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How can we adopt a gender lens to social protection programs in the face of the COVID19 crisis?

The dual health and economic crisis brought on by the pandemic is exacerbating inequalities globally, and signs are pointing to a disproportionate impact on women and girls, as highlighted in our previous Webinars. Social protection is increasingly important to mitigate the negative impacts on the livelihoods and wellbeing of the world's most vulnerable. Not only have households, especially those headed by women, faced an unprecedented shock to their livelihoods, but many of the social programs they rely on to address acute and systemic challenges, such as access to sexual and reproductive health services, or maternal and child health, are under considerable strain. The pandemic has underscored and brought to the forefront pre-existing gender gaps and differential access to social safety nets and financial tools (such as micro-finance) for contending with shocks. And gender gaps have been exposed even in the fiscal measures and technological tools to mitigate the impacts of the crisis.

Delivering social protection programs is tremendously challenging in the context of COVID19. The shock has increased the number of persons requiring social protection, especially among women who are not typically subject to job losses during typical economic downturns. However, women disproportionately work in the sectors most affected by lockdowns or most at risk as frontline care workers. They also disproportionately rely on deriving livelihoods from informal activity, contend with the increased demands from unpaid care responsibility (children, elderly and the sick), and face increased mental health concerns and stress, domestic violence and restricted access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Against this increased need, there are at least two major impediments for the delivery of social protection programs. First, as the global economy faces a historic downturn, government revenues decline as fiscal spending rises, and funds are redirected to COVID health care and research and development. Long-term funding available for social protection programs could be at risk. Navigating increased need with decreased resources will be a defining challenge. Second, sanitary measures required to minimize the spread of disease is making the logistics of program delivery immensely difficult, requiring creative solutions, often involving remote delivery of programs, which may or may not be as efficient as in-person delivery.

Research Priorities

Priority 1:

Some of the early emerging evidence points to an evolution in the gendered impact of the pandemic on key indicators of wellbeing, especially women's livelihoods, as households navigate the impact of the pandemic over time (e.g. with food shortages and rationing). Understanding the dynamics of this evolving response will be important to better inform social protection policy.

Priority 2:

In order to optimize the delivery of programs to an increasing number of beneficiaries over a longer period of time requires improved targeting when faced with binding resource constraints. As in any targeting exercise, an important research question is how to reach the largest number of persons in need while minimizing leakages and the administrative costs in identifying beneficiaries. This is especially challenging when field operations are suspended and when social distancing policies are in place. The size and importance of the informal sector provides an additional challenge to generating social registries especially where they do not exist pre-pandemic.

Priority 3:

We know that the risk and incidence of gender-based violence have risen during this pandemic, especially for the most vulnerable and isolated women. A major research priority is how to include gender-based violence programming into social safety nets. This will include the need to address systemic problems related to harmful gender norms.

Policy Implications

Implication 1:

Some organizations have adapted their programming to provide remote delivery of their programs, using mobile technology. This provides opportunities to deliver and scale up programs. The data generated by mobile technology can be used to customize social protection programs to respond to pressing needs, such as identifying and targeting support beneficiaries most at risk of gender-based violence or mental health issues, as well as broadening economic opportunities for program participants.

Implication 2:

A key factor in ensuring effective and efficient social protection programs is ensuring good governance – program delivery must be both transparent and accountable.

Implication 3:

Many services that the poor and vulnerable benefit from are public services, such as water and sanitation, primary health services (including SRHR and maternal and child health) that have seen restrictions during the pandemic. Maintaining access to these services should be considered a policy priority.

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