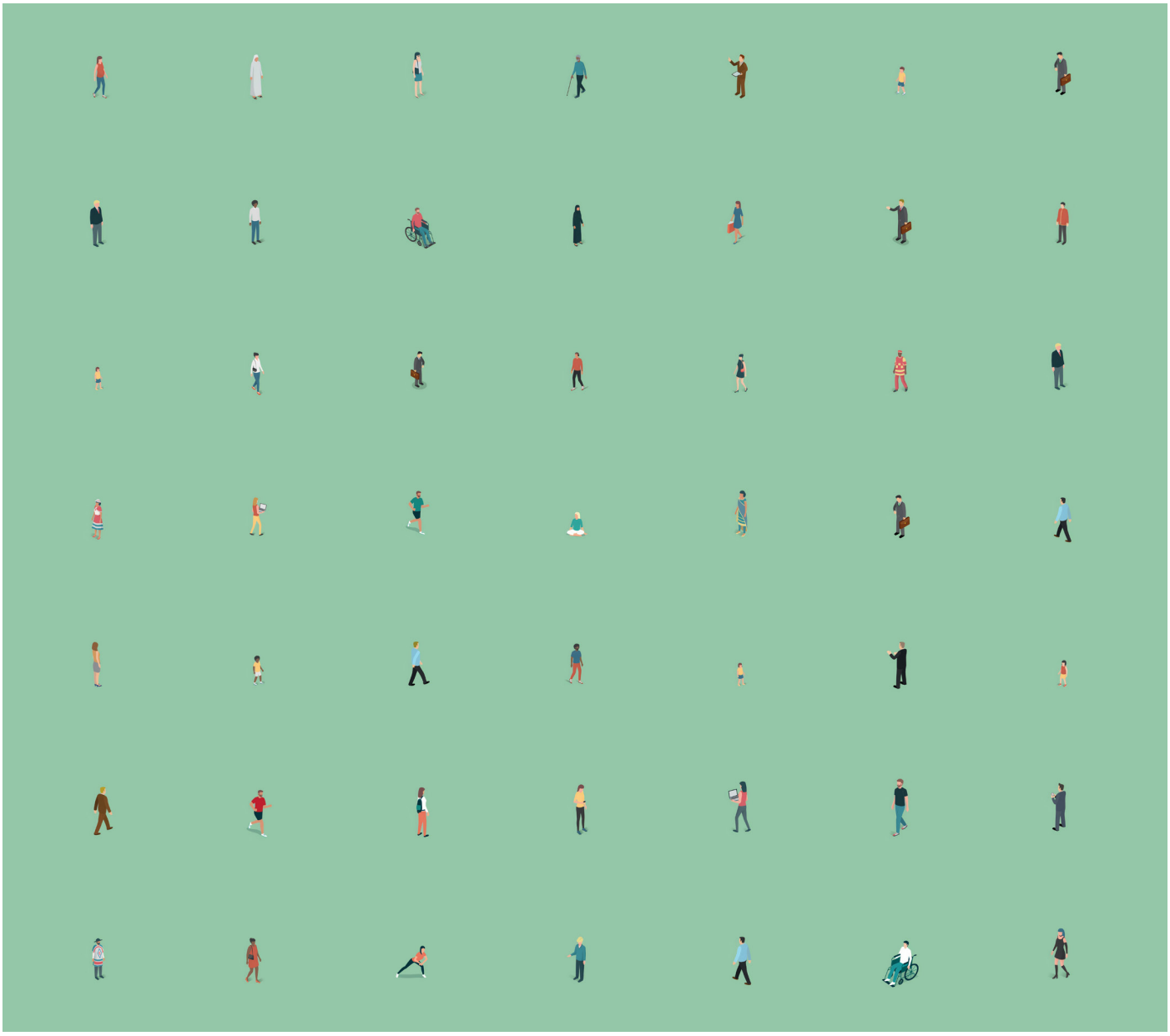
Protecting and Supporting Vulnerable Groups Through the Covid-19 Crisis



UNRISD
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

COVID-19 RESPONSE

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For a list of any errors or omissions found subsequent to printing, please visit **www.unrisd.org/covid-19-vulnerable-groups-report**

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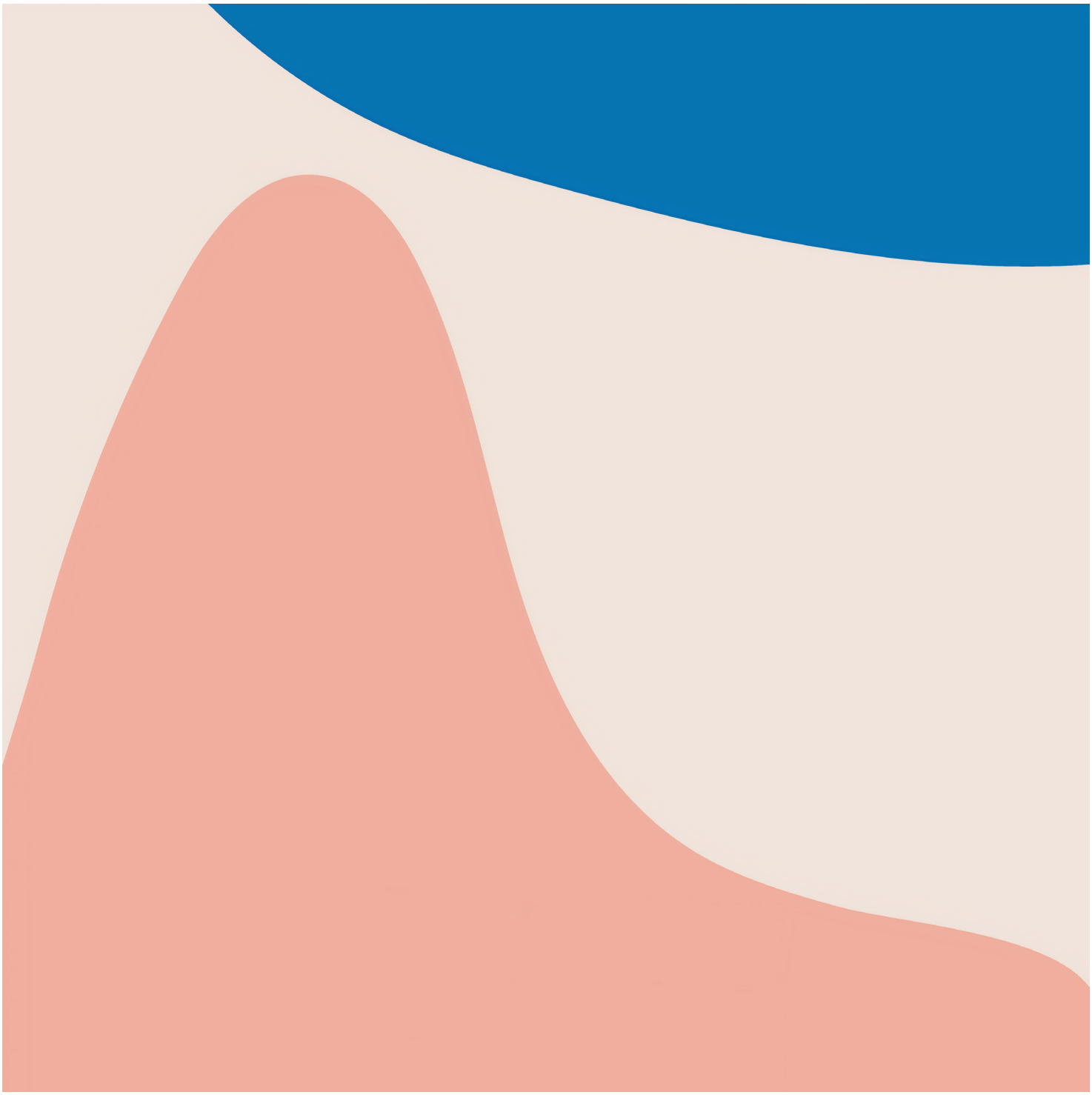

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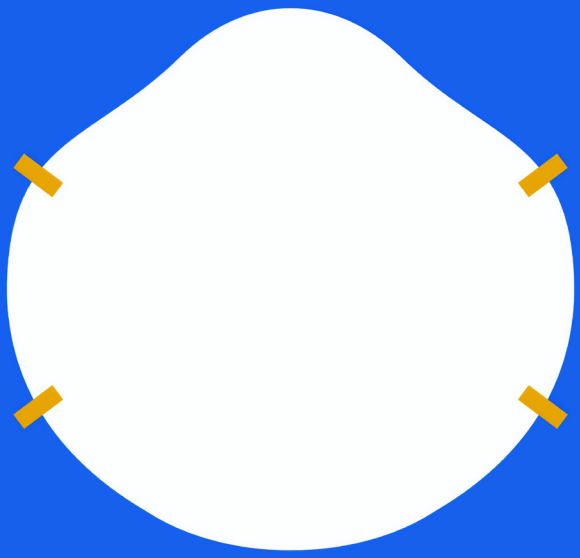

Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	3
Which vulnerable people were mentioned by respondents?	5
Which policy responses are governments putting in place?	6
Are there key differences within countries?	9
Gender dimensions of the policy response	11
Have government interventions had unintended consequences?	14
Have non-state actors and vulnerable groups themselves provided support?	15
What more can be done to support and protect vulnerable groups?	18
Conclusion and next steps	20
Endnotes	23
Annex: Countries covered in survey responses	23

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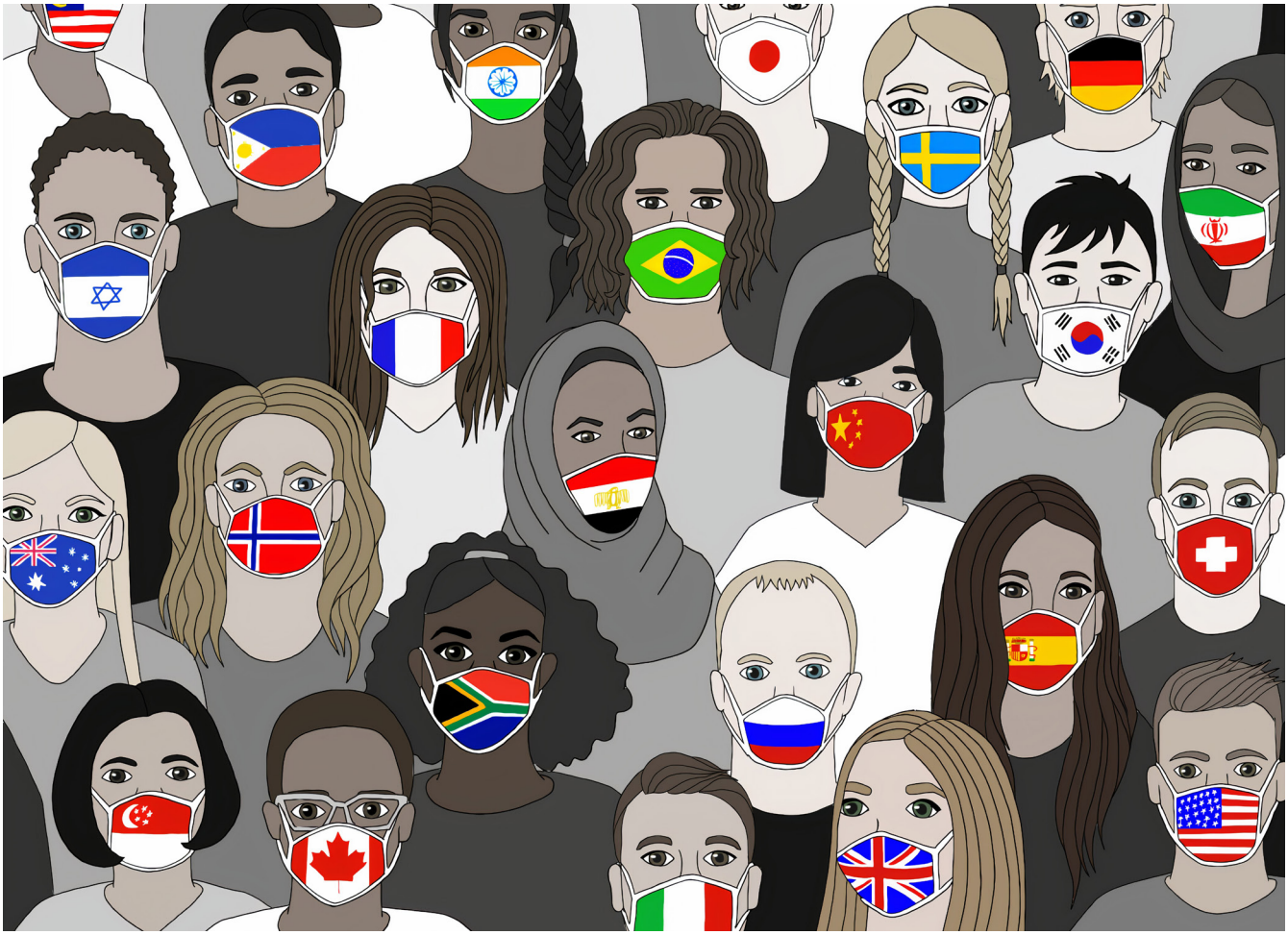

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Summary

THIS REPORT offers insights on how interventions to address the Covid-19 pandemic—by governments and non-state actors—have affected vulnerable groups, especially those living in poverty and experiencing informal and precarious work, as well as older persons. It is hoped that these insights can encourage policy responses that are more sensitive to the needs of vulnerable people and groups. The information presented is drawn from a survey that the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) launched at the end of April 2020, primarily targeted at UNRISD's network of academics and practitioners. It covers all regions of the world and countries at all income levels.

The survey responses support the narrative that—as a result of lockdowns—many people around the world have faced a terrible choice between lives and livelihoods. In poorer countries, lockdowns and physical distancing have been less effective and undermined by a lack of complementary socioeconomic measures such as scaled-up cash transfers and food distribution. Border and school closures were perceived as easier to implement across countries of all income levels. Internal travel restrictions in particular have generally served to protect indigenous communities, although other threats such as economic exploitation of their resources have increased. Yet school closures have also led to concerns that educational inequalities are being exacerbated because of a lack of access to learning resources for children without access to the internet or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Beyond poverty and informality, most explicit references to other vulnerable people and groups—especially older persons and people living with disabilities—became more apparent for countries at higher income levels.

Responses to the survey revealed some important differences between the efficacy of interventions implemented in urban and rural areas, and in the support received from local, state and national governments. There was widespread recognition that some policy interventions—such as food distribution—were more important and necessary in urban areas, but that rural areas also faced unique challenges, such as their relationship with urban markets. Mobility (or its restriction) between the two, especially of migrant workers, created new vulnerabilities for migrants themselves and hosting communities.

There have been strong gendered dimensions of the policy responses and interventions, with women and girls more likely to be negatively affected compared to men. Survey responses confirmed, through specific examples, what has received widespread media attention: that women's burdens at home—for care, education and domestic work—increased significantly as a result of confinement and school closures. Women were found to be more exposed to the risks of domestic violence, harassment and unwanted pregnancies. And income insecurity intensified for many women, as they were less likely to directly receive government support compared to men. The gendered segregation of the labour market meant that women were more likely to continue working through the crisis, especially in roles that put them at risk—in care, nursing, food and service industries, for example.

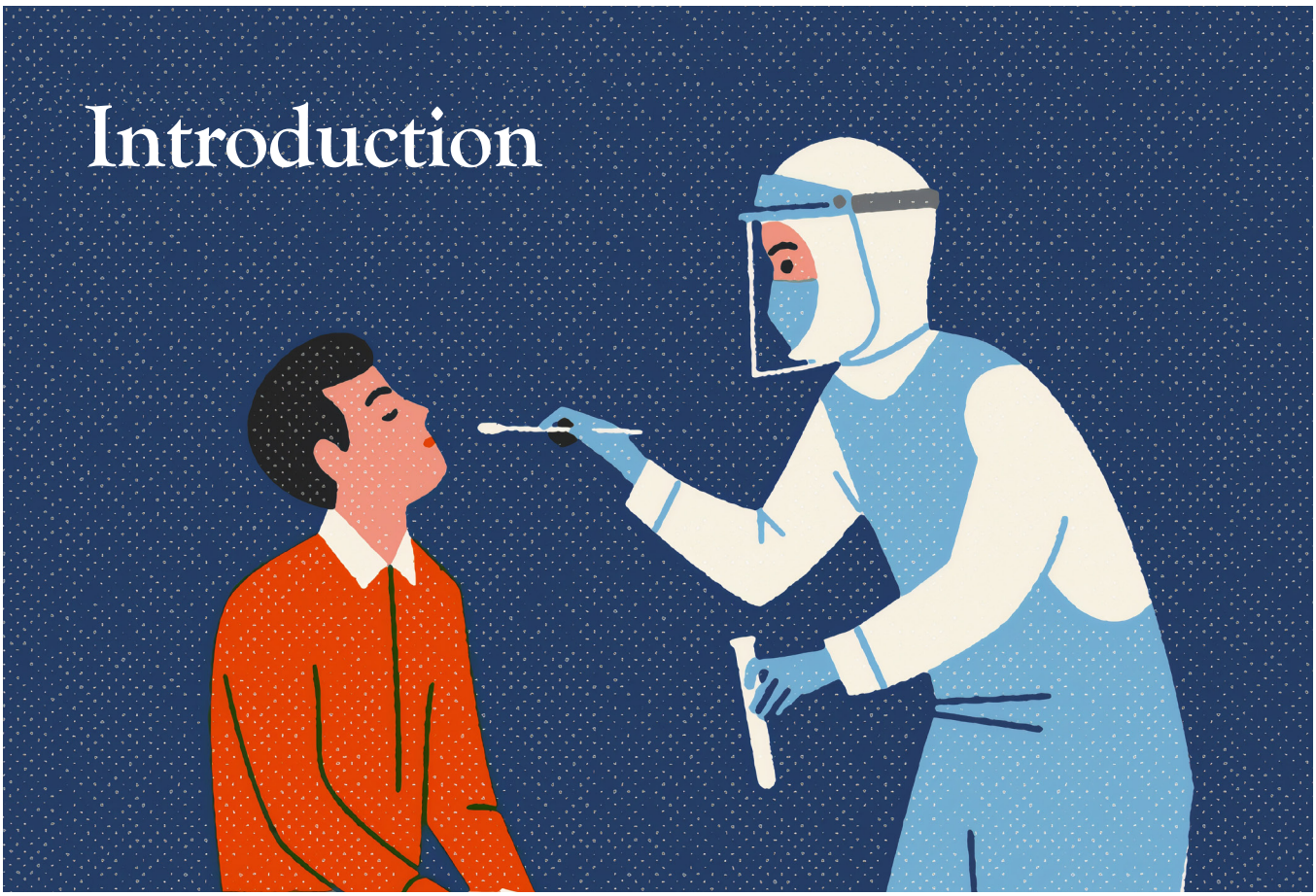
There have been other unintended consequences of government policy responses. Respondents in about one-sixth of countries reported increases in police violence and harassment, crime, bribery and corruption. Positive dynamics were stated in relation to family life, friends and society; and in lower levels of air pollution. While the crisis has exposed and exacerbated many inequalities, it has also led to some reflection on societal values, including the revalorization of "essential" workers, and the importance of universal health services and social protection.

Beyond governments, non-state actors have been an important source of support, especially for vulnerable groups most adversely affected by lockdowns and physical distancing. This has included the provision of food and protective equipment, public information campaigns, transporting older persons to clinics, mental health services, and support for women and children. Faith-based groups and organizations, trade unions, and the private sector—including cooperatives, and social and solidarity economy actors—have also provided essential support and services in some countries.

Respondents identified a range of policies that could better support and protect vulnerable groups in the areas of social protection, inclusive and responsive institutions, health care and medical support, and collaboration and solidarity. Initiatives linked to the provision of cash support, food, water and shelter were highlighted particularly in low- and middle-income countries. A major concern across all countries was the lack of reliable information on the specific characteristics, locations and needs of vulnerable groups that could be used to design and effectively deliver appropriate responses. In some countries it was felt that more participatory and bottom-up approaches, led by decentralized institutions, and including representatives of vulnerable groups, would improve the quality and efficacy of the overall response. Some respondents also argued for giving equal if not more attention to non-governmental modes of support, especially where there are problems of bureaucratic inertia and corruption. Increased collaboration, external support and funding for NGOs that already work with vulnerable groups were seen as important interventions across countries of all income groups.

Beyond these insights to inform more effective policy responses for vulnerable groups, the survey also points to areas for further investigation based on UNRISD's mandate and experience in the field of social development. These include a deeper context-specific understanding of inequalities and vulnerability, including through an intersectionality lens; the experience of countries that have stronger and more comprehensive health and social protection systems; how modes of governance and underlying politics shape the impacts and responses to the crisis; the fundamental questions raised by the pandemic about our relationship with nature and the planet; and reflection prompted by the crisis on how we organize economic activity to strengthen resilience, how society values the contributions that paid and unpaid essential workers make, and how we underpin a shift towards greater solidarity and collaboration both within and between countries.

Introduction



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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC that has unfolded in the first six months of 2020 has proceeded in waves with different hotpots; first China, then Italy and the rest of Europe, and then the United States. At the time of writing it has a strong foothold in many countries in South America, and the risk is that it will continue to spread within Africa and Asia. Different regions and countries are at different stages of infection and, critically, they are at different stages in their response.

Infection rates and mortality rates have varied widely across the world. It will take time to disaggregate and understand the factors behind this variation, but this will necessarily include an exploration of: how quickly broad physical distancing measures and closures were initiated; enforcement methods; health system capacity; the underlying health status of populations; the proportion and living conditions of older persons or those with other health vulnerabilities; socioeconomic measures to help people endure distancing and shutdown measures; and strong tracking and tracing systems. Besides underlying conditions and political choices, the ability to develop and effectively implement many of these policy responses has depended on the capacity of state institutions.

Early analysis suggests that the impacts of the crisis have been unevenly distributed. It has severely hit those people living in poverty, without alternative income and livelihood options or lacking access to social protection. It has spread more quickly in densely populated spaces, cities and slums. It has affected those with less access to services and support, and those already in poorer health. It has had gendered impacts, particularly for women who have taken on additional care burdens and suffered higher rates of violent abuse in the home. Survey responses highlighted that in the United States and Europe, Covid-19 has been more widespread in the Black and minority ethnic communities because of underlying inequalities.

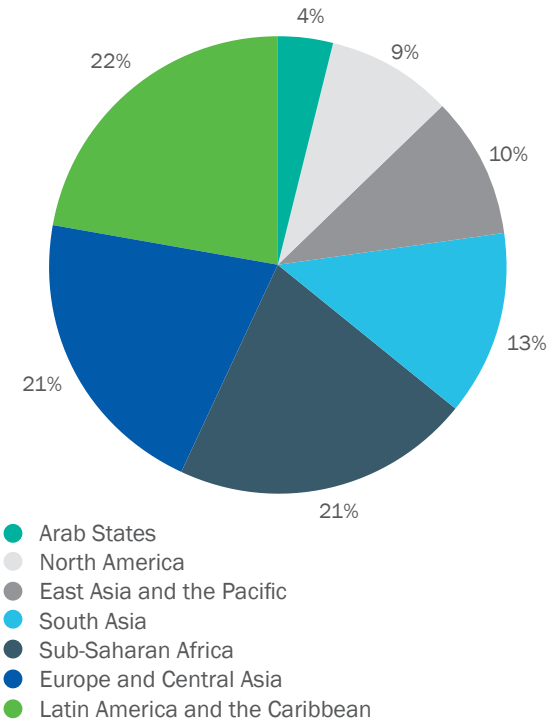
The pandemic threatens the progress made on poverty reduction and economic and social development in the last two decades, and casts a dark shadow over the prospects for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—and, in particular, its commitment to leave no one behind. It seems clear that Covid-19 is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Broad measures to contain the virus have not always been sensitive to the needs of groups that may already be vulnerable in society because of circumstance or characteristics;

or who risk slipping into vulnerability because of poverty and exclusion. After the initial health crisis has passed, governments will need to recommit to a socio-ecological transformation that respects human rights, human well-being and the environment.

UNRISD launched its survey to collect perspectives on the extent and effectiveness of policy responses to Covid-19, and in particular how they address the potential or actual vulnerabilities of individuals, groups and communities. The objective was to provide rapid insights on how policies can be better designed so as to address the needs of groups that may already be vulnerable or may become so. This is important because not all countries have yet to experience the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and there is the ongoing risk of spikes or new waves of contagion in all countries. In addition to pointing out main trends, failures and unintended consequences, the analysis has also sought to highlight good practices. The survey respondents are largely drawn from UNRISD's network, typically academics and practitioners, in all regions of the world. The majority of respondents are thus affiliated with academic institutions, NGOs, United Nations agencies, civil society or social movements. It is not meant to be a representative survey of individuals or households to assess direct and indirect socioeconomic impacts. It is instead intended to provide insights on the main trends associated with vulnerable groups across all countries, particularly with a view to further research. Responses have been analysed with qualitative social science methods, with the objective of identifying key trends that emerge in relation to vulnerable groups, and to determine patterns to inform future discussions about reforms and transformation.

Because of the motivation to provide an analysis—as far as possible—in real-time, this report analyses the first round of responses received between 27 April and 17

Percentage of responses per geographical region



Survey responses: some numbers

- 329 responses from 82 countries

- **Low-income**
  17% of survey countries; 8% of responses
- **Lower-middle-income**
  19% of survey countries; 30% of responses
- **Upper-middle-income**
  24% of survey countries, 26% of responses
- **High-income**
  25% of survey countries, 36% of responses

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