

## OPINION EDITORIAL

# Social Protections during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada: An Analysis of Strategies Around the World

**Sathya Aithal**, McMaster University; **Shireen Gill**, McMaster University; **Sabrina Price**, McMaster University

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a significant public health challenge that will have social and economic repercussions for years to come. Labour markets around the world have experienced historically unprecedented levels of disruption. In 2020, 8.8% of global working hours were lost, equivalent to 225 million full-time jobs [1]. The pandemic has led to a significant increase in global poverty, effectively erasing a decade of poverty reduction [2]. Governments have thus faced the challenge of containing the health impact of the pandemic while responding to its social and economic impacts. It has become clear that strengthening social protection measures is an essential part of a coordinated policy response, which involves expanding access to quality healthcare and enhancing income security.

While the number of workers in flexible forms of employment, and the informal economy, increased during this pandemic, their lack of protection has become more evident. Precarious groups such as these increasingly experience a disproportionate lack of protections in many countries.

Although embedded in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, social protections have largely been absent in the international human rights agenda. This pandemic has presented a 'wake-up call' for countries to strengthen their social protection measures, to avert or mitigate the crisis, and to better address ensuing challenges [3].

## CANADA'S RESPONSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the existing infrastructure and social supports available both in developing and developed countries. Thanks to strong political institutions, pre-existing policy legacies, and sound social protection mechanisms, Canada has been able to accommodate the threat of COVID-19 in a unique way.

As Canada relies extensively on universal benefits and services, financial and social protections such as Employment Insurance are purely under federal jurisdiction. This is not always the case, as in the United States, for example, Unemployment Insurance (UI) is decentralized [4].

In response to COVID-19, one notable mechanism exercised by the Canadian government was the creation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). CERB provided '\$500 a week for up to 16 weeks' in taxable benefits to eligible workers who lost their income due to the COVID-19 crisis [5]. Adopted on March 25, 2020, CERB was expanded a few weeks later to cover contract, part-time, and seasonal workers who had initially been excluded from the program [4]. This has since renewed interest in Employment Insurance and social assistance reforms, such as the possibility of creating a universal basic income across the nation.

Canada also exercised the use of several social protection mechanisms, such as the introduction of lockdown and social distancing measures. Social

assistance policies illustrated through financial assistance and income transfers hoped to target certain sub-populations especially marginalized by the pandemic [4].

## GLOBAL SOCIAL PROTECTIONS

With the spread of COVID-19, disease prevention measures have become more prevalent. As a result, multiple countries have implemented social protections to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the poor and vulnerable members of their community and to strengthen their economic setbacks. Case studies of other nations highlight the strengths and weaknesses of Canada's measures.

*Family leave and care policy:* Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of schools, universities, and child-care centers in over 100 countries, impacting over 800 million children and youth [2]. Subsequently, family leave policies have become critical, especially for those who cannot telework, while their usual employment is closed. Countries such as France and Italy have introduced parental leave entitlements for the purpose of child-care during the period of school closures, prepayment of social security benefits, and suspension of taxation [2,6].

*Access to Healthcare:* Financial protection against healthcare expenditure has to be expanded to all, including those who would not be included in other universal healthcare protection schemes. For instance, Thailand guaranteed treatment for COVID-19 for foreign residents in the country [2]. The pandemic also brought upon improved coordination in the healthcare system, including institutional and staff capacity. Countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom complemented existing systems using private service providers under public regulation [2].<sup>^</sup> Australia, notably put into place a number of protections to manage the impact of the pandemic in Long-Term Care Facilities (LTCFs), such as priority access to personal protective equipment COVID-19 support funding for facilities, and worker retention bonuses [7].

*Protection Infrastructure:* Eastern countries such as India and the Philippines implemented the National Social Assistance program and the Social Amelioration Program, respectively, to provide one-off payments to individuals under a certain threshold of poverty and/or vulnerable members of society [8,9,10] However, these payments were insufficient, as they only provided limited relief for two months and were hindered due to a lack of technological developments for payment delivery [8].

*Income security:* Income security can alleviate financial stressors during a crisis if planned meticulously with existing policies in place. This is best exemplified in Denmark, where a portion of employee salaries were covered while paying fixed-costs for companies to prevent layoffs [11,12,13]. Denmark was able to put forth effective, unified, and time-sensitive social protections because their government, private sector, and unions worked collaboratively [9,10,11]. In contrast, the United States' social protections were limited and implemented at a slower pace due to the decentralized UI which lacked administrative support, resulting in inconsistent benefits and timelines across states [4].

## POLICY SUGGESTIONS

Social protections are needed to ensure that individuals need not compromise between their health and their livelihoods. While Canada's plan has fared better than others, they can learn from countries such as Denmark and introspectively from their own shortcomings.

While schemes such as CERB saved millions of Canadians from immediate poverty, they were maladapted to the realities of people experiencing precarious employment, or living in poverty. Moreover, as CERB only covered individuals that did not voluntarily quit their jobs, people were less likely to leave unsafe employment conditions as they would not receive benefits [5]. Canada should work towards providing more comprehensive social schemes to ensure that all demographics in need of protections during a future pandemic are

supported. Additionally, Canada should work on integrating the various government levels, public, and the private sector to provide unified income protections similar to Denmark's, which would result in increased funding and broad social protections. Canada should expand family and sick-leave policies, similar to that of France and Italy, to support working parents affected by the closure of schools and child-care facilities.

Vulnerable populations such as those in LTCFs should be integrated into existing healthcare structures. In addition to increased funding to and system integration of LTCFs, standards for long-term care should include a rights-based framework that includes sustainable financing and social protections [7].

Inequities hinder developing nations such as India and the Philippines, which cannot sufficiently fund their social protections' infrastructure; Canada should pool their surplus resources and contribute to their preparedness in responding to crises.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a policy window, for social protection programs which have largely been absent from the international policy agenda. These programs have to include expanding access to quality healthcare, income security, leave programs and building the required infrastructure.

Findings from current research should guide proactive and permanent social protection schemes not only in Canada but also globally to ensure that the consequences to the economy and health are dampened in case of a future pandemic. To prepare for the future, social protection measures should be seen not as an emergency response to a crisis, but rather as a set of permanent entitlements, protected by law to individual rights-holders.

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