



# Social policy responses to COVID-19: New issues, old solutions?

Global Social Policy

2021, Vol. 21(3) 381–395

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/14680181211055645

[journals.sagepub.com/home/gsp](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/gsp)**Sarah Cook**

University of Witwatersrand, South Africa

**Marianne S. Ulriksen**

University of Southern Denmark

## Introduction

Analysing a pandemic quintessentially requires a *global* lens. With COVID-19, a global public health crisis has been coupled with devastating economic and social impacts – what some are calling a ‘syndemic’ (GSP Digest, 2021; Schmidt-Sane et al., 2021), none of which can be addressed solely within national borders. International organisations (IOs) and other institutions of global governance inevitably play a critical role – in defining and measuring the problem, sharing information and technical capacities, making policy recommendations, guiding and advising national governments, and where necessary holding governments and other actors to account. National governments across the world have reacted in varying ways to the pandemic, considering both recommendations and lessons learned from previous crises and across different contexts, as well as by assessing their own conditions. Local and national responses and actions in turn shape regional and global knowledge and policy, including through various channels of engagement with international organisations.

The contributions in this special issue highlight some of these dynamics between the national, regional and global levels. The articles provide new empirical analyses, drawn from particular national (sometimes regional) contexts, and address or compare national level policies and responses and their impacts on particular groups; several explicitly examine whether and how regional, international or transnational actors and policies shape responses to the pandemic at different scales.

The discussion in this *Introduction* is structured along the following two main axes: first, we examine new or previously neglected issues that have been made visible or attracted significant policy or public attention during the pandemic, particularly as they

---

**Corresponding author:**

Sarah Cook, UNSW, Sydney and Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Email: [s.cook@unsw.edu.au](mailto:s.cook@unsw.edu.au)

affect individuals or groups. Collectively, the articles point out both those made newly 'vulnerable' by the pandemic, as well as the exacerbation of old vulnerabilities. Second, we discuss the structural and institutional features of national welfare systems and global social policy arrangements and ask whether or to what extent policies and systems are shifting in response to the new and exacerbated issues and forms of vulnerability arising through the pandemic.

Based on the articles we conclude that, despite countries facing a shared global 'macro' shock which has revealed glaring gaps in social protection or welfare systems, countries have largely pursued national solutions within their existing systems. While IOs may be expected to take a lead in the development of global policy solutions, to date they have not played a key role in guiding or resolving the gaps in social protection emerging through the pandemic. Nonetheless, IOs are well placed to gather the wealth of experience that follows in the wake of the pandemic, and perhaps in the long term, our shared crisis will provide evidence and knowledge that can support needed global social policy solutions.

### **Who is affected? Old and new vulnerabilities in the context of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic and related socio-economic crises have drawn attention to a number of issues that are either new or were previously marginalised in national and global policy debates. From across the articles in this volume, we can identify, in particular, two sets of issues – with varying implications for affected groups. First, issues of *care and care work* (whether paid or unpaid), and relatedly, the role of 'essential' or 'key' care workers, have been elevated in public discourse at national and global levels. These concerns span the care of the elderly and children as well as the sick or those directly affected by COVID-19, whether in institutions or at home, through paid or unpaid labour; they shed light on how the largely feminised *work of care* – including the frequently unpaid (and often unrecognised) daily work of social reproduction and survival – has been systematically undervalued.<sup>1</sup>

Second, several articles draw attention to the gaps in welfare systems in relation to *non-standard, informal, or precarious forms of employment*.<sup>2</sup> Workers in such employment generally fall outside policy and regulatory frameworks or programmes that have been rapidly scaled up in response to COVID-19, providing formal or standard workers with additional social, economic and job protections. Beyond the specific case of the care sector noted earlier, workers in such forms of employment face greater risks with few protections; particularly in low-income contexts with high levels of informality, family survival depends on daily work outside the home, domestic living arrangements rarely allow for social distancing and social protection is weak, absent or fragmented. The risks and absence of protection are further intensified for millions of *migrant workers*, both domestically but particularly for those crossing national borders.

In highlighting these issues, the articles discussed below draw attention to the vulnerability and risk exposure of particular groups in different contexts, in some cases pointing to the intensification of pre-existing vulnerabilities, and in others the creation of new ones due to COVID-19 or through policy responses (such as restrictions on mobility and

lockdowns). At the level of the individual, pandemic-related impacts reflect intersecting forms of disadvantage related for example to gender, class, race or nationality, or migrant status, as well as being associated with fragmented welfare systems and longer term policy neglect of particular issues or groups.

### *Care-work, workers and those cared for: an undervalued sector*

The issue of ‘care’ and the role of ‘essential’ or key workers are central to several articles in this volume. Care jobs are often feminised or undertaken by marginalised workers (including migrants); these jobs are widely shown to be undervalued in monetary terms and to lack societal recognition; such work may be invisible – hidden within households and institutions, with workers lacking adequate protections. This lack of recognition, coupled with the pandemic, exacerbates the (pre-existing) intersecting vulnerabilities of many care workers as women or migrants, or along class, race or other lines. As Leiblfinger et al. (p. 491) note, such ‘undervalued workers became critical to the management of the pandemic’ and labelled ‘essential’ without their interests or work being adequately recognised or remunerated. More generally, Leiblfinger et al., Kovacs, and Doetter et al., point to ways in which the pandemic has, in different contexts, revealed or exacerbated the fragility of national systems of care – for the sick, elderly, and children – whether state-organised, familial or privatised, or simply absent, with implications both for those giving and receiving care.

The issues of care and care-work play out differently according to context. Leiblfinger et al. focus on the impact of the pandemic on *transnational* care arrangements with an in-depth analysis of the situation of *live-in carers* who regularly cross borders to work – specifically examining the case of Romanian and Slovakian carers working in Austria. Such transnational care-work, they suggest, is a widespread phenomenon, shaped by structural and gendered inequalities, but that remains largely invisible. They conclude that ‘the pandemic exacerbated the already precarious working conditions of live-in carers, impacting on their already limited free time, and the increase in tasks or workload beyond the care workers’ competencies’ (p. 499). As ‘self-employed’, these workers lacked access to the same level of social benefits (including health care, social protection, and sick leave) enjoyed by workers in standard employment. Furthermore, their dependence on agencies as intermediaries reduced their access to information or ability to negotiate for better working arrangements. Responses by the authorities to their situation, through travel arrangements and financial incentives, are used by the authors to demonstrate that ‘while live-in carers were deemed critical workers and essential for the long-term care system, the inequalities and dependencies already existing in transnational care arrangements were deepened’ (p. 490) with ‘care workers’ wants, needs, and interests being subordinated to the interests of care recipients, agencies, and sending and receiving countries’ (p. 492).

Care of the elderly, and particularly those in long-term institutional care – a group that bore a disproportionate mortality burden particularly in the early stages of the pandemic – has been the subject of significant public attention. Doetter et al. focus on the elderly in residential care facilities in six European countries, seeking to explain variation in outcomes through a comparative analysis of these countries and their diverse welfare

systems. The authors show that, while rates of institutional care of the elderly vary substantially for the countries studied, mortality or morbidity is largely explained by the prevalence of COVID-19 in the general population and the share of elderly in care homes. Some remaining variation is explained by conditions within care homes (such as crowding or single vs shared rooms) as well as by the nature of staffing – whether casual or professional. In addition, policy choices, the timeliness of implementation of new measures, and wider adherence to policy guidance, in this case coming from the EU, are also explanatory factors.

As with care of the elderly, responsibility for child-care (now also including home-schooling) has created unprecedented challenges for families in countries affected by ‘lock-down’ and working from home orders. Kovacs, writing on *early childhood education and care* (ECEC) in Romania, shows how the pandemic unevenly impacts families with children – in ways that intersect with class and employment status. A country with pro-natalist policies, where formerly state socialist provisions have been heavily privatised and ‘familialised’, Romania’s pandemic responses further shifted care responsibilities to families without consultation, support or recognition. The already limited provision for children below 3 years further deteriorated while public pre-school (up to age 6) provisions were largely suspended. A declared ‘State of Emergency’ reduced rights of civil protest, while divergent interests among parents meant that Associations of teachers and families (particularly those hardest hit) were unable to formulate challenges to the policies. Teachers continued to be compensated throughout school closures while policies to support parents (particularly mothers) were ‘highly selective’, largely catering to the needs of already better-off families who were better placed to voice their interests. Rural families, which tend to be larger, were particularly hard hit, while assumptions about multi-generation households with grandparents playing a key role in child-care were largely shown to be misplaced, particularly as families tried to shield higher-risk older family members. Overall, policies exacerbated pre-existing inequalities within an already bifurcated system, where women with standard employment benefit from generous maternity provision and have resources to access (largely urban) private provision, while those without formal employment, on low wages and with inadequate benefits, depend on public provision.

Like Leiblfinger, Kovacs highlights the broader issues of the undervaluation of care, the marginalised interests of providers – whether paid or unpaid, gaps in provision and the impact that familialisation or privatisation has on those already disadvantaged. Similar experiences of families having to fill systemic gaps in provision whether for children, the elderly or the sick have been widely documented across many countries during COVID-19 lockdowns. Globally, a growing awareness of these concerns has generated numerous calls for a ‘care-led’ recovery and the formulation of care-focused recovery plans (e.g. De Henau and Himmelweit, 2021; UN Women, 2020).

### *Neglected workers: how welfare systems treat non-standard, informal or precarious jobs*

Beyond the realm of care-work, the pandemic has drawn attention to wider insecurities facing certain categories of workers and the vulnerabilities associated with work under

pandemic conditions. Moreover, work differentially shapes access to social protection and benefits under different welfare systems with the most obvious differences existing *between* comprehensive welfare states and lower income countries with fragmented systems. In the latter contexts, social assistance coverage is most patchy, benefits are limited and the majority (over 90% in sub-Saharan Africa) may lack any access to any formal social protection (Devereux; Gronbach & Seekings). But variation is visible also *within* these groups of countries, as shown in the articles focused on countries in Africa (Devereux; Gronbach and Seekings) and Europe (Seeman et al.). Across Africa, and more generally in lower income countries, a key feature is the dominance of informal employment, and the exclusion of this sector – and thus, in particular, the urban working poor – from social protection. In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, despite more comprehensive and generous provisions, the difference in coverage between ‘standard’ workers and the growing numbers labelled variously non-standard, casual, precarious and so on emerges sharply, challenging policy-makers’ assumptions about labour markets (Seeman et al.).

Contributions by Gronbach and Seekings, and Devereux, document pre-existing social protection coverage and pandemic responses across a number of African countries. Social protection programmes have dramatically expanded coverage over recent decades, often in response to previous shocks and supported by international donors. These have primarily targeted groups based on ‘vulnerability’ (children, the elderly, those with HIV-Aids, or food insecure/disaster prone rural households). By contrast, the articles demonstrate that the urban poor, retrenched and informal sector workers have emerged as new key populations of concern during COVID-19: these groups need to work, often in public spaces; lack conditions for isolation; and have limited if any access to social assistance. This working age ‘missing middle’ (Leisering; Alfers and Moussié, 2020) lacks formal employment-based social security while earning too much to be eligible for poverty-based social assistance. Evidence from the pandemic reveals, however, that pre-existing programmes targeted to identified ‘vulnerable’ groups – while readily expanded to be more generous to existing beneficiaries – could not easily or rapidly be scaled to incorporate groups not already covered. As Devereux writes, governments across Africa responded quickly with a range of ‘shock-responsive’ measures designed to expand on existing programmes: these measures ‘had the advantages of being quick and administratively simple, but the disadvantage of bypassing people who were made most vulnerable by COVID-19, notably retrenched and informal workers with no access to social insurance’ (p. 421).

The two articles identify a wide range of such ‘shock responsive’ measures taken by government and donors in response to COVID-19, including cash grants, food transfers, solidarity funds, fee or tax relief, albeit with significant variations and limits in implementation and practice among countries. In general, vertical expansion of social protection programmes (increasing transfers to existing beneficiaries) has been combined with some new emergency programmes, generally introduced on a temporary or ad hoc basis. Such programmes have, however, faced obstacles to their implementation in the midst of crisis, including government fiscal constraints, and in some cases revealed differing priorities between governments and donors. Gronbach and Seekings find in a number of countries that donor programmes tended to be more generous but narrowly targeted,

while government responses were broader, less generous, but faced difficulties of achieving scale within a short time-frame.

In terms of reaching newly vulnerable urban or informal workers, the results have been mixed. Gronbach and Seekings show that in South Africa new programmes (mainly wage subsidies and social grants) benefitted urban *workers* (rather than the poor more generally), while in Botswana, they reached urban businesses and formal workers rather than the urban working age poor. In Ethiopia, according to Devereux, ‘COVID-19 accelerated a trend toward . . . the incorporation of previously excluded urban areas into the nascent national social protection system’ (p. 443). By contrast, in Zambia, the government resisted the focus of IOs on the urban poor; according to Gronbach and Seekings, any ‘urbanisation’ of social protection was funded by donors while government retained its focus on the rural population.

To the extent that there has been some shift in the *intent* to expand social assistance to new population groups, particularly the urban poor and informal workers, the question also raised by the articles is whether this is a temporary crisis response – as Gronbach and Seekings suggest for South Africa – or whether this heralds a more permanent policy shift. Devereux points to the latter, arguing that some states have recognised a responsibility to those affected by, or unable to benefit from, public policies, absent the usual debates about ‘deservingness’, and that in South Africa at least, this has stimulated ‘a high-level policy debate about introducing either a universal Basic Income Grant or at least Basic Income Support for unemployed 18-59-year-olds’ (p. 443).

While the labour market contexts and welfare systems of African and OECD countries are dramatically different, both have faced challenges of extending support to workers not covered by existing social welfare provisions. In the European cases discussed by Seeman et al., the *norm* of formal or standard employment, providing adequate benefits or social insurance coverage for workers, increasingly fails to reflect the reality of contemporary labour markets. They examine the plight of an increasingly precarious workforce through a comparison of pandemic responses affecting workers in standard and non-standard employment and low-income benefit recipients across five European states. The authors draw on the results of their analysis to argue that COVID-19 has exposed labour market weaknesses, particularly in respect of ‘non-standard employment’ – a term encompassing workers who fall outside stable systems of social security, with ‘a-typical’ contractual relationships, in casual, unstable or ‘precarious’ work and who are situated ‘on the margins of traditional social security regimes’ – another version of the ‘missing middle’ mentioned earlier. While the article acknowledges the difficulty of comparison due to variation in definitions and categories, nonetheless it illuminates diverse forms of employment, and divergence in how governments have recognised and addressed such workers and their needs for inclusion or protection, both prior to and during the crisis.

Across Europe, the pandemic has precipitated the rapid introduction of measures to protect jobs or workers, for example, through job retention, furlough, or short time work schemes. In the countries examined, these measures largely built on existing programmes (Italy being an exception with the introduction of new initiatives), while in some cases eligibility criteria of existing programmes were relaxed to include some ‘non-standard’ workers. Support through measures such as subsidies and social compensation saw an

unprecedented expansion, but these were generally temporary, suffered from gaps and omissions or implementation problems, and there was little adaptation between waves (Seeman et al. pp. 550–568). The authors demonstrate that most ‘non-standard workers’ fell ‘between the cracks of eligibility criteria, and of those individuals who were eligible, many suffered hardships from delayed roll outs and public miscommunications’ (e.g. over the use of payments), as well as limited adequacy of benefits relative to previous incomes (p. 564). New schemes designed to include non-standard workers – especially those in precarious employment who were often particularly hard hit – generally provided more limited benefits than for standard workers. Such differentiation of ‘social compensation’, the authors argue, is problematic given that such protection is a core duty of the welfare state (p. 565). More generally, Seeman and colleagues conclude, welfare states lacked experience in expanding coverage to many ‘non-standard’ workers, revealing prior neglect and ‘blindspots’ in their understanding of labour markets. With some parallels to the focus on the urban working poor noted in African contexts, Europe’s policy makers have been confronted with the reality that labour markets have undergone profound changes over the past decade, particularly with increases in various forms of non-standard and precarious work, and they now face the question of whether and how to include these groups more fully into the welfare contract.

### *Migrants: work, power, and intersecting exclusions*

Generally excluded from pandemic responses and benefits provided to workers in their national contexts, transnational migrant workers have found themselves particularly disadvantaged – by the pandemic, restrictions on their mobility and limited mechanisms for the protection of their rights. The intersectional disadvantages made visible by Leiblfinger et al. in their examination of transnational care workers have been vividly illustrated in media reports from around the world on the plight of migrants trying to return home, losing their jobs and income, or remaining without support in precarious conditions. The pandemic has indeed massively increased the number of workers being repatriated and quarantined but, Foley and Piper suggest, it has in some instances also been used by employers to reduce wages or to dismiss migrant workers without paying wages or providing benefits to which they are entitled. The risks facing such workers, and their lack of any social protection, rights, or agency during the crisis, are powerfully illustrated by Foley and Piper in their examination of the situation of south Asian migrants in the Middle-East or Gulf region – a group that is often heavily indebted as a result of their migration journey. They present evidence that the pandemic has exacerbated the already precarious situation of such temporary contract migrant workers, in particular through the widespread non-payment or underpayment of wages for work that has already been carried out in the case of retrenchment or repatriation.

As Foley and Piper note, wage differentials are a key driver of migration, and for those migrating for work, wages form the cornerstone of their experience. Focusing on non-payment of wages, an issue they argue that has been largely neglected in migration debates, they analyse it from the perspective of ‘access to justice’. In the context of highly restrictive migration regimes, migrants incur high debts to migrate, and are channelled into low skill, low-wage work, often with precarious conditions where rights violations are widespread. Citing Farbenblum et al. (2013), they argue, ‘The

theft of migrant workers' wages is therefore a particularly grave violation [of rights] and it is amplified by the global system of labour exchange which prevents cross-border justice' (p. 471). For migrants to the Gulf, the combination of immigration and employment law, lack of infrastructure for grievance, language barriers, low levels of education or skills, and lack of information about their rights, all contribute to their lack of voice, representation, or means of redress. They are then dependent on other actors (mainly CSOs) for any recourse or representation. The pandemic forced many migrants to return home, removing them from the only location where they could seek justice.

As in the European context analysed by Leiblfinger et al., power imbalances and structural inequalities shape the experience of transnational migrant workers, and in their case underpin the system of mobility for care-work. In both cases, the pandemic has illuminated the inequalities, dependencies and forms of exploitation that characterise many forms of transnational labour mobility.

More generally, the range of evidence provided in the articles discussed earlier shows how structural imbalances of power, wealth and resources, and the intersecting nature of inequalities at the individual level, shape the vulnerabilities of different groups to the pandemic. Gaps in welfare systems and social provisioning have often placed burdens on already marginalised workers and families who have consequently been more exposed to pandemic effects – whether through their work, care responsibilities or lack of protection. Greater recognition of both the gaps and weaknesses in the systems, and of the role of social policy in providing protection, may have emerged in some contexts through the pandemic. But in many instances, measures appear to be insufficient to address the needs or disadvantages of these groups. The inability of governments to address gaps in national welfare policies may in part be due to the tendency to address the crisis within existing systems rather than to think anew, or to the limited capacity or resources of states to make major directional shifts during a crisis. This is another main line of findings that come through the articles and which we discuss further in the next section.

## **How are welfare systems responding to pandemic: national and international strategies**

Providing social security in times of need for those working in informal jobs, as migrant workers, in the care industry, and so on, are common challenges across welfare systems. As discussed earlier, the articles in this special issue reveal that the challenges for such groups have been greatly exacerbated during the pandemic, and that many welfare systems continue to insufficiently address their needs. The pandemic has also exposed new lines of vulnerabilities, such as among the urban working age poor, whose needs the welfare systems address only sketchily. Why have existing welfare systems not been better adapted to meet these challenges? And what role have IOs played in guiding or supporting national governments?

We know that major crises have served as the impetus needed to change existing welfare systems. The great depression in the 1930s, the Second World War, and the economic crisis in 2007–2008 are examples of crises that have revealed major gaps in welfare systems and have led to policy changes and reforms addressing new or

discovered needs (Farnsworth and Irving, 2011; Obinger et al., 2018; Starke et al., 2013). One may therefore expect that the pandemic – a novel crisis or ‘syndemic’ coupling a health crisis with a social and economic crisis – would be another such incident that prompts IOs and governments to pursue policy reforms to better address the new and dramatic challenges. Many of the articles in different ways address how IOs and governments react to the pandemic, essentially circling around the question of whether the crisis has led to changes in welfare systems, enabling them to better respond to the exacerbated or new vulnerabilities that the pandemic has revealed. The discussions around and answers to this question operate at the following two levels: (1) How and to which extent IOs provide guidance and offer solutions that governments can follow and (2) how and whether national governments reform their existing welfare systems to address the gaps that the pandemic has revealed or exacerbated.

### *Have IOs provided guidance and offered solutions?*

Leisering argues in his article that IOs are bearers of world culture. Because IOs can pose as ‘objective disinterested others’ (citing Meyer, 2009) that are not bound by vested interests, they can identify global social problems and formulate solutions, guiding states in how best to effectuate policy changes to tackle crisis situations.<sup>3</sup> Given the global and complex nature of the crises associated with COVID-19, IOs as well as regional organisations play a vital role in gathering lessons and expertise to assist and guide countries in coping with a common foe.

Indeed, Doetter et al. show how the European Union (EU) was quick to formulate guidelines that EU-member states could use to protect the elderly in institutionalised care from the pandemic outbreak. In addition, as knowledge about the virus grew the comprehensiveness and stringency of the recommendations evolved to become an important tool for countries in finding solutions about how best to respond to the fast transmission of the infectious disease. Countries adhered to the guidelines to varying degrees and Doetter and colleagues show that adherence to EU policy explains some of the variation across member states in mortality rates among elderly. However, following EU guidelines was not the principle explanation for variation in mortality rates across the countries; rather, the main explanation was the ability to reduce the infection rates in the general population, which was largely driven by domestic factors.

IOs and regional organisations are also pivotal in supporting migrant workers who transcend national borders in maintaining their livelihood. In fact, given the transnational nature of migrant work, it is hard to see how their interests can be appropriately addressed purely in national settings. While the pandemic has exacerbated the precariousness of migrant work as discussed in the previous section, the pandemic also highlights the challenges – and urgency – of finding globally based regulations that countries obey. This is well illustrated in the paper by Foley and Piper, where they explore the difficulties of agreeing on a common global framework regulating international labour migration with a specific focus on wage theft (the non- or underpayment of wages due to sudden repatriation). Foley and Piper argue that there are several key factors in place that could address the issue of wage theft. For instance, there are established international human rights instruments such as the ILO’s Protection of Wages Convention no. 95, which state

that wage theft constitutes a labour rights violation; another example is the ICMW Convention, which states that in situations where migrants are forced to return prematurely, they have a right to claim their unpaid wages. There is also a wealth of empirical evidence showing both the highly precarious situation of temporary contract migrants in general, and how the issue of wage theft has been exacerbated by pandemic repatriation programmes. Furthermore, there is a strong and expanding global CSO advocacy network, which lobby for the migrants' labour rights at various platforms, with the ILO's tripartite system being a key forum. Despite these factors, the issue of wage theft has failed to gain traction and there are no redress mechanisms in the global system for individual or groups of workers to remedy labour violations. In fact, there are key policy gaps, inadequate institutional mechanisms, lack of cross-border coordination in relation to repatriation, and – critically – it remains unresolved who is to be held responsible for non-payment. Foley and Piper end their paper on a positive note arguing that global advocacy can push for change, but for now wage theft of migrant workers remains a global issue that IOs have been unable to adequately resolve.

Leibfingler and colleagues are also interested in transnational workers, specifically migrant live-in care workers from Romania and Slovakia employed in Austria. They argue that although the live-in care system is a transnational arrangement, the national interests of the country wherein the live-in careers work prevail whereas the interests of care workers remain secondary. For instance, the interests of care recipients were more important than the interests of the live-in careers, illustrated by the care workers being required to test or undergo quarantine, while this was not a requirement for the care recipients and their families. Due to travel restrictions, care workers were either required to extend their rotas or stay in their home countries; both situations being stressful and causing physical and mental strain; yet, care workers struggled to get support from the Austrian government and even the agencies hiring the carers pushed their clients to accept difficult situations by appealing to an imperative of mutual solidarity and their moral obligations. Thus, Leibfingler et al. argue that national interests take priority over finding global or transnational solutions thereby exacerbating existing inequalities:

while workers with their limited bargaining power were left at the mercy of more powerful actors even before the pandemic, the national focus of pandemic-related responses drew renewed attention to the power imbalances as well as to the deeper structural inequalities, dependencies, and forms of exploitation within Europe that underlie care mobility. (p. 501)

Social protection for migrant workers may be particularly challenging given the transnational nature of migrant work and the consequent requirement of global or cross-national agreements. From this perspective, IOs may have a more straightforward role in identifying gaps in existing welfare policy systems and providing solutions to residents living and working in their home countries. Leisering discusses how IOs have dominated the expansion of social protection in the Global South, where they have also provided a lion's share of the funding for new social protection programmes (particularly in low-income countries). IOs also dominated in identifying key social problems as the COVID-19 crisis hit; they agreed that the pandemic exposed and intensified poverty and inequality among already identified vulnerable groups, but also that the crisis revealed insecurity

and deprivation among ‘new’ groups such as the urban working age poor and workers in non-standard employment. Yet, the IOs have not generally changed their approach in confronting these more demanding or new forms of poverty and inequality; instead, it was more of the same. For instance, Leisering argues, the ILO has insisted on its workerist strategy of social insurance, although social insurance in its current forms ‘only extends to a minority of formal workers and significant extensions seem elusive’ (p. 411). Other IOs follow their own settled strategies, whereby it becomes evident that IOs proposed solutions are in line with their own mandates and *raison d’être* (i.e. the World Bank focusing on poverty, UNICEF on children, etc.). Leisering thus concludes that there is a ‘conspicuous discrepancy’ between the identification of novel challenges and the policy proposals that may appropriately address these.

Gronbach and Seekings too highlight how IOs were quick to respond to the pandemic by claiming the global reform agenda and urging the need of social protection expansion. However, the urgent warnings were not supported by agreement among the IOs of what needed to be done and how it should be financed. Thus, the IO’s call for urgent action have not been supported by actual action. Moreover, although IOs have dominated the global agenda on social protection, they were largely unable to persuade governments to follow their suggested reform initiatives. Even poorer African countries relying on external funding for social protection programmes have resisted IO’s lobbying efforts, such as in the case of Zambia. As Gronbach and Seekings argue, ‘[w]hen significant reforms have been initiated, these have generally been in response to domestic political dynamics’ (p. 451).

To sum up, we learn from the analyses of the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic that, even though IOs have played important roles in forming the global agenda, their ability to provide appropriate solutions that countries will follow has been more limited. Perhaps this is due to the urgent and dramatic character of the crisis in which countries have been desperate to deal with their own issues and have felt somewhat isolated as travels and interactions across the world closed. Certainly, Pereirinha and Pereira in their contribution reason that they focus on nation-state responses to the pandemic, ‘since it was the required immediate instance of reaction’ (p. 574). It is to national governments we now turn to discuss whether the pandemic has caused governments to reform their existing welfare systems to tackle gaps in social protection.

### *Has the pandemic pushed governments to pursue welfare policy reform?*

The pandemic as well as the consequent economic lockdown faced countries with the triple challenge of economic downturn, strain on the health sector, and the urgency of social protection for large parts of the population. In this special issue, we focus on the latter and several articles explore how national governments expanded and adapted their welfare systems to the pandemic. As Leisering notes, the social protection responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were massive with all countries (barring Yemen and Central African Republic) introducing or expanding some, in many cases several, social protection measures. However, the question posed by the articles, covering as different parts of the world as Europe and Africa, is whether the national responses constitute departures from the pre-COVID-19 welfare systems that would better address both the already existing gaps as well as meet the needs of groups made vulnerable due to the crisis.

Pereirinha and Pereira develop a synthetic index of social resilience to analyse how European countries responded to social protection challenges and their ability to cope and adjust to the crisis. Pereirinha and Pereira show that although all countries faced the same exogenous crisis, their preparedness and ability to deal with the crisis varied in many respects, which can be attributed to the specific characteristics of the countries' welfare systems. For instance, the authors contend that there is a noticeable contrast between the Bismarkian or universalistic welfare systems of northern Europe that were better prepared with existing unemployment protection policies and better income schemes, compared to the southern European countries whose existing welfare systems had less capacity to cope with the pandemic and also had higher risks of exposure to it.

From Pereirinha and Pereira, we learn that more encompassing welfare systems are better suited and have sounder mechanisms in place to deal with a crisis like COVID-19. In contrast, countries with more fragmented and less developed welfare systems place higher burdens on their populations. This latter point is well illustrated by Kovacs who explores the shift in responsibility for early childhood education and care in Romania during the pandemic's first period. As Romania locked down, the public provision of early childhood care shifted to private households without a corresponding shift in recognition and resources. The example of early childhood care in Romania may appear as a shift with partial, selective, and at times, inadequate public provisions to early childhood care being individualised and moved to the private domain. However, Kovacs argues that the Romanian government is following decades-old principles of family policy characterised by the familialisation of young children's care, and that the crisis response consequently merely reinforces the selectiveness, fragmentation and inadequacy of benefits and service provision. We have earlier posed the question of whether a major crisis is an impetus for change. Not so, says Kovacs, about Romania wherein the 'familialist family policy is particularly sticky, more so in times of crisis than in "good" times' (p. 508).

Like Pereirinha and Pereira, and Kovacs, Seeman and colleagues argue that social protection measures introduced in response to the pandemic have not changed the pre-existing welfare state structures. Seeman et al. compare Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom to explore the crisis measures taken for individuals in 'standard employment' and in 'non-standard employment' and thereby to understand whether the crisis responses have changed the existing configurations of state responsibility towards citizens. The authors note how those in non-standard employment already pre-corona were on the margins of the traditional social security regimes, and they pose the question whether the pandemic has led to a convergence of social protection instruments between those in standard and those in non-standard employment. Although the number and extent of schemes and measures introduced for those in non-standard employment were unprecedented during the crisis, the authors demonstrate that these measures have tended to be ad hoc and of limited duration only, whereas there has been a tendency to prioritise 'standard workers' and not to bring about any structural changes to the welfare systems. They conclude that '[w]hat makes the measures of the current crisis stand out . . . is mainly their scope, but not their normative and legal basis in the welfare state' (p. 565).

Focusing on an entirely different part of the world, Gronbach and Seekings similarly emphasise how southern African governments respond to the pandemic in ways that

follow the logics of the existing welfare systems and are in line with the political coalitions that shaped policy in the past. Hence, the authors argue that the pandemic is not a ‘game-changer’ but that the differences in country responses are instead path dependent. Thus, South Africa with the most extensive welfare systems and pro-reform coalitions have expanded the furthest in response to the pandemic. In Botswana, the government mainly provided food parcels at low costs without otherwise expanding its social protection programmes thereby maintaining its conservative inclinations of a modest welfare system. In Zambia, the government did very little except for funding some support programmes for its rural political support base, whereas the urban poor were left to rely on limited support from external donors.

Devereux also mentions the path dependent nature of COVID-19 responses. Providing a broad view of initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa and thereafter focusing specifically on Ethiopia, Botswana and South Africa, Devereux discusses how ‘shock-responsive’ social protection measures that build on existing platforms and instruments were the main strategy for addressing the crisis. ‘Shock-responsive’ measures can be vertical (increase benefits to existing recipients) and horizontal (registration of new beneficiaries on existing programmes). In Africa, the vertical expansion has been the more common (also argued by Gronbach and Seekings), and countries with comprehensive and well-functioning systems were better able to implement the ‘shock-responsive’ interventions. While it can be advantageous to build on existing systems, there was also a flurry of new humanitarian relief or temporary social assistance programmes across many African countries. However, not only are these programmes ad hoc in their very nature, Devereux argues that ‘the new programmes . . . where slow to get established and deliver benefits, prone to delays and susceptible to mismanagement, corruption and fraud’ (p. 438).

To sum up, despite covering very different regions and countries, the articles demonstrate how governments have largely either expanded coverage of or increased benefits within existing welfare programmes and/or introduced temporary measures that do not in themselves change the basic characteristics of the existing welfare systems. It has been easier for countries with already encompassing and well-functioning systems to address the challenges that the pandemic lay bare. In this sense, path dependency can in some contexts be a strength; as Devereux puts it, ‘the simplest and most effective interventions were vertical expansions – transferring more cash to beneficiaries already registered . . . using existing payment mechanisms’ (p. 442). However, path dependence is less comforting when existing systems are fragmented and less well established as coherent solutions are harder to create and the toll on citizens becomes widespread. Moreover, the inability to push through major reforms also reveals the limitations of even the encompassing systems as groups already at the margins of the welfare systems (i.e. non-standard workers) or groups whose vulnerability or exclusion has become apparent during the crisis (i.e. the urban poor) continue to experience social and economic hardships and insecurity.

## Conclusion

The articles in this special issue add to the body of emerging evidence on how the pandemic has exacerbated the situation for some already vulnerable population groups, while also creating new sources of vulnerability affecting different groups. The

vulnerability of the working age population has become particularly glaring during the crisis with for instance non-standard employees, migrant workers and the urban working poor not being covered by social protection in a ‘syndemic’ that has created job loss or inability to work. The International Labour Organization (ILO), for example, has made repeated calls that access to social protection must be increased, and that social protection should be granted irrespective of a specific labour market status (for example, ILO 2021). The crisis has exposed this call to be incontrovertible.

Despite both aggravated and new vulnerabilities, the articles demonstrate how governments have largely responded within the frameworks of their existing systems and institutions. That the more encompassing systems fare best should not come as a surprise, but even these systems have been challenged to tackle new vulnerabilities, and gaps and variations in systems and responses remain. The ‘syndemic’ therefore underscores the importance of adequate welfare systems existing prior to crisis, but also raises questions about the capacities of such systems to adapt or change directions when responding to crisis.

Hence, overall, we do not see major shifts in policy direction – a finding that is consistent with a number of other studies examining social policy responses to the pandemic (see, for example, Béland et al. 2021). At the same time, some innovative responses or efforts to reach different groups are apparent, and it may just be too early to identify more fundamental shifts. The question over the longer term will therefore be whether the pandemic will lead to significant reforms as welfare systems try to build resilience against future complex crises, incorporate groups that have been neglected in welfare systems or expand to cover newly vulnerable groups.

IOs can play a key role in supporting such potential reforms. However, although IOs called for global solidarity at the start of the pandemic, many countries have ‘gone in on themselves’ and governments have largely strengthened the national focus of their policies. Consequently, IOs have often appeared less able to push through guidelines or solutions at least in the short-term view of this special issue (with articles being written during the first year of the pandemic). The potential for IOs to provide strong leadership in the long-term is still conceivable. The crisis is global and with all the different measures countries have put in place, there is a wealth of experience that could be collected and shared and IOs are well placed to do this. IOs can shape the global agenda, engage on transnational issues, share information and formulate global responses and guidance. Responding to the pandemic will continue to require a global social policy perspective.

### **Acknowledgements**

The editors of this Special Issue would like to thank Professor Gerald Boychuk for his support and guidance throughout the process of putting together this selection of papers and all the anonymous reviewers who agreed to review papers within very tight timelines.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. An extensive body of work and activism exists on care and the care economy at national and global levels. In the context of COVID, these debates have been addressed specifically in a Special Issue of *Feminist Economics* (Kabeer et al., 2021). See also, UN Women (2020).
2. See Pellissery (2013) for a discussion of the limits of global social policy in relation to informal economies.
3. Of course, this notion of ‘objective disinterested other’ can be challenged; the question of the interests and mandates of organisations, their independence, and the potentially conflicting demands of Member States, has been discussed in relation to World Health Organization (WHO), for example, Agartan et al. (2020).

## References

- Agartan TI, Cook S and Lin V (2020) Introduction: COVID-19 and WHO – Global institutions in the context of shifting multilateral and regional dynamics. *Global Social Policy* 20(3): 367–373.
- Alfers L and Moussié R (2020) The ILO world social protection report 2017–19: An assessment. *Development and Change* 51(2): 683–697.
- Béland D, Cantillon B, Hick R, et al. (2021) Social policy in the face of a global pandemic: Policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis. *Social Policy & Administration* 55(2): 249–260.
- De Henau J and Himmelweit S (2021) A care-led recovery from COVID-19: Investing in high-quality care to stimulate and rebalance the economy. *Feminist Economics* 27(1–2): 453–469.
- Farbenblum, B, Taylor-Nicholson, E, and Paoletti, S (2013) *Migrant Workers’ Access to Justice at Home: Indonesia*. New York: Open Society Foundations.
- Farnsworth K and Irving Z (2011) *Social Policy in Challenging Times: Economic Crisis and Systems*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- GSP Digest (2021) Global Social Policy Digest 21.1: An equitable and sustainable recovery from COVID-19? *Global Social Policy* 21(1): 153–182.
- ILO (2021) World Social Protection Report, 2020-2022: Social protection at a crossroads- in pursuit of a better future. Geneva: ILO.
- Kabeer N, Razavi S and van der Meulen Rodgers Y (2021) Feminist economic perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic. *Feminist Economics* 27(1–2): 1–29.
- Meyer JW (2009) *World Society* (eds G Krücken and GS Drori). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Obinger H, Petersen K and Starke P (2018) *Warfare and Welfare: Military Conflict and Welfare State Development in Western Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pellissery S (2013) ‘Informal’ global social policy? *Global Social Policy* 13(1): 87–89.
- Schmidt-Sane M, Leach M, MacGregor H, et al. (2021) Local COVID-19 syndemics and the need for an integrated response. *IDS Bulletin* 52(1): 1.
- Starke P, Kaasch A and van Hooren F (2013) *The Welfare State as Crisis Manager*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- UN Women (2020) *COVID-19 and the care economy: Immediate action and structural transformation for a gender-responsive recovery*. UN Women policy briefs no. 16, UN Women policy briefs, vol. 16, 30 July. New York: United Nations.