East Africa countries extended social protection coverage to children against the impact of COVID-19

A study noted that Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan had different interventions to support children

Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan designed emergency interventions to cover children at the height of Covid-19 infections, a study has revealed.

The Africa Platform for Social Protection in collaboration with Save the Children, conducted a study on social protection interventions targeting children in East Africa during Covid-19, with the goal of generating evidence for child-sensitive social protection programmes in East Africa during Covid-19.

The research provided an understanding of the nature of the Covid-19 emergency interventions and the challenges in implementing them.

The study found that governments in the region, with the support of their development partners, offered alternatives to in-person learning during the school closures.

According to UNICEF, South Sudan offered 32,000 solar-powered radios to vulnerable households. The radios helped to reach at least 160,000 children with lessons broadcast by the South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Miraya.

In addition to radio, Kenya and Uganda responded by providing instruction to out-of-school children in remote areas through printed learning packages distributed through newspapers, postal service, teachers, and school leaders. According to the World Bank, Uganda distributed about four million learning packages to students within the first two months of Covid-19 pandemic.

Teachers were also trained in identifying and protecting vulnerable children, supporting their re-enrolment and monitoring their re-integration in schools.

According to the study, Covid-19 lockdowns led to loss of parents’ incomes. The global impact of the pandemic also reduced remittances from abroad. In response, states in the EAC set up measures like expansion of the existing social protection schemes to accommodate newly vulnerable groups in addition to other range of measures.

The interventions included conditional and unconditional cash transfers, and in-kind social assistance. South Sudan, for instance, launched a three-year $40 million safety nets project funded by the World Bank in April 2020. The project, initially designed to cover 6,500 households in the capital, was increased to benefit 10,000 households.

Before Covid-19, Kenya had an existing cash transfer programme dubbed Inua Jamii that was giving Ksh2,000 ($19) to one million casual labourers whose livelihoods depended on daily wage and self-employment. In South Sudan, the World Food Programme provided one-month in-kind food assistance to 40,000 persons in May 2020.

Other forms of in-kind support included utility support like deferral of deadlines for payment of utilities such as water, electricity and internet during the containment period. Waivers on specific payments were also used as a form of in-kind transfer. In Kenya, the government waived levies for sending cash through the mobile money electronic transfers (MPESA) below Ksh1,000 ($10) for a period of one year. Uganda halted for 30 days bank-to-mobile money wallet charges and cash-out fees for smaller transactions.

Regarding prevention measures, in Uganda, the government offered masks to everybody aged six years and above. In addition to masks, other in-kind social protection items offered during the pandemic included soap and mosquito nets. Similarly, in South Sudan, UNICEF and partners distributed 240,000 masks to vulnerable people. In some EAC states like Kenya and Rwanda, cash and in-kind interventions have been accompanied by information on prevention of Covid-19, infant feeding, child marriages, and violence in schools and communities.

The study noted that lockdowns disrupted school meals which will contribute to higher malnutrition and food insecurity situation among children in informal settlements. Despite these efforts, UNICEF and World Health Organization (WHO) recent reports indicates that Covid-19 is going to exacerbate malnutrition and food insecurity situation among low income households with children, pregnant and lactating mothers and adolescents. The emerging harsh environmental conditions due to climate change and Covid-19 containment measures like lockdowns and work from home adverse affects the informal sector which supports a large segment of the population at the base of the pyramid in East Africa, compounding further challenges especially in Kenya and South Sudan.

According to the study WASH interventions had been a significant feature of SP interventions, even prior to the standard operating procedures (SOP) demands of Covid-19 (e.g., frequent hand washing).