Secretary-General*, September 2021, un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf, p. 28.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



A Tunisian protester holding a loaf of bread is pushed by riot policemen during a demonstration in Tunis, Tunisia, 18 January 2011 © Martin Bureau/AFP via Getty Images

The UN Special Rapporteur on poverty noted that one of the ‘rediscoveries’ of the pandemic and other crises that followed, was the importance of social protection to protect humanity from current and future crises.⁹⁴ The urgent need for support to cope with growing inflation and its impact on access to essential items like food and fuel has been raised in many of the popular protests around the world. However, instead of responding to the demands of the protesters and addressing the root causes of some of the drivers of protests, states have responded with actions that have led to even more human rights violations.

Amnesty International joins a growing coalition of experts and civil society organizations in calling for the redoubling of efforts to provide social protection to every person who may need it. There is an urgent need for taking steps towards progressively realizing universal coverage without discrimination so that every person is protected from current and future shocks – whether they are caused by health emergencies, the climate crisis, conflict, or other events.

Furthermore, in the context of the many protests globally that are driven by rising inflation, unemployment and a steady erosion of people’s right to an adequate standard of living, all states must respect people’s rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression, and also address the drivers of these protests. They must invest in ensuring everyone can enjoy the right to social security. In particular, states should:

- Urgently invest in social protection measures that guarantee the right to social security, ensuring that everyone has access to adequate levels of healthcare; parental care and benefits; family and child benefits; basic income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in cases of sickness, unemployment, and disability; and basic income security for older persons.

⁹⁴ UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, Report: *Looking Back to Look Ahead: A Rights-based Approach to Social Protection in the Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery*, 11 September 2020, ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Poverty/covid19.pdf, para II.

- Take steps to progressively achieve universal social protection and move away from narrow poverty targeting.
- Ensure that social protection systems are shock responsive, which means that they can be adapted to increase coverage in the case of large-scale crises. This should include ensuring that climate change related risks are incorporated within existing social protection systems and accounting for climate shocks when designing new systems.
- Mobilize the maximum available resources including through progressive taxation, debt relief, international assistance, and climate finance for climate-change related adaptation and loss and damage to provide comprehensive social protection coverage.
- In line with the obligation of international cooperation and assistance, states that are able to, must assist other states in need, with financial and technical support to realize the right to social security. This includes the supporting the establishment of a global fund for social protection to provide universal and shock responsive social protection.
- Take urgent and immediate steps to ensure that necessary funds are made available to meet humanitarian needs and there is sufficient resource mobilization to address all levels of food insecurity across the world prioritizing the worst affected areas.
- Ensure that humanitarian assistance and social protection measures address the multiple forms of discrimination experienced by women, people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, people belonging to racialized communities, Indigenous peoples, older persons, children, people with disabilities and people with multiple and intersecting identities.
- Respect the rights to freedom of assembly and remove all barriers and undue restrictions that have been put in place to obstruct peaceful protests, before during and after an assembly.

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations. We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

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