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Social protection floor gaps and pandemic relief measures: a case for universalism?

Exploring scalability through targeted versus universalist approaches

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Abstract: With the expansion of social protection measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, considerations both old and new have surfaced regarding targeted versus universalist approaches. This study focuses on how social protection coverage before the pandemic influences the extent of targeted versus universalist policies in advanced and developing economies. It offers new insights regarding continued and new patterns in policy design, particularly concerning beneficiaries and the type of programmes, by learning from the policy mix of crisis relief. The study draws on two datasets: the COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker and the Social Protection Floor Index. Combined, they provide information about financing gaps for social protection floors before the pandemic and about countries' specific pandemic policy responses. Using standard regression modelling, an association is estimated between social protection floor indexes and the share of universal policy measures across different conceptualizations of social protection. The findings offer first reflections on the extent to which pre-existing systems matter and in what way recent policy innovations may inform the design of shock-responsive systems going forward.

Key words: crisis response, social protection floors, universal social protection, targeting, universalism, economic shocks

JEL classification: D60, H12, H53, I30

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1 Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic resulted in economic adversity and challenges to an unprecedented extent worldwide. As a response, governments rolled out more than 800 policy measures over the course of 2020 and 2021 (UNESCWA 2021). This led to, or rather reignited, the general recognition of social protection as a vital tool for crisis response (Bastagli and Lowe 2021; Behrendt 2021). Part of this discussion is the promotion of universal social protection, especially concerning aspects of equitable, expansive, and inclusive policy design (Schmitt and Bierbaum 2022). This is pertinent given that those who already experience economic marginalization often bear greater consequences from economic shocks or other crises, while having lower access to social protection systems. Hence, the adequate, timely, and efficient identification of households in need of support may be a challenging task during unfolding crisis events.

To provide a broad-based overview, this study explores how existing levels of social protection coverage resulted in different crisis responses during the pandemic. It specifically focuses on the extent to which targeted versus universalist policies were applied. By exploring the Social Protection Floor Index, the COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker database, and types of (non-) democracies using descriptive and correlational methods, the study's aim is three-fold. First, it explores shifting conceptualizations of the social protection policy space by highlighting alternative forms of social protection. Second, it measures an association between existing social protection coverage, political contexts, and the extent of universalism in crisis response. Third, it compares differences across levels of development, particularly distinguishing between high-income and non-high-income countries.

The study finds a negative association between social protection coverage and universalism. This implies that less-comprehensive social protection systems are associated with having a higher proportion of universal policies among crisis response policies. However, this association, though significant, shows a negligible effect whereby the inclusion of alternative forms of social protection, particularly business-oriented programmes, explains the observed tendency towards universal crisis relief. Overall, this suggests that in the context of crisis relief, it may be necessary to seek to understand social protection beyond the established scope of social insurance, social assistance, and labour market programmes.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, Section 2 reviews relevant debates on targeted versus universal approaches in the social protection space. Next, Section 3 introduces the scope and frameworks applied in this study concerning social protection, social protection coverage, crisis response, and a distinction between targeted versus universal approaches. Section 4 describes the data and empirical approach, Section 5 presents the results from the correlational analysis applied, and Section 6 concludes.

2 Literature review

Social protection has been discussed in light of crisis events before. A burgeoning literature discussed its important role and capacity to respond to economic shocks in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2009 (Barrientos and Niño-Zarazúa 2011; Davies and McGregor 2009; Stiglitz 2009; Marzo and Mori 2012). Already back then, scholars identified social protection as a key tool to tackle economic challenges faced by households that arose due to covariate shocks and to assist in economic recovery more broadly. Further, these conversations and scientific

evaluations did not come without mention of matters of finance and affordability, effective design, necessary stimulus packages, and financial assistance to developing countries.

Many of these arguments are repeated when it comes to current debates on social protection expansions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a timely review re-emphasizes the crucial role of social protection as a flexible and strategic tool of crisis response—particularly in high-income countries—thereby also pointing to the need for more-comprehensive approaches in non-high-income contexts (Abdoul-Azize and El Gamil 2021). Aspects of comprehensiveness also lead to a (re)call for universal social protection systems that include social protection floors in general and during crises more specifically to provide basic coverage for all (Behrendt 2021). Despite the recognition of the general importance of social protection in crisis relief, there are still considerations both old and new regarding how to best achieve such universal coverage, paired with concerns about reaching those most affected by a crisis. These reflections link to the ongoing debate about targeting versus universalism in the allocation of welfare support.

The core of the discussion on universalism versus targeting focuses on the choice of whether or not there should be an element of selectivity in the allocation of welfare benefits. Broadly speaking, universalist approaches make a benefit available to an entire population, while targeting applies some selectivity by—most commonly—defining those most in need (Devereux 2021b; Ellis et al. 2009; Mkandawire 2005). These considerations often result in a normative debate about basic human rights, deservingness, justice, or public solidarity. In doing so, they also reflect broader political orientations regarding who should benefit from public solidarity, how, why, and under what circumstances.

Despite there being no clear consensus, targeted approaches are the dominant method in welfare allocation, especially in developing countries. However, this may be not solely a product of national political systems and their political orientations but also due to a narrative of efficiency and the resulting practices within macroeconomic and aid policies which have often made poverty reduction a central rationale (Mkandawire 2005). Another institutional driving force has been governments' fiscal constraint during the late 1970s, which generated a political agenda of budgetary restraint whereby improved targeting meant more poverty alleviation with fewer resources (Besley and Kanbur 1990). With universal and thus often more expansive programmes thus appearing less feasible, targeting seemed to provide a cost-effective and equitable option to cater to those most in need.

Yet targeting comes with its own set of costs. These have been described as social costs, such as the stigma and shame felt by recipients for being 'singled out' (Ellis 2012). Mistargeting, on the other hand, can lead to social tensions and exclusion or even crime and violence against welfare recipients (Cameron and Shah 2014). Mistargeting is also a product of considerations of efficiency, as it involves identifying inclusion or exclusion errors and thus an allocation of welfare benefits to non-eligible individuals or households, or the absence of allocation of welfare benefits to those that are eligible (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2015). Further, political costs associated with targeted programmes arise due to lower levels of political support for programmes that benefit some but not all, thereby not receiving as much support from middle-income and wealthy individuals (Devereux 2021b).

While universalist approaches can address some of the challenges associated with targeting, especially regarding matters of inclusion and exclusion, there are also certain political weaknesses. For instance, universalist proclamations often do not match their acclaimed reach. Filgueira and Filgueira (2002) argue that universalist approaches have often been stratified and have addressed those social groups that were relevant in nation-building and industrialization processes, particularly in countries that pursued import substitution industrialization. Others coined the term

'stratified universalism' as a means to capture latent selectivity and biases towards urban and privileged sectors (particularly formalized sectors), referred to as labour aristocracies (Areskoug 1976). It has also been argued that universalist approaches tend to overlook prevailing discrimination and economic marginalization (i.e. by race or gender), thereby creating a false sense of unity (Ellison 1999). From a fiscal standpoint, universalist approaches—while saving expense on often costly targeting mechanisms and allocation systems—can be more costly overall due to their more expansive nature (Devereux 2021b).

At the same time, universalism has gained higher public support in more-equal societies (Rothstein 2001) and has the potential to circumvent challenges of accuracy in the allocation of benefits, especially in poorer countries (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2007; Ortiz 2018). An argument of accuracy also seems relevant in times of crisis, when those most in need are more difficult to identify. Targeting the most-vulnerable households is a key element of social protection programmes during crises, often termed shock-responsive social protection, which seeks to enhance households' resilience and capacity to respond to unforeseen challenges (Cornelius et al. 2018).

While there are thus pros and cons to either approach, a tendency towards either universalism or targeted approaches is often shaped by what is in place when a crisis occurs. Governments do not start from scratch when utilizing social protection as a crisis response but opt for vertical or horizontal expansion (see for example Barca 2017), meaning either increasing existing benefits or introducing new benefits to previously non-targeted parts of the population. This also implies the use of existing delivery mechanisms and systems to channel support, termed 'piggybacking', or the alignment of new programmes with existing ones in terms of, for example, targeting and delivery (Bowen et al. 2020).

The nature of crisis-related ad hoc expansions thus highlights the importance of existing systems and levels of social protection already in place. During a crisis, one of the key challenges is the increasing demand for support among various groups of the public. The extent to which this may then put stress on existing systems further depends on the unfolding pace of a crisis, its predictability, duration, or geographical concentration (Bowen et al. 2020). These aspects in turn influence how well an existing system can respond to manifold demands for support.

In the event of covariate shocks—yet with idiosyncratic consequences—as witnessed during the pandemic, the universalism versus targeting debate highlights another challenge. While targeted approaches acknowledge that the identification of eligible recipients is often difficult and can result in errors, this may be even more true during times of crisis, where economic consequences and challenges are unfolding rapidly, are compounded in diverse ways, and often change frequently. At the same time, crises often come with either immediate or future fiscal constraints or limited state capacity if they lead to an economic recession or follow a period of conflict, making more-costly universal programmes a less viable option.

Taking existing social protection levels into account, this study attempts a first exploration of social protection expansions witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic by distinguishing between universal and targeted policies used as crisis response. In addition to understanding how existing social protection schemes influenced the extent to which countries opted for universal versus targeted responses, it also discusses what the drivers behind this might be, focusing particularly on whether a conceptual shift in what is understood as social protection in terms of policy priorities and defined beneficiaries may play a role, and whether identified patterns differ across rich and

developed and relatively poorer and developing countries—hereinafter captured as high-income versus non-high-income countries.[1]

3 Conceptual framing

Multiple definitions seek to capture and describe what is referred to as social protection, including normative and justice-oriented frameworks such as the one promoted by the International Labour Organization (ILO 2009) or risk-oriented frameworks proposed by the World Bank (Holzmann et al. 2003). Due to the policy-oriented nature of this research, the study follows an approach that focuses on currently established policies—particularly those implemented in regions of the Global South—to define the scope of social protection. It thus applies a perspective that consolidates information about programmes that exist in various countries.

3.1 A policy-focused understanding of social protection

To define social protection from a programmatic perspective, the study utilizes the classifications listed in recent literature, typically including labour market and employment programmes, social assistance, and social insurance (for example, see Barrientos 2020; K4D 2019). However, it also uses the online platform Socialprotection.org, which lists implemented social protection programmes currently enacted, including 32 sub-programmes that fall under broader classifications. These range from specific subsidies to in-kind transfers to job training or public procurement measures (Socialprotection.org 2022). A more detailed overview and breakdown is provided in the Appendix, Table A1). Most common are programmes that fall into the category of social assistance (56.7 per cent of all programmes listed on the platform), followed by subsidy schemes and active labour market programmes (17 and 20 per cent respectively). The platform further lists targeting mechanisms, including 844 different measures overall. These include most commonly applied measures, such as categorical (381), geographical (134), means-tested (131), proxy-means-tested (130), community-based (67) and self-targeting (41) methods. There is, then, no explicit distinction for universal programmes.[2] The overall distinction into three main components—labour-market-oriented policies, social assistance, and social insurance—and sub-classifications will serve as a framework to classify the crisis response policies observed. The study thus uses this framework to identify policies that fall within the field of social protection.

3.2 Existing levels of universal coverage: the Social Protection Floor Index

To capture existing levels of universal social protection coverage before the pandemic, the study utilizes the Social Protection Floor Index (SPFI). The ILO ratified Social Protection Floor Recommendation R202, which was unanimously adopted by 184 member states, in 2012 (ILO 2012). A social protection floor (SPF) consists of nationally defined basic social security guarantees that encompass the policies listed in Table 1 by defining a minimum set of requirements. This includes four components: (1) sets of goods and services for essential healthcare; (2) basic income security for children; (3) basic income security for people of working age who are unable to earn a sufficient income (e.g. due to disability, sickness, maternity, unemployment); and (4) basic income security for older people (see also Bierbaum et al. 2016, further described in Section 4.1). Based

[1] Thus including upper-middle income, lower-middle income, and low-income countries.

[2] For a more detailed description of these mechanism, see for example Devereux et al. (2015).

on this rationale, the SPFI measures financing gaps in income and health security for each country.[3] The SPFI thus captures the inverse of social protection coverage in that it points out the extent of financing needed to close SPF gaps, expressed as a share of a country's GDP.

3.3 Universal versus targeted tendencies in crisis response

Crisis relief policies are those that were enacted as a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This covers a wide range of actions, including awareness campaigns, healthcare spending, interest rate reductions, and price regulations for essential foods and medicine. The study takes a data-driven approach and uses the COVID Stimulus Tracker (UNESCWA 2021), providing relevant data as will be described in Section 4.1. Not all policies captured on this platform can be classified as social protection policies using the framework outlined above. The study, therefore, distinguishes, as a first step, between social-protection-relevant policies and other policies not relevant for a social protection lens. Social-protection-relevant policies are those that speak to any of the three components, labour-market-oriented programmes, social assistance, or social insurance. Due to the high prevalence of business-oriented policies providing support to small and medium-sized enterprises, or to enterprises more generally, the study further distinguishes policies into a set of 'general social protection' and 'expanded social protection' policies. General social protection thus only includes policies that are classified under the three components outlined above. Expanded social protection also includes support to businesses, which can have direct and indirect effects on labour markets and constitute 'second-order' policies to active and passive labour market programmes. The policy types will also be used to explore different priority-setting approaches in terms of crisis relief and allocation mechanisms.

The study then classifies both sets of social protection policies by their mode of allocation into either targeted or universal approaches, following the rationale discussed in Devereux et al. (2015). The authors describe targeting, as discussed before, as an explicit mechanism that identifies eligible individuals or households to whom to allocate resources or access to given social services. These include measures as briefly mentioned in Section 3.1. which lists the most popular choices. Universal social protection programmes are then classified as policies or sets of policies that 'aim to reach every citizen passing a basic criterion, often categorical schemes for all people of a certain age [e.g. pensions] or status [e.g. child benefits]' (Devereux et al. 2015: 9). An alternative classification was considered, discussed by Mkandawire (2005) who primarily distinguishes targeting from universalism through a poverty- or needs-based lens. Hereby, targeting would aim at 'the population segment deemed poor according to some criteria' (Mkandawire 2005: 1). Yet given how social protection design evolved, i.e. from protective and preventive to also transformative approaches whereby targeting started to increasingly incorporate e.g. lines of discrimination (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004; Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux 2008), a more holistic approach to defining targeting (e.g. including gender and disability) seems appropriate.

While applying this rationale was fairly straightforward for 'conventional' beneficiary subgroups of social protection schemes, such as the elderly, children, women, or vulnerable populations, distinguishing targeted and universal approaches for more business-oriented policies required an additional step. Following the classification of employees and self-employed as targeted policies, similarly, businesses (SMEs as well as larger enterprises) form a category that constitutes the institutional equivalent of such targeted policies. On the other hand, policies that apply to people, the economy, and businesses as a more broadly defined group were classified as universal

[3] See Section 4.1 for a more detailed description.

approaches.[4] Thus, the study's distinction of 'targeted' versus 'universalist' crisis response is a stricter one, to closely match the original definition applied for existing social protection schemes. An overview of beneficiary groups classified as targeted or universal can be found in Table A4 in the Appendix.

4 Data and empirical analysis

4.1 Data

The study is primarily based on data from the COVID Stimulus Tracker published by UNESCWA (2021) and the SPFI first constructed in 2016, with the latest figures from 2018 (Bierbaum et al. 2016; FES 2018).

The COVID Stimulus Tracker constitutes one of a bourgeoning amount of datasets that collect policy measures as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study utilizes it for the proposed analysis due to its clustering of policies within the framework detailed in Section 3.1. It comprises a total of 8,159 policies over the years 2020 and 2021, collected globally. If high-income countries are excluded, there is a total of 4,719 policies. Globally, 95 per cent constitute newly introduced policies (7,747) whereas only 5 per cent build on existing policies (421). Policies were based on government fiscal support (77 per cent), central bank liquidity support (15 per cent), or others (most commonly donor agencies, 7 per cent). Policies can be categorized by policy type and beneficiary subgroup, which allows them to be distinguished into targeted and universalist policies. Clustering by policy type first allows a distinction to be made between social-protection-relevant and non-relevant policies, as discussed earlier. A total of 3,625 policies are excluded due to their not being relevant from a social protection perspective (for a detailed overview of which measures are included in this category, see Appendix, Table A3). In the next step, the remaining 4,068[5] social-protection-relevant policies are sorted into universal or targeted approaches (here Table A4 in the Appendix shows a detailed overview).

As summarized in Table 1, overall, less than a third of policies used in crisis response have a universal approach, with targeted approaches being the dominant choice. This is in line with earlier discussions which point to the general prevalence of targeted approaches in the social protection policy space. Within countries, this proportion also applies across both social protection classifications; however, it can vary quite significantly across countries.

In addition, a quarter of crisis responses are social transfers and a quarter subsidies, with one-third of policy programmes supporting SME/non-SME businesses (see Appendix, Table A2). Five per cent are either active or passive labour market programmes, with the next-largest share being public health insurance programmes. In addition, the within-country share of universal policies is slightly higher in non-high-income countries (33 per cent on average) than in high-income countries (16 per cent on average) with an overall mean of one-quarter (see Appendix, Table A6). Further insights on the above-mentioned policy types will be discussed in Section 5.1, which focuses on policy priorities across development levels.

[4] It was further evident that this beneficiary group comprises a set of policies beyond business-oriented policies, including social transfers, subsidies, active and passive labour market programmes, and pensions.

[5] Note that this number is slightly lower than total policies minus policies that are not social-protection-related, due to missing information concerning beneficiaries for approximately five hundred listed policies.

Table 1: Targeted and universal policy approaches

Allocation	N	%
Universal	1,168	27.7
Targeted	2,900	71.3
Total social protection	4,068	100.0
	N	Mean (sd)
Universalism general SP	158	.32 (.21)
Universalism expanded SP	155	.31 (19)

Source: author's own construction based on data from UNESCWA (2022).

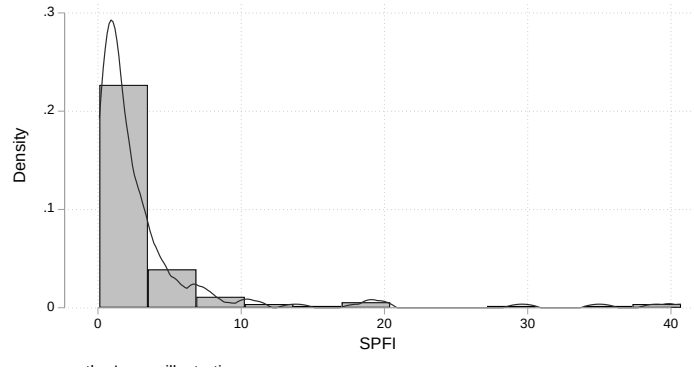
Across these policies, the extent of universalism in crisis response is the dependent variable. The SPFI, on the other hand, reflects existing levels of social protection coverage before the pandemic. A group of scholars designed the SPFI in 2016 to provide a monitoring tool to track the implementation of R202 on Social Protection Floors. The SPFI thus measures shortfalls in income and health security and aggregates such information into a composite indicator (Bierbaum et al. 2016). It measures gaps in income security by considering the financial resources needed so that everyone is lifted to and above the poverty line (also known as the aggregate poverty gap). It also quantifies health security gaps by taking two aspects into account, namely (1) public resources allocated to health and (2) the adequacy of such allocation. The first involves an evaluation of a country's public health expenditure, and the latter is the number of physicians, nurses, and midwives per 1,000 people for each country, compared against a normative benchmark (Bierbaum et al. 2016).[6] The index expresses all shortfalls as a share of a country's GDP, with equal weighting across income and health security measures (for a more detailed description, see Bierbaum et al. 2016).

While this includes multiple years, the most recent figures available are for 2018, thereby reflecting financing gaps before the onset of the pandemic. The SPFI is available for 179 countries and will serve as the independent variable in the subsequent analysis. Further, the SPFI is available in three different measurement formats due to the assessment of income security and the application of different poverty lines. This study uses the SPFI which applies the '50 per cent of the median income' poverty line to measure income security. This relative poverty line can more readily be applied to all countries across development levels than the two alternative measures using absolute poverty lines of US$1.90 or $3.20 in purchasing power parity per day.

SPFI gaps are particularly prevalent among non-high-income countries, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. For high-income countries, SPFI gaps typically range only between 0.2 and 2.2 per cent, with an average of 0.7 per cent of GDP. When including all countries, gaps can be as high as 40.7 per cent of GDP, whereby non-high-income countries show an average gap of 4.4 per cent of GDP, which remains at 2.6 per cent of GDP when excluding countries with high SPFI gaps above 10 per cent of GDP. Overall, about two-thirds of all countries show gaps of between 0.5 and 5 per cent (69 per cent); among non-high-income countries, this applies to 72 per cent.

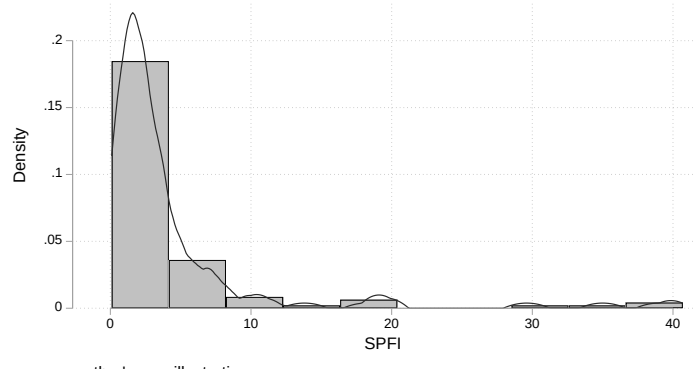
[6] The normative benchmark amounts to 4.3 per cent of GDP and stems from the share of GDP spent by countries, within 0.5 standard deviations, of the global average of physicians, midwives, and nurses per thousand people, derived taking 167 countries into account.

Figure 1: SPFI using relative poverty line (all countries)



Source: author's construction based on Bierbaum et al. (2016).

Figure 2: SPFI using relative poverty line (excluding high-income countries)

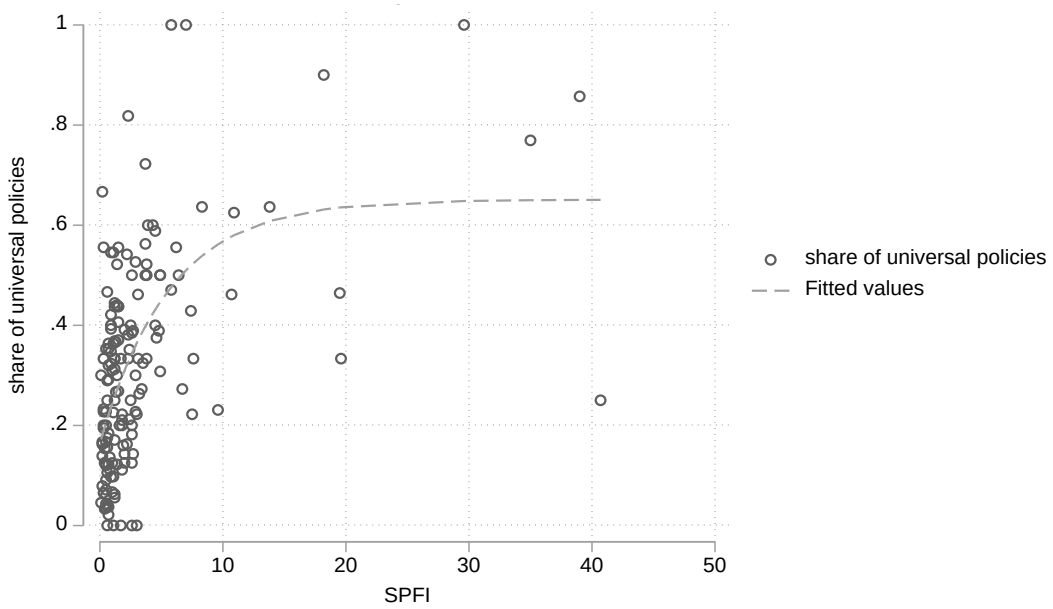


Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020).

A combined look at the extent of universal policies expressed as a share of all social-protection-relevant policies implemented in a country and existing social protection coverage displays non-linear, limited growth, or an asymptotic relationship (see Figure 3). Here, the effect on the extent of universalism in crisis responses approaches a marginal near-zero effect. However, it is also evident that for countries with high SPFI gaps greater than 20 per cent of GDP, the extent of universalism in crisis response varies from a little more than 20 per cent up to 100 per cent. This also suggests that for countries with low social protection coverage, these pre-existing systems are less of a determinant or show no clear association with whether the country opted for more targeted or universal policies.

For countries with SPFI gaps of below 5 per cent, there seems to be a steep association whereby the extent of universalism in crisis response either grows with even marginal changes in social protection coverage or may be explained by other factors, particularly for countries with similar SPFI gaps but notable differences in the extent of universalism in their crisis response. Hence, the inclusion of other possible explanatory factors may provide further insights, as well as an isolation of the association between existing social protection coverage and universalism in crisis response. In addition, due to the skewed distribution observed for SPFI and non-linearity, the study thus explores this association by applying the logarithmic transformation of SPFI in the subsequent analysis.

Figure 3: Universalism and existing levels of social protection



Note: including high-income countries.

Source: author's own illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2022).

4.2 Empirical approach

This study explores this nexus between existing social protection coverage and universalist versus targeted crisis response with a non-causal correlational analysis of a cross-country framework which is broadly captured in the form:

$$Universal_i = \beta_1 + \beta_2 \log (SPFI)_i + \beta_3 X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$Universal_i$ is the dependent variable that captures the share of policies in a country i that can be classified as universal. It thus expresses universal policies as a share of the total of social protection policies in a given country. Consequently, there is one variable that captures the general social protection framework and one for the expanded social protection framework including business support. $SPFI_i$ is the logarithmic transformation of the Social Protection Floor Index, expressing a financing gap in social protection coverage as a percentage of a country's GDP, further using the '50 per cent of median income' poverty line to measure the component of income security. X_i represents a set of controls including the total extent of crisis response, the share of policies supported by the government, the share of business support if not excluded in the dependent variable, and a country's GDP and population. ε_i represents an overall error term. More-specific model specifications used for comparison are included in the Appendix, Table A7.

The analysis tests three hypotheses: first, the relationship between the extent of universalism in crisis response and the level of existing social protection across 158 countries for which both relevant information is available; second, whether the influence of existing social protection is conditional on a conceptual expansion of social protection, also including SME and non-SME support programmes; and third, whether the observed associations between the extent of universalism and existing social protection differ between high-income and non-high-income countries.

Hypothesis 1. Higher financing gaps in existing social protection programmes are associated with a greater extent of universalist approaches. This assumption revisits current findings which emphasize that non-high-income countries had a less-comprehensive social protection approach to crisis response during the pandemic (Abdoul-Azize and El Gamil 2021), by adding the distinction between targeted and universalist approaches to gain insights about who was included in crisis response by design. The hypothesis is confirmed if $\beta_2 > 0$ and statistically significant across various model specifications to assess whether the proposed association holds.

Hypothesis 2. A greater extent of universalist crisis response is primarily explained by a greater extent of business-oriented support programmes and thus a conceptual shift in social protection. This assumption tests whether there is a need to revisit the conceptual limits of what is understood as social protection (Barrientos 2020; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2007; K4D 2019). The hypothesis is confirmed if $\beta_2 > 0$ and statistically non-significant when excluding business-oriented programmes in defining the extent of universalist policies, hence the use of the general social protection framework.

Hypothesis 3. The observed associations between existing social protection levels and universalism differ between high-income and non-high-income countries, following observations made by Abdoul-Azize and El Gamil (2021) as well as Behrendt (2021). This is primarily an exploratory hypothesis and will be explored by comparing model outcomes across different sample specifications which exclude/include high-income countries.

5 Results

Before looking at the extent to which existing social protection levels play a role in determining the tendency to implement universal versus targeted policies, the following assesses policy priorities as they feature in crisis relief. This includes a comparison across development levels as well as a brief assessment of the extent to which different policies are associated with a greater extent of universalism across countries and different country groups.

5.1 Contextualizing universalism: exploring associated policy priorities

Table 2 provides an overview of policy priorities across development levels. Governments implemented different policy types across development levels. After support to businesses, social transfers and subsidies were by far the most frequently applied policies in crisis response, followed by active and passive labour market programmes. For example, on average, a country implemented more than five policies that can be classified as social transfers or subsidies, more than six policies that constitute business support, and one in the area of active and passive labour market support.

While, in general, the number of policies implemented was higher in high-income countries, there are also slight differences regarding the extent to which different policies feature in crisis relief. For instance, after support to businesses, subsidies were most prominent in high-income countries (7.6 policies on average). In upper-middle-income countries, this applies to social transfers (7.5 policies, which constitutes the highest average observed across development levels) whereas lower-middle-income countries and low-income countries also have a higher prevalence of and similar amounts of social transfers and subsidies (about five for lower-middle-income countries and two for low-income countries). High-income countries further have a notably higher average of active and passive labour market policies compared with other development levels. While parental and paternity policies were less frequently applied overall, there were none observed for low-income countries. Despite the health-related nature of the crisis, health-related measures were also less

prominent across all development levels. Otherwise, and interestingly so, the patterns regarding policy priority-setting resemble each other across development levels.

Table 2: Policy priorities across development levels

Policy priorities (expressed as share of total social protection policies)	Development level (all countries)				
	High income	Upper-middle income	Lower-middle income	Low income	Total
	Mean of total policies implemented per country				
Active labour market	2.5	0.5	0.9	0.17	1.2
Passive labour market	2.1	1.2	0.5	0.17	1.2
Social transfers	5.4	7.5	4.8	2.4	5.4
Subsidies	7.6	5.1	5.3	2.1	5.5
Parental/paternity	0.15	0.03	0.02	0	0.6
Pensions	0.28	0.70	0.21	0.03	0.3
Health	1.7	0.73	0.67	0.21	0.9
Business	9.1	5.4	5.8	4.8	6.6

Source: author's construction based on UNESCWA (2022).

Table 3 shows an association between policy types and the extent to which universalism occurs. It shows policy priorities expressed as a percentage of a country's total crisis relief.[7]

Table 3: Policy priorities and their association with universalism across country groups

Policy priorities (expressed as a share of total social protection policies)	Development level (all countries)			
	All countries N=187	High-income countries N=60	Non-high-income countries N=127	SPFI < 5% N=137
	Dependent variable: share of universalism in crisis response			
Active labour market	−0.03 (0.166)	0.00 (0.316)	−0.03 (0.187)	0.09 (0.251)
Passive labour market	0.08 (0.178)	0.06 (0.368)	0.03 (0.194)	0.02 (0.213)
Social transfers	0.50 (0.106)***	0.16 (0.241)	0.41 (0.119)***	0.55 (0.128)***
Subsidies	0.74 (0.119)***	0.09 (0.248)	0.82 (0.133)***	0.74 (0.148)***
Parental/paternity	0.05 (0.691)	−0.56 (0.743)	−3.85 (2.90)	−0.97 (1.17)
Pensions	0.58 (0.332)*	−0.48 (0.817)	0.61 (0.352)*	0.57 (0.326)*
Health	−0.31 (0.230)	−0.83 (0.363)**	−0.22 (0.328)	−0.34 (0.268)
Business	0.16 (0.027)***	−0.06 (0.089)	0.16 (0.028)***	0.15 (0.041)***
Total response	0.000 (0.000)**	0.000 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	−0.01 (0.000)**
Constant	−0.10 (0.077)	0.21 (0.184)	−0.06 (0.086)	0.11 (0.101)

Note: robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Source: author's own calculation based on FES (2022) and UNESCWA (2022).

Overall, countries with a high application of social transfers, subsidies, business support, and, to some extent, pension-related support scored higher in universal allocations of benefits. This also reflects the higher occurrence of the policies considered, as discussed earlier. However, in high-income countries, the type of policies chosen seems to matter less in defining their mode of allocation (universal or targeted). Health-related support was associated with a lower extent of universalism, which might imply that health measures were more geared towards targeting specific population groups. This seems plausible given that, particularly concerning health, initial measures

[7] Here, only social-protection-relevant policies are counted towards defining total crisis relief. For more details see Section 3.3 and Section 4.1 and Appendix Table A2 and Table A3.

often took age-specific groups into account. In non-high-income countries, the global pattern shows that countries with a higher share of social transfers, subsidies, pensions, and business support have higher rates of universalism.

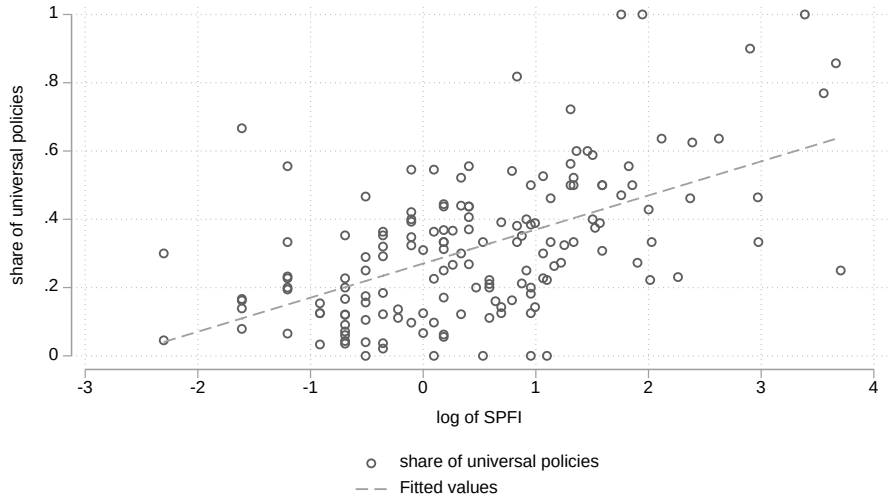
This pattern also applies to countries with comparatively smaller social protection financing gaps (SPFI of below 5 per cent of GDP), which includes non-high-income and high-income countries. However, it is noteworthy that on average the SPFI index only amounts to 0.7 per cent of a country's GDP for high-income countries, as discussed in Section 4.1. The following section will take a closer look at the role of existing SPFs and the extent of universalism in crisis relief.

5.2 Existing social protection systems and universalism in crisis response

Higher existing levels of social protection coverage can be associated with a lower level of adoption of universal policies in crisis response. In other words, if social protection systems are more comprehensive, measured by standards of social protection floors, countries seem to have applied more targeted policy responses. This confirms the hypothesis that higher financing gaps in existing social protection systems are associated with a greater extent of universal policies in crisis response. However, this does not seem to be a strong association, as the measured effect itself is negligible. For every percentage point (pp) increase in the social protection floor gap (recall that this is measured as a percentage of a country's GDP), there is a 0.07 pp increase in a country's share of universal policies applied in crisis response (see Appendix, Table A7, and Figure 4). Despite the increases in SPFI being greater in countries with higher levels of social protection financing gaps, the effect on universalism in crisis response, though significant in a log-transformed linear model, is thus negligible. This is in line with earlier discussions which emphasize the dominance of targeted approaches since the 1970s (Mkandawire 2005).

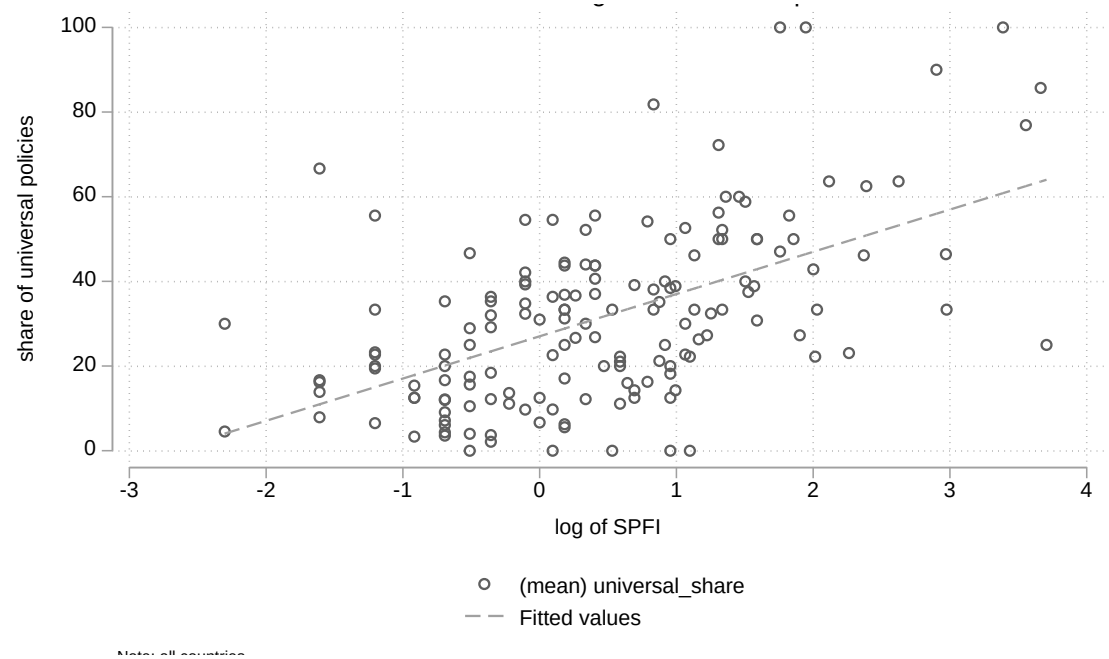
Regarding the second hypothesis, there is a significant effect on the extent of universalism explained by the share of policies oriented towards SMEs and non-SMEs in a country. Though the effect of social protection coverage (SPFI) remains significant when including multiple controls (see Figure 5, and Appendix, Table A7), the effect of business-oriented programmes is more notable. For every 1 pp increase in the share of business-oriented policies, there is a 0.24 pp increase in the extent of universalism in crisis response.

Figure 4: Predicted effects of SPFI on the extent of universalism in crisis response (all countries)



Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2022).

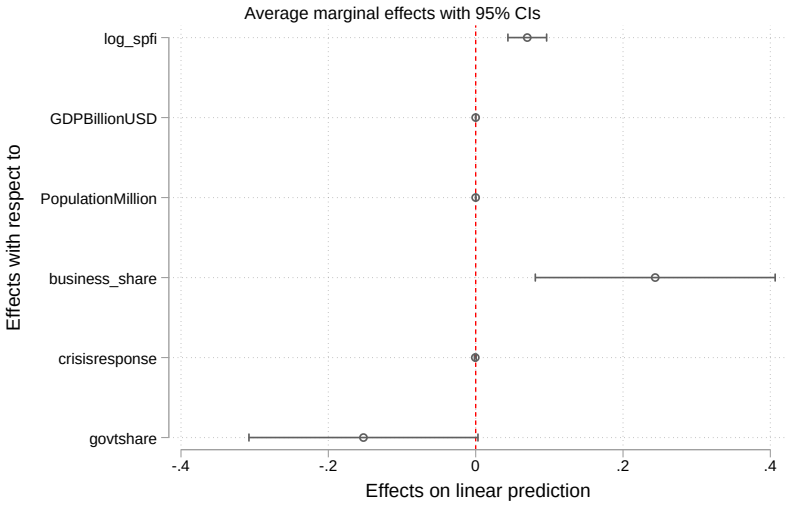
Figure 5: Marginal effects on the extent of universal policies in crisis relief (all countries)



Note: all countries.

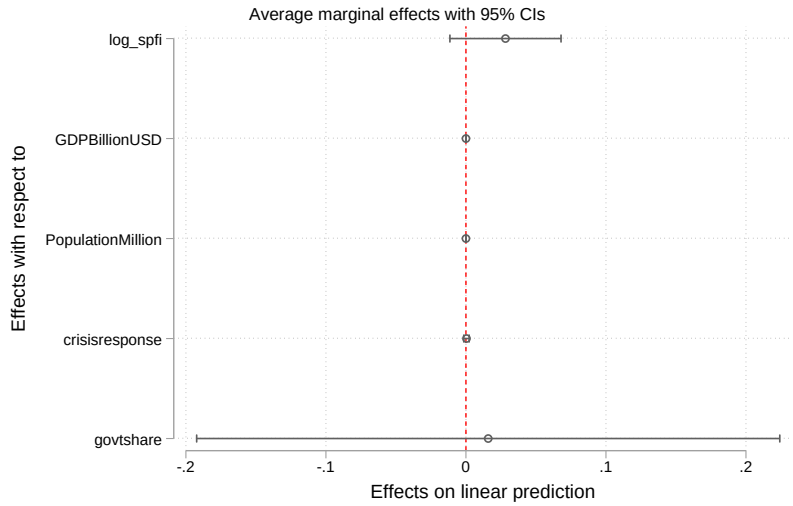
Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2022).

Figure 6: Marginal effects on the extent of universal policies in crisis relief (all countries)



Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2022).

Figure 6: Marginal effect on universalism in general social protection (excluding high-income countries)



Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2022).

Thus, a shift towards universalism would be explained by a shift in terms of conceptualizing or expanding the framework of social protection and incorporating in it a broader set of active and passive labour market and financial policies for enterprises. Notably, the effect of existing social protection floors remains significant, though negligible, which also holds when measuring universalism in crisis response while excluding any business-oriented measures across all countries (see Appendix, Table A7).

Yet when high-income countries are excluded, social protection floors do not predict the extent of universalism in general social protection schemes (excluding business measures; see Figure 6). This entails that any greater extent of universalism in upper-middle-, lower-middle-, and low-income countries is primarily explained by universal measures targeted towards enterprises. Yet the inclusion of business-oriented programmes might be questionable when seeking to understand whether 'conventional' social protection programmes shifted due to the nature and urgency of the pandemic. It also makes it difficult to draw any inferences as to whether a crisis, as represented by the COVID-19 pandemic, presents a case for universalism—returning to the considerations discussed in Section 2.

6 Discussion

This study aimed to explore an association between existing social protection systems and the extent of universal policies in crisis response. It observed policies implemented as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While it explored the allocation of crisis response (universal versus targeted), a comprehensive measure of this distinction for existing social protection systems on a global level is not available at present. Instead, the study utilized the Social Protection Floor Index, which measures the implementation of universal social protection coverage as a basic provision of income security and public health in a given country. While this captures the social protection coverage for a defined population overall—regardless of the mode of allocation—a brief historical review reveals that the mechanism to assign social protection benefits has been dominated by targeted approaches since the 1970s.

In part, this study confirms the dominance of targeted allocations in crisis response, including social assistance, social insurance, and labour market policies. When looking only at these programme components, especially when excluding alternative forms of social protection aimed at businesses, the degree to which SPFs were implemented had no clear association with whether universal or targeted allocations featured more prominently in crisis response. Yet while, overall, only a quarter of policies could be labelled as universal, this share was slightly higher in non-high-income countries than in high-income countries. This is true even though non-high-income countries implemented on average 15 policies fewer than high-income countries. In addition, frequently used policies in crisis response include social transfers, subsidies, and business support. This pattern of policy priorities holds across all development levels. Such policies (expressed as a share in a country's total social protection crisis response) then also explain the higher extent of universal allocation in non-high-income countries, further including pension-related support.[8]

The study found a positive association between the extent of universalism and SPF gaps. This means that the higher the financing gap to achieve universal social protection, the greater the share of universal policies in crisis response. A significant driver of this seems to be alternative forms of social protection, with business-oriented forms explaining a notable share in the rise of universal policies. This effect, though small, holds for all countries. The exponential increase in SPF gaps explains some of the effect. This becomes evident when comparing a linear effect among countries with a social protection floor gap of below 5 per cent of GDP (see Appendix, Table A7 and Figure A3). Overall, the high-level analysis suggests that more-comprehensive social protection is associated with more-targeted responses. This also mirrors the lower extent of universal policies in high-income countries that typically, and on a comparative basis, have more-comprehensive welfare coverage.

While there are first confirmations of the proposed hypotheses, it is important to mention that this study represents findings that hint towards broader indications rather than isolated, measurable effects. In other words, while it points to the directions observed in crisis response, these should be seen merely as broad tendencies rather than as causal relationships. In addition, there are certain limitations. These can include certain inaccuracies in the reporting of target beneficiaries, which may lead to a misclassification of policies into either targeted or universal responses. For instance, if a more-comprehensive category was assigned due to a lack of detailed information, a policy might be classified as universal even though it may have elements of targeting. An way to correct this would be to use cross-validations with other similar data sources that collect government responses to the pandemic, such as CoronaNet. In addition, the SPFI measures only financing gaps and does not provide any details about the design of existing schemes. Consolidating such information in a comprehensive measure that reflects targeted versus universal elements within policies and further enables cross-country comparisons over time would be an interesting avenue to explore further. Doing this could enhance a general understanding of which institutions, contexts, and events may lead to a shift in system design in social protection. Lastly, this analysis includes only a narrow subset of explanations, as reflected in the control variables included. Thus, it can detect broader patterns but does not render the specific or explain causal effects. Despite these limitations, the following draws out broader reflections on two aspects linked to the aim of the study.

[8] Regarding pension-related support, this is highly plausible given the definition of universal allocation applied in this study (broader age category).

6.1 Politics versus policy design

While it may be a matter of definition, there is also room for considering whether these varied and ad hoc responses created a political momentum for universalist responses based on the premise that existing social protection systems fell short in covering everyone in need of assistance during the pandemic. In this respect, the 'case for universalism' was a more political one in nature than a policy design one. USP2030, a global partnership for Universal Protection 2030 (USP 2022), represents a consortium of 44 members and partners, including the African Union, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, the World Bank, and OECD. The initiative proposed five key actions concerning universal social protection systems throughout the life cycle: universal coverage; national ownership of strategies and policies; sustainable and equitable financing and participation; social dialogue concerning governance; and institutional leadership. This policy narrative resembles that of social protection floors—particularly concerning universality. Similarly, arguments that support a basic income grant as a key example of even non-stratified universal policies are still brought forth through a policy narrative that emphasizes a focus on the most vulnerable or excluded. In this, they may reflect a needs-oriented approach that is more aligned with the underpinning rationale of targeting (for example, see Devereux 2021a). Thus, it remains unclear whether the case for universalism calls for broad access regardless of the mode of allocation—a sum of all pieces (targeting) or broad-based policies for all (universalism). Hence, whether this is best achieved by multiple, targeted, or fewer broad-based interventions is up for debate.

6.3 Effective crisis relief: considerations of scalability

Another aim of the paper was to provide first indications as to whether universal or targeted policies are a more viable solution in scaling up social protection systems for crisis relief. A sufficient answer to this question would need to look at whether policy measures were effective in responding to the needs and challenges of the pandemic. At present, it may be too early to tell, although there are efforts to assess the outcomes of respective programmes for beneficiaries in different countries.

Regarding social protection expansions, targeting can be costly in terms of its mechanism but fiscally viable due to a narrower allocation of resources, typically to those most in need. Yet, as recognized in considerations around adaptive social protection, identifying those in need and what their particular needs are during a state of crisis can be difficult. If the association between social protection floors and universalism holds, then countries that have comprehensive coverage in place opted for a targeted allocation of support. This is plausible from a point of view where the expansion of a comprehensive system relies on filling more narrow gaps via targeted interventions, i.e. through horizontal expansion. Conversely, less-comprehensive schemes may require more-universal approaches, as gaps may not be neatly defined and thus may be (i) more difficult to target or (ii) wider and more heterogeneous in terms of needs and sub-populations affected. This then was a viable option in developing countries where the extent of universalism and alternative forms of social protection that target sectors, business, and the economy more broadly was higher overall. While the question of whether universalism is more effective remains open at this stage, this study highlights a need to explore crisis responses from the viewpoint of policy formulation and design—to revisit more closely whether gaps have been sufficiently closed and whether targeting or universalism can yield a higher rate of adaptation and flexibility concerning ad hoc solutions for crisis response. This may also create a momentum behind rethinking the conceptual scope of social protection as understood to date, to incorporate policy innovations witnessed during COVID-19 crisis relief.

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Appendix

Table A1: Existing social protection programmes across regions of the Global South

Program type	First-level subcategories	Number of programmes in Global South (%)
Labour market and employment programmes	Active labour programmes/ productive inclusion (i.e. employment/wage subsidies or public work programmes)	136 (19.6)
	Passive labour market policies (i.e. unemployment benefits/insurance)	2 (0.003)
Social assistance	Social care services	37 (0.05)
	Social transfers	394 (56.7)
	Subsidies	118 (17.0)
Social insurance	Maternity/paternity/parental benefits	2 (0.003)
	Old-age pension	3 (0.004)
	Public health insurance	3 (0.004)
Total programmes listed		695 (100)

Note: excluding Europe and North America.

Source: author's construction based on Socialprotection.org (2022).

Table A2: Policy types applied in crisis relief

		Policy type	First-level subcategories	N(%)
Expanded social protection	General social protection	Labour market programmes	Active labour market[i]	264 (5.8)
			Passive labour market[ii]	239 (5.3)
		Social assistance	Social transfers[iii]	1,135 (25.0)
			Subsidies[iv]	1,162 (25.6)
		Social insurance	Maternity/paternity/parental	12 (0.26)
			Old-age pension	69 (1.5)
			Public health insurance	192 (4.2)
		Business programmes	SME/non-SME support	1,467 (32.3)
		Total		4,540 (100)

Note: (i) as well as standard programmes, also including rental subsidies to SMEs/non-SMEs, subsidies for social services, tax exemption/reduction/deferment for SMEs/non-SMEs, waiver of customs duties for SMEs/non-SMEs, waiver/reduction of government fees for SMEs/non-SMEs, and loans and interest deferment for SMEs/non-SMEs; (ii) as well as unemployment insurance, also including paid leave or working from home and sick leave; (iii) also including measures that enhance food security; (iv) as well as standard programmes, also including measures such as subsidies for social services, tax exemption/reduction/deferment for individuals, waiver/reduction of customs duties for individuals, waiver/reduction of government fees, waiver/reduction of utilities bills (e.g. water and gas, electricity, communications bills), interest rate waiver, reduction for individuals, interest/principal deferment for individuals, soft loans, and credit support

Source: author's construction based on UNESCWA (2022).

Table A3: Policy measures listed under 'other' as part of countries' crisis response

Broader policy measures (captured as ‘other’)	N	%
COVID-19 awareness campaigns	67	1.8
Creating/expansion of a fund	223	5.6
Government spending (fiscal expansion)	170	4.5
Healthcare system	309	8.1
ICT and digital solutions (e.g. internet capacity, digital platforms, remote working, online schooling, free software, and e-services)	225	5.9
Interest rate reduction	168	4.4
Labour regulation adjustments	139	3.6
Multiple measures	354	9.3
Other subsidies for social services	95	2.5
Other support (not further defined)	1,008	26.4
Price controls for essential food and medicine	55	1.4
Research and development expenditure	56	1.5
Stocks of basic goods and medicine	108	2.8
Targeted health-related support	615	16.1
Working hours adjustments	33	.90
Total	3,815	100

Source: author’s construction based on UNESCWA (2022).

Table A4: Distinction into universal and targeted policies by target beneficiary

Target beneficiary	Universal	Targeted	Total
All (people, business, and economy)*	X		549
Categorically targeted households		X	107
Children and adolescents	X		42
Coronavirus patients		X	10
Elderly	X		96
Employees		X	555
Families/households (not specified)	X		111
Female-headed households		X	15
Homeless people		X	8
Indigenous people		X	10
Individuals (not specified)	X		248
Individuals and families	X		102
Non-SMEs		X	299
Non-citizens including migrants, refugees, and stateless people		X	29
People in prison		X	2
People with disabilities		X	33
Poor households (PMT targeted)		X	89
SMEs		X	413
SMEs/non-SMEs		X	722
Self-employed workers and professionals		X	203
Specific vulnerable population		X	117
Students		X	42
Unemployed		X	177
Victim of gender-based violence against women		X	10
Women		X	26
Women employees		X	17
Women entrepreneurs		X	16
Youth	X		20
Total	1,168	2,900	4,068

Note: PMT = proxy means tested; * this is a non-aggregated category included in the dataset and thus not one constructed by the author: it is thus not possible to separate this category into e.g. people only and business only as separate categories.

Source: author's construction based on UNESCWA (2022).

Table A5: Beneficiary subgroups, further classification

Beneficiary subgroup (aggregated)	N (%)
Employees and self-employed	1,019 (14.6)
Specific vulnerable population	499 (7.2)
Unemployed	226 (3.2)
Women	453 (6.5)
Children	129 (1.9)
Older people	142 (2.0)
Other individuals and families	1,068 (15.3)
Non-SMEs	387 (5.5)
People and business (non-disaggregated)	1,596 (22.9)
SMEs	513 (7.4)
SMEs/non-SMEs (non-disaggregated)	949 (13.5)
All policies (including other)	6,981 (100)
Expanded social protection	4,076 (100)

Source: author's construction based on UNESCWA (2022).

Table A6: Universal policies: country shares

Universalism in crisis response	Mean (sd)
Universal share within country	0.25% (0.16)
Universal share within country, high income only	0.16% (0.12)
Universal share within country, non-high income only	0.33% (0.17)
Total social protection response	36.4 (22.8)
Total social protection response, high income only	44.5 (22.9)
Total social protection response, non-high income only	29.8 (20.5)

Source: author's construction based on UNESCWA (2022).

Table A7: Estimated effects of existing social protection and the extent of universalism in policies

	M1: all countries	M2: excl. high-income countries	M3: all countries	M4: all countries	M6: excl. high-income countries	M7: high income countries only	M8: incl. controls	M9: incl. controls, excl. high-income countries
	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 * \beta 2 SPFI2$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 * \beta 2 SPFI2$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 log(SPFI)$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1(SPFI < 5)$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1(SPFI < 5)$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1(SPFI < 5)$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 log(SPFI) + \beta X$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 log(SPFI) + \beta X$
Observations	N=158	N=115	N=158	N=137	N=94	N=43	N=158	N=115
$\beta 1\ SPFI$	−0.48*** (0.065)	−0.44*** (0.086)						
$\beta 2\ SPFI$	0.84*** (0.046)	0.88*** (0.048)						
Constant	0.65*** (0.067)	0.67*** (0.090)	0.27*** (0.015)	0.17*** (.021)	0.24*** (0.032)	0.11*** (0.036)	0.32*** (0.075)	0.28*** (0.091)
$Log(SPFI)$			0.70*** (0.012)				0.07*** (0.013)	0.05*** (0.016)
SPFI				0.06*** (.011)	0.04*** (00.013)	0.09** (0.046)		
GDP							0.00 (0.000)	0.00 (0.000)
Population							0.00 (0.000)	0.00 (0.000)
Business							0.24*** (0.082)	0.33*** (0.097)
Total response							0.00 (0.000)	0.00* (0.000)
Govt. share							−0.15* (0.078)	−0.10 (0.096)

Note: robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Source: author's construction based on FES (2022) and UNESCAW (2022).

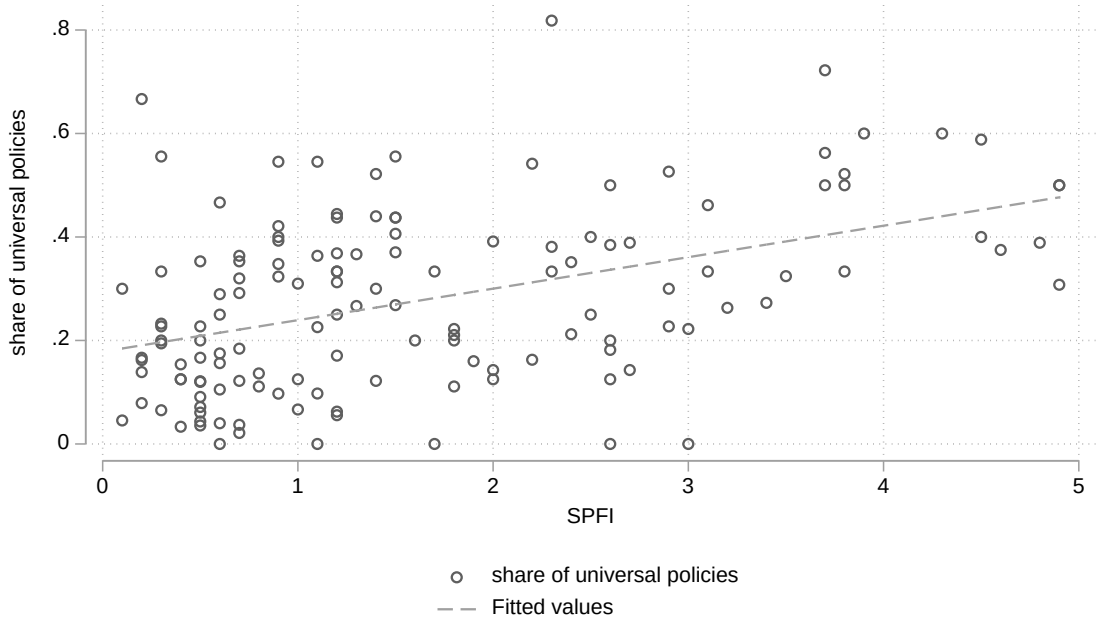
Table A7 continued

	M1: all countries, excluding business programmes	M2: excluding high-income countries, excluding business programmes
	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 log(SPFI) + \beta X$	$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 log(SPFI) + \beta X$
Observations	N=158	N=115
$Log(SPFI)$	0.04** (0.015)	0.03 (0.020)
GDP	0.00 (0.000)	0.00 (0.000)
Population	0.00 (0.000)	0.00 (0.000)
Total response	0.00 (0.000)	0.00 (0.000)
Govt. share	0.03 (0.086)	0.02 (0.105)
Constant	0.31*** (0.065)	0.31*** (0.078)

Note: robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

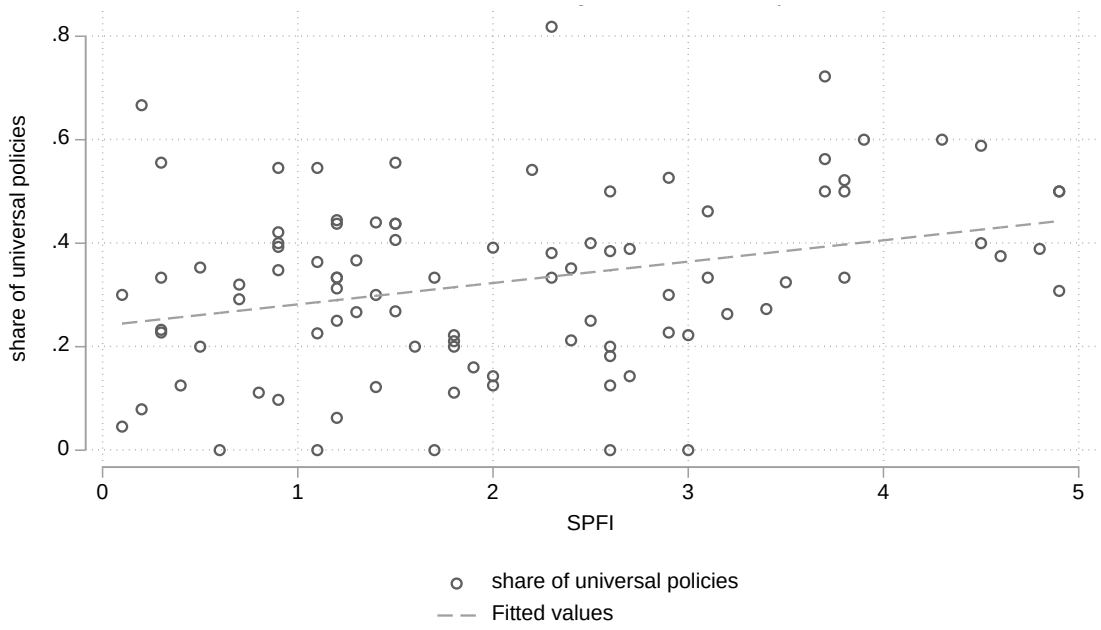
Source: author's construction based on FES (2022) and UNESCAW (2022).

Figure A1: Estimated association between share of universal policies in crisis response and SPFI for countries with SPFI < 5 per cent



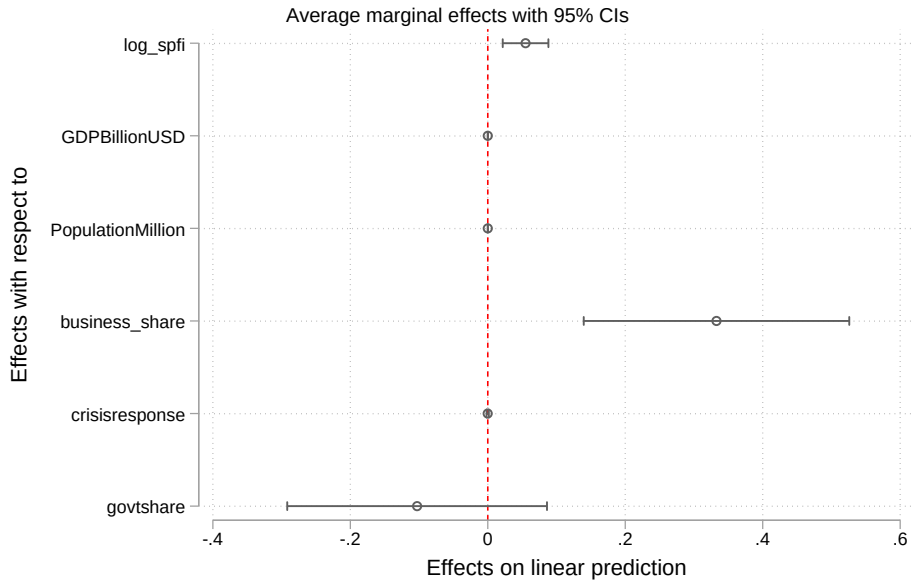
Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2020).

Figure A2: Estimated association between share of universal policies in crisis response and SPFI for countries with SPFI < 5 per cent, excluding high-income countries



Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2020).

Figure A3: Marginal effects excluding high-income countries, universalism defined using extended social protection



Source: author's illustration based on Bierbaum et al. (2020) and UNESCWA (2022).