

## Chapter III

# From youth to adulthood: risks and opportunities

### Key messages

- The specific needs of young people are rarely the focus of social protection systems, even though failing to invest in youth can have long-term implications for society.
- A lack of formal work history, resulting from their age and high degree of participation in the informal sector, significantly hinders the access of young people to social protection.
- Restricting access to health care coverage to workers in formal employment can have long-term costs, as it keeps health care beyond the reach of many young people.
- Social protection programmes work best for young people when they are linked to other social policies that promote participation in the labour market and build skills that are in demand.
- Improving the access of young people to social protection will require more and better data on programme coverage and impact.

### Introduction

The overall proportion of young people is at an all-time high globally. In 2015, young people aged from 15 to 24 years accounted for 1.2 billion, or 16 per cent, of the world's population.<sup>30</sup> That figure will decline to 15 per cent in 2030 and to 14 per cent by 2050. However, trends differ greatly by region. In sub-Saharan Africa, young people make up 20 per cent of the population, and their number is projected to continue growing over the coming decades. In contrast, youth constitute 11 per cent of the population in Europe, and their number is declining.

Young people can be a force for development if provided with the opportunities they need to thrive. When a population experiences a sustained decline in fertility rates, there is a period when the share of the population of working age grows larger. The relative abundance of persons of working age can lead to high savings, increased output per capita and rapid economic growth. The capacity of a country to benefit from the so-called demographic dividend, however, depends on the opportunities provided to and investments made in young people poised to enter the labour force, as their productivity and entrepreneurship will drive future economic growth. If they do not find work and are left behind by development processes, large populations of disaffected young people may pose significant challenges to stability and prosperity for all, rather than allowing countries to reap the demographic dividend.

<sup>30</sup> Data from 2017 Revision of World Population Prospects. Available from <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp> (accessed 18 July 2017).

As young people move from school to work, become politically engaged and start families, they find themselves presented with opportunities but also facing significant obstacles and risks. A lack of jobs, income insecurity, adolescent pregnancy, restricted options for participation in political life and exposure to violence and crime can lead to disadvantage and exclusion and damage young people's long-term prospects. Many of the challenges young people face have roots in disadvantage and underinvestment in early childhood (see chapter II).

Creating a social and economic environment that allows young people to thrive in adulthood is crucial to promoting their inclusion. Policy efforts naturally focus on ensuring access to good-quality education and skills training that can open the way to good jobs. When decent work is lacking or other age-based disadvantages limit opportunities, social protection has an important role to play in countering the risk of exclusion. Unfortunately, many young people, especially in low-income countries, are not covered by any form of social protection.

This chapter describes how the challenges young people face result in disadvantage and exclusion. It provides examples of countries where social protection systems are working to address the specific needs of young people and promote their inclusion, bearing in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Although they have limited resources, some low-income countries have found innovative solutions to improve young people's prospects.

## A. Risks and disadvantages faced by young people

### 1. In the labour market

The successful transition from education to decent work is critical for social inclusion. For many young people, however, it remains elusive. Encouragingly, young people are spending more years in education than ever. The global youth literacy rate was 91 per cent in 2015, up from 83 per cent in 1995 (UNDP, 2016b). The mean number of years of schooling rose in 88 out of 98 countries for which data are available from 2000 to 2016.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, 142 million young people (37 per cent) of upper secondary school age worldwide are not in school, even though secondary education is becoming increasingly important for the acquisition of the skills and knowledge necessary to function productively in today's economy and participate fully in society (UNESCO, 2016b). In addition, education systems are struggling to transmit the skillsets needed in a changing world of work.<sup>32</sup> Some young people fail to attain even baseline proficiency in reading and mathematics. In Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, 24 per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls do not have baseline proficiency in reading at the age of 15 years (OECD, 2016a). Many of the countries struggling most to educate their young people are those with rapidly growing young populations.

Youth unemployment has been a persistent challenge over the past decades. With a global youth unemployment rate of 13.1 per cent in 2017, young people are three times more likely than adults to be unemployed (ILO, 2017e). In addition, many countries are witnessing an increase in the number of discouraged young workers, who are not counted among the unemployed because they are not actively seeking work. ILO estimates that 21.8 per cent of young people in countries with available data are not in employment, education or training (ibid.). More than three in four (77 per cent) of

<sup>31</sup> Author calculations based on data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics database. Available from <http://data.uis.unesco.org> (accessed 4 December 2017).

<sup>32</sup> A/72/292.

them are women (almost 90 per cent in Southern Asia), which partly reflects gender differences with regard to time spent in unpaid caregiving and household work (ibid.).

Even when they do find jobs, young people are less likely than adults to find decent jobs. They are overrepresented in vulnerable employment, often in the informal sector. Around the world, 77 per cent of young workers (97 per cent in developing countries) are in informal employment (ILO, 2017e). Even in developed countries, it is estimated that close to 20 per cent of young workers are in the informal sector (ibid.).

In the formal sector, too, young people work in less-than-ideal conditions. In 2015, 40 per cent of young people in the European Union were employed under temporary contracts, compared with 11 per cent of adults, and about 30 per cent were employed part-time, compared with 12 per cent of adults.<sup>33</sup> A trend towards low-paid or unpaid internships has further delayed the entry of young people into the labour market. Many young people do one or more unpaid internships, mostly without any social protection or insurance benefits. Non-standard contracts do not necessarily constitute a deficit of decent work, but it has been found that more than one third of young employees in the European Union work under temporary contracts because they cannot find more secure, long-term jobs (ILO, 2016b).

In many countries, labour market regulations establish a sharp distinction between open-ended work contracts and temporary and other non-standard contracts, which involve much lower hiring and firing costs. Workers under non-standard contracts, among whom young people are overrepresented, tend to bear the brunt of job losses during recessions. A similar segmentation exists in countries where a strongly protected group of workers in the formal sector coexists with a large informal economy. The surge in youth unemployment that followed the financial crisis of 2008 was a strong reminder that young people's jobs are less secure and often the first lost during economic downturns.

Early labour market experiences are strong predictors of future earning potential. The trend towards increasing unemployment and discouragement among young people, in a context of sizeable decent work deficits, has an adverse impact on them in the long term. ILO has warned of the emergence of a lost generation of young people who have abandoned any hope of working for a decent living.

A lack of decent work opportunities leads to poverty. In OECD countries, some 14 per cent of young people live in poverty, compared with 10 per cent of adults (OECD, 2016b). Young people also experience higher-than-average levels of working poverty, with 64.1 per cent of young workers worldwide living on less than \$4 a day, compared with 55.1 per cent of adults (ILO, 2015c). Youth poverty is often passed from one cohort to the next, as young parents who are poor cannot afford to invest in the health and education of their children, leading to a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Aside from financial hardship, unemployment and underemployment also adversely affect the social networks and civic engagement of young people, as well as their trust in other people and institutions (United Nations, 2016a). Among those who do have work, poor employment conditions and a lack of avenues for advancement can damage long-term career prospects. The resulting stress or discouragement can lead some to drop out of the labour market altogether. Youth unemployment and underemployment also have a high cost for society, in terms of lost human and productive potential and decreased revenues. They also undermine trust in the political and economic system and social cohesion and stability.

<sup>33</sup> Eurostat, Labour Market and Labour Force Survey Statistics. Available from [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Labour\\_market\\_and\\_Labour\\_force\\_survey\\_\(LFS\)\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Labour_market_and_Labour_force_survey_(LFS)_statistics) (accessed 10 April 2017).

## 2. In the household and community

Young people make important decisions about leaving home and school, accessing skills training or further education, becoming sexually active, getting married and starting a family. The circumstances under which these choices are made can pose challenges. Finding stable housing can require significant up-front resources at a time when young people face insecurity in the labour market (European Youth Forum, 2016). Formal financial institutions are often unwilling to offer services, such as loans and mortgages, to young people, hindering their entry into the housing market. According to the World Bank, only 5 per cent of young people had borrowed from a financial institution globally, compared with 12 per cent of older adults in 2014.<sup>34</sup>

Many young people engage in sexual activity without access to sexual and reproductive health services. Age-specific societal norms or legal restrictions can hamper their access to such services. Lack of sexual and reproductive health services results in unwanted pregnancies and the contraction of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Early child-bearing increases the risks of maternal mortality and other health problems and harms long-term education and economic prospects.

Young people can also be vulnerable to violence and crime. They are often targeted by political movements that channel their desire for change and the lack of other options for civic engagement into civil disobedience and violence. In countries in conflict and those with high rates of crime and violence, exclusion from political channels of representation can lead young people to join gangs and armed movements. Being a member of a gang can bring respect and a sense of inclusion, in particular in the absence of decent jobs or access to good-quality education (Hardgrove and others, 2014). The consequences of violence and crime can be devastating. In 2010, four out of five homicide victims in Europe were young males (UNICEF, 2012b). Violence was the second most frequent cause of death among adolescent girls (aged from 10 to 19 years) globally in 2012, behind infectious and parasitic diseases (UNICEF, 2014b). Widespread violence and conflict also harm young people by destroying services such as schools and hospitals.

## B. Gaps in social protection coverage for young people

In the absence of decent jobs and other opportunities, social protection has a role to play in ensuring that the risks young people face do not result in poverty and social exclusion.

Although few social protection schemes formally exclude young people, the socioeconomic disadvantages they experience hinder coverage. Many schemes available to young people, including insurance-based unemployment benefits and health insurance, are contributory. Because of their age and tendency to work in the informal economy, young people tend to have paid less into such schemes. In addition, young independent adults of working age often find themselves outside the targeting criteria applied in tax-financed programmes.

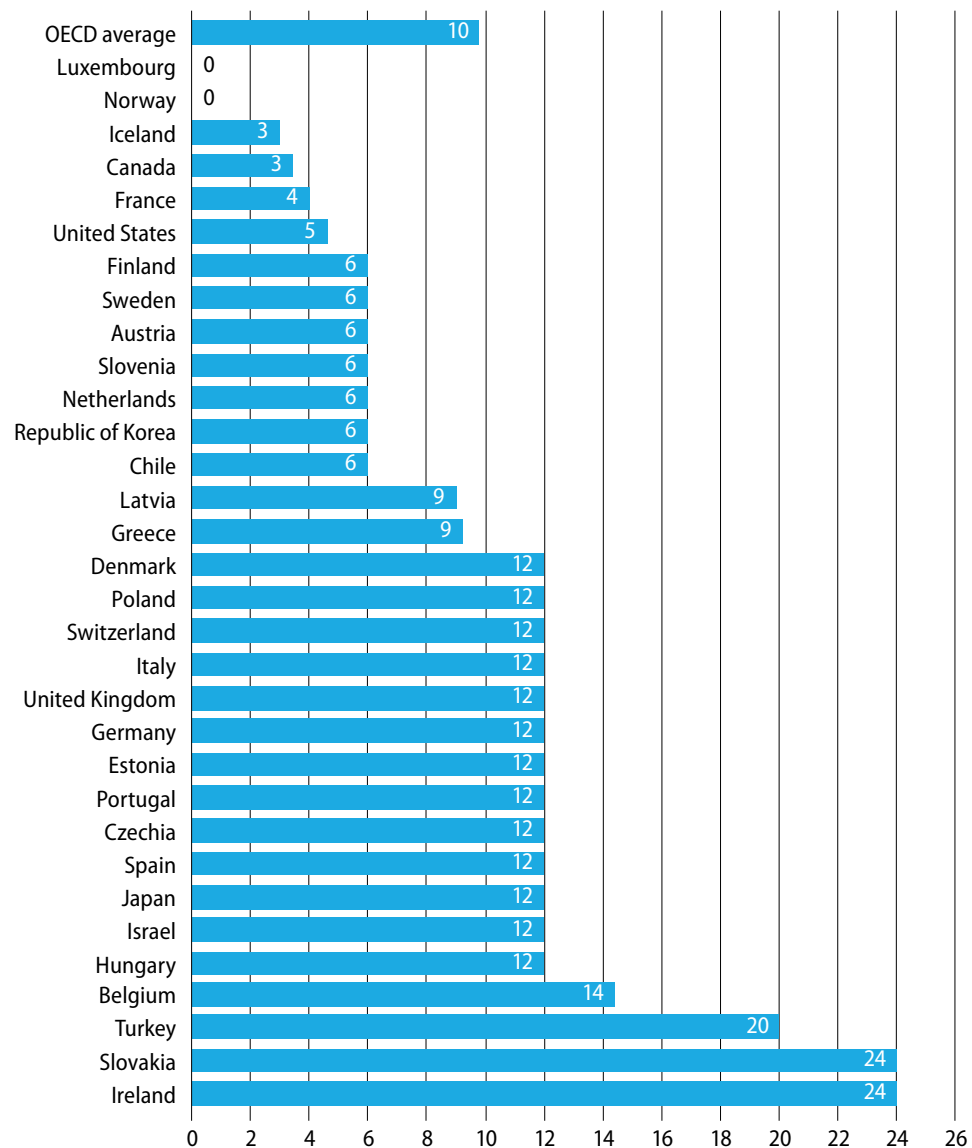
### 1. Contributory social protection coverage

Unemployment protection plays a key role in providing income security to workers and their families and in preventing impoverishment. Yet only 20 countries provided

<sup>34</sup> World Bank, Global Findex database. Available from <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/financialinclusion> (accessed January 2017).

unemployment benefits for first-time jobseekers worldwide as of 2013 (ILO, 2014a). In 82 of the 98 countries that provide unemployment protection, periodic cash benefits are provided through contributory social insurance schemes (ILO, 2017a), for which young people may not meet the minimum contributory periods. In most European countries, for instance, eligibility for unemployment benefits depends on the payment of insurance contributions for minimum periods ranging from 4 to 24 months (see figure III.1).

Figure III.1  
OECD Unemployment insurance minimum contribution period (in months)



Source: OECD, 2016b.

First-time jobseekers are, for the most part, young people who are not covered. Yet young people are also more likely to be unemployed than adults and, therefore, are most in need of unemployment benefits. Even when young workers do have coverage, the level of benefits may be low or they may be covered for shorter periods than older recipients because they have not paid contributions for as long. Young people in the

informal sector are unable to satisfy scheme conditions and, therefore, are left without access. Reflecting their higher rate of participation in the informal economy, young women pay systematically less than their male counterparts in contributions to social protection schemes, leading to gender gaps in coverage (ILO, 2017e). ILO (2017a) estimates that only 22 per cent of unemployed workers worldwide receive unemployment benefits. They usually come in the form of periodic payments under mandatory social insurance (unemployment insurance), and are often combined with skills upgrading or other measures to facilitate the individual's quick return to work. The global average, however, masks large regional differences, with more than 40 per cent in Europe and Central Asia receiving benefits, compared with less than 15 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean and 6 per cent in Africa (ibid.). Young workers are likely to make up a disproportionately large share of those excluded. Among countries of the OECD for which data are available, only around 30 per cent of all unemployed people aged from 15 to 29 years receive unemployment benefits, compared with 40 per cent of those over the age of 30 (OECD, 2016b).

The labour market disadvantages facing young people also affect their coverage by other social protection schemes, such as health insurance. In Latin America and the Caribbean, only 55 per cent of young people in formal employment were effectively covered under a health-care scheme in 2013, compared with 71 per cent of wage-earners aged 25 years and over (ECLAC, 2015). Tax-financed health care is necessary to ensure access, particularly for people working outside the formal economy or with short working histories.<sup>35</sup> However, most countries lack comprehensive, tax-financed health-care systems (ILO, 2014a).

Access to sexual and reproductive health care is particularly important for young people. In many countries, however, access to such services is affected by laws regarding the age of consent for sexual relations and judgmental and discriminatory attitudes towards young people by health-care workers (UNESCO, 2013). Adolescent girls, for instance, are often less protected against unplanned pregnancy than older women. The World Health Organization (WHO) has found that, in 49 low- and middle-income countries, only 42 per cent of women aged from 15 to 19 years have their demand for family planning satisfied with modern and traditional contraceptives, compared with 66 per cent of women aged from 20 to 49 years (WHO, 2015a). Shah and Ahman (2012) found that 41 per cent of the total 21.2 million unsafe abortions in developing regions in 2008 were among young women aged from 15 to 24 years.

Under some insurance-based health-care systems, young people may retain coverage under the health insurance policies of their parents up to a certain age. In the United States, for instance, young persons can often stay on their parents' plan until they turn 26, even if they are married or living outside the parental home. That can help to reduce coverage gaps for young people, albeit only if their parents themselves have comprehensive coverage.

The inability of young people who are unemployed or working in the informal sector to pay contributions over protracted periods can result in significant gaps in access to contributory pensions in old age. In Latin America and the Caribbean for instance, only 39 per cent of young wage-earners were affiliated to a pension scheme in 2013, compared with an average of 61 per cent for workers aged from 25 to 64 years (ECLAC, 2015). There is evidence that pensions can indirectly benefit young people and other members of a household supported by the income of an older person (ILO,

<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, some countries offer subsidized health insurance (as in Ghana and Thailand) or mandatory mutual funds (as in Rwanda).

2014a; Ardington and others, 2016). However, those indirect mechanisms cannot be relied upon to address the needs of young people fully and can increase the risks and insecurity for older persons themselves (see chapter IV).

## 2. Tax-financed social protection coverage

In principle, young people may have access to tax-financed schemes such as unemployment assistance, minimum-income benefits, housing-related benefits (rent allowances), or public health care, where available. Public employment programmes and vocational skills training are also popular forms of tax-financed social protection designed to facilitate the participation of young people in the labour market.<sup>36</sup> Young people in households living in poverty may also be covered by cash transfers provided to the household. At times, however, young people do not meet targeting criteria: they may be too old for child benefits and too young to be eligible for other programmes.

Most high-income and some middle-income countries offer tax-financed minimum-income benefits designed to guarantee a minimum decent living standard for people on low or no income. For instance, 25 of the 35 OECD countries provide social assistance and 23 offer housing benefits (OECD, 2016b). Those schemes often have basic eligibility criteria—such as citizenship or income level—but they do not carry conditions related to age or previous employment. Although generally provided to individuals, they are often means tested at the household level. The income of a young person's parents and spouse or partner is therefore taken into account to determine the level of benefit.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, the net income provided by the combination of social assistance and housing benefits is systematically lower for 20-year-olds (31 per cent of median household income for a single person) than for the average recipient (35 per cent) (ibid.). That gap is particularly pronounced in France (15 per cent and 40 per cent, respectively), the Netherlands (21 per cent and 67 per cent) and Luxembourg (4 per cent and 47 per cent) (ibid.). Tax-financed unemployment assistance, generally more generous than minimum-income benefits, is available in only 7 of 35 OECD countries (ibid.).

Universal access to health care, where available, is a vital component of social protection coverage for young people. Most high-income countries provide tax-financed health-care coverage for a core set of services,<sup>38</sup> funded primarily by a combination of tax revenue and social insurance schemes. In some cases, the coverage is supplemented by private insurance for a wider range of services. Some countries in developing regions, such as China, Colombia, Rwanda and Thailand, are strengthening tax-financed or mixed health-care systems and have reached relatively high levels of coverage (ILO, 2017a). In low-income countries, however, tax-financed universal health coverage is much less common, leaving many people, particularly the young, without access to comprehensive health care (WHO, 2015a).

In some countries, young people living in poor households may be covered as indirect beneficiaries of cash-transfer programmes, as discussed in chapter II. Yet many young people in lower-income countries have no access to tax-financed social protection schemes, which tend to focus more on other age groups (ECLAC, 2014). Programme design can also exclude young people. Child and family benefit schemes,

<sup>36</sup> Such programmes are sometimes financed (at least in part) through social insurance contributions.

<sup>37</sup> In some countries, such as Sweden, young people are considered a separate household for the purposes of social assistance eligibility, even if they live with their parents.

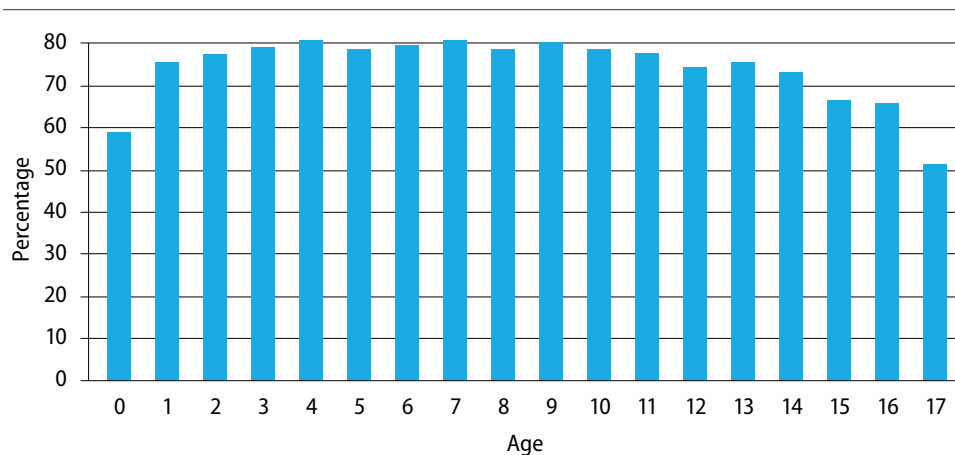
<sup>38</sup> Public health-care coverage usually includes consultations with doctors and specialists, tests and examinations, and surgical and therapeutic procedures. Generally, dental care and pharmaceutical drugs are partially covered, although in some OECD countries they are paid for separately (OECD, 2015b).



for instance, often cover only children under 15 years of age.<sup>39</sup> Several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Argentina, Colombia, Jamaica and Mexico, are attempting to address the issue by complementing traditional family-based transfer schemes with ones targeting young people (see section C below).

Other tax-financed programmes have minimum age limits or features that impose one de facto, leaving adolescents who may be living independently unable to access them. In South Africa, the need for an identity card, which can only be obtained from the age of 16, to apply for benefits under the Child Support Grant excludes some potential young beneficiaries (Kidd, 2014). In addition, some Grant staff believe that teenage mothers should not be eligible for the benefit. Some caregivers also withdraw in the mistaken belief that adolescents are no longer entitled to it if they start working (Department of Social Development, South African Social Security Agency and UNICEF, 2012). As a result, effective Grant coverage is low among young people aged from 15 to 17 years (see figure III.2).

Figure III.2  
Percentage of eligible children and young people who receive benefits under the Child Support Grant, South Africa, 2015



Source: Author calculations based on the General Household Survey of 2015 in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2015).

In addition to direct income support, Governments offer public employment programmes or entrepreneurship promotion with cash or in-kind transfers as forms of tax-financed social protection for young people of working age.<sup>40</sup> The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India, for instance, guarantees up to 100 days of unskilled work per rural household per year on public works projects. It extends the legal entitlement for paid work to all young people in rural areas, reaching an estimated 50 million households, or 30 per cent of all rural households across the country (ILO, 2014a). Such programmes, aside from being the only source of income for some, can also serve as stepping stones to formal employment. In some cases, however, young members of the household are sent off to work while the payment is made to the head of the household. Globally, there are no data on the number of young people covered under such schemes, which range from small-scale efforts to ambitious nationwide programmes.

<sup>39</sup> A study of the Juntos programme in Peru found evidence that some families with many children try to retain benefits by creating new households headed by young family members who have become too old to be eligible as children (Aste and Roopnaraine, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Most such active labour market policy measures are beyond the scope of this report.



## C. Expanding access to social protection for young people

Social protection can play a key role in facilitating the inclusion of young people, improving their material and psychological well-being, providing income security, promoting access to education and health and smoothing the transition from education to work.

This section looks at countries that have extended coverage of general contributory and tax-financed schemes to young people and removed barriers that previously hindered access. It also emphasizes the need to embed such schemes within economic and social policies aimed at supporting the broader inclusion of young people in society. More research is needed, however, to understand more fully the impact of social protection on them.

### 1. Providing income security and combating youth unemployment

In the absence of opportunities for decent work, social protection that at least partially compensates unemployed young people for lost income and that addresses the needs of workers under non-standard contracts or in the informal sector, has the potential to play a major role in promoting the inclusion of youth. However, as shown in section B, coverage by such measures is often lower for young people than for other age groups, owing to their labour market situation, minimum contribution periods and age-related eligibility requirements.

Extending unemployment benefits to first-time job seekers can help improve the income security of young people and, in recent years, several high-income countries have extended access to existing unemployment benefits or established new schemes. In Austria, Portugal and Slovenia, for instance, the minimum contribution periods for eligibility to unemployment benefits have been shortened in order to broaden the provision of income security support to more young people (European Union, 2015). In New Zealand, Jobseeker Support is available for all citizens or permanent residents over the age of 18 years, regardless of employment record. People aged 16 and 17 years in that country can obtain assistance under the Youth Payment scheme if they do not live with their parents or guardians and are not financially supported by anyone. The Youth Parent Payment offers support to people between the ages of 16 and 19 years with dependent children. Although designed primarily to help beneficiaries to stay in education, there is evidence that those schemes have encouraged a move off benefits and into the labour market (McLeod, Dixon and Crichton, 2016).

In countries that offer them, voluntary unemployment insurance schemes may benefit young people disproportionately, given their high rate of participation in the informal economy and in jobs under non-standard contracts. The uptake of such schemes, however, is low, and young people who lack the means to contribute remain excluded. Moreover, such schemes are not available to people outside the labour market, including those doing unpaid domestic work. That leaves many young people, especially women, underserved.

In OECD countries, only 40 per cent of beneficiaries under the age of 30 years receive transfers that are high enough to keep them out of poverty, compared with 49 per cent of working-age adults over the age of 30.<sup>41</sup> This gap has been exacerbated by cuts in public spending on social protection in many OECD countries since the financial crisis of 2008 (OECD, 2016b). Eligibility requirements for unemployment benefits

<sup>41</sup> A combination of family allowances, disability benefits, unemployment benefits and other forms of social assistance but excluding public pensions.

have been tightened in Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece and Hungary. In France, the minimum contribution period for unemployment benefits has been increased (ILO, 2017a). A consequence of limited or no access to benefits has been prolonged dependency on parental and/or wider family support (European Union, 2015).

Public employment programmes and cash transfers to support entrepreneurship appear to have a modest positive effect on labour market outcomes for young people (Betcherman and others, 2007; Kluve and others, 2016). Evidence from Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Panama shows that such programmes tend to be more successful when implemented in periods of economic expansion, when employment opportunities grow (Marcus, Mdee and Page, 2016). However, as has emerged in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, entrepreneurship training and similar schemes as a form of social protection and approach to poverty eradication may place unfair burdens and unachievable expectations on young participants if insufficient attention is paid to the regulatory and economic environments (Wiger and others, 2015).

## 2. Addressing other dimensions of youth exclusion

The evidence of the positive impact of social protection on enrolment in secondary education and on the health of young people, particularly in terms of the lessened risk of HIV infection and improvements in sexual and reproductive health, is considerable, as summarized in chapter I.<sup>42</sup> Greater material well-being can also bring with it increased self-esteem and social acceptance (Attah and others, 2016; Adato, Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2016). The psychosocial impact of social protection has not been widely researched but could be especially significant for young people.

Social protection, while necessary, is alone insufficient for achieving the social inclusion of young people. Policies designed to improve the availability and quality of education and health services, for instance, are crucial for sustained human development. Without access to affordable and good-quality health care, for instance, it is unlikely that small-scale and narrowly focused cash-transfer programmes will be enough to ensure that health risks faced by young people do not result in disease and exclusion.

In high-income countries, well-tailored measures designed to help young people stay in school, as well as the continued expansion of free education and housing support services, have shown potential as tools for the social inclusion of young people (European Union, 2015; OECD, 2015c). Young people have also benefited from social protection closely linked to supportive sexual and reproductive health policies, including access to sex education, contraception and maternity care (ECLAC, 2015). Social protection is most effective in tackling the multiple disadvantages faced by particularly vulnerable young people, such as the homeless and those in public care, when implemented in tandem with social services.

Evidence is sparse as to which programmes contribute most to the social inclusion of young people and why. Available age-disaggregated data on social protection coverage focus on children and older persons, with young people often included among working adults. Data for specific groups, such as indigenous youth or young refugees, are even scarcer (United Nations, 2016b).

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Bastagli and others, 2016; Attanasio, Fitzsimons and Gómez, 2005; Parker, 2003; and Mendizábal and Escobar, 2013.

## Conclusions

Young people face risks and disadvantages that can lead to their social exclusion. Improving access to good-quality education and skills training, promoting the creation of decent jobs and smoothing the transition from school to work are all key to facilitating their inclusion.

When pathways to decent work are lacking, social protection can be an important tool for turning the risks young people face into opportunities. Lowering age limits and other age-specific barriers for access to social protection programmes and shortening minimum contribution periods for social insurance schemes are two ways of making social protection more accessible to young people in need of assistance. In addition, the benefits paid should be sufficient to provide income security.

It is important to embed social protection schemes in supportive economic and social policies. Such schemes work best for young people when they are linked to policies that facilitate participation in the labour market and the acquisition of skills that are in demand. Similarly, policies promoting access to good-quality education will only contribute to inclusion if the young people who benefit from them subsequently find opportunities for decent work. Without additional efforts to reach young people, the impact of social protection programmes is likely to remain limited to modest, mostly short-term, improvements in specific indicators.

There is a critical need for better data on and evaluation of the programmes that work for young people. Existing evidence indicates that a shift in the approach to social protection may be required. Young people are generally considered less in need of social protection than other social groups. Some Governments fear creating work disincentives for young people at a time when their participation in the labour market is crucial for future prosperity. However, the basic human right to social security applies to all, regardless of age, and carries corresponding obligations, underlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Social protection coverage for young people should be anchored in national legislation.

Failing to invest in young people has long-term implications for a society. Prolonged periods of unemployment and poverty can weaken young people's skills and motivation, affect their physical and mental well-being and lead to their marginalization and exclusion. It also affects economic growth and can threaten social stability and cohesion. Countries with young populations may miss the window of opportunity brought about by the demographic dividend as a result. In rich countries, the viability of existing social protection systems will depend increasingly on the full labour market participation of healthy young adults in a context of ageing populations.