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Strengthening Social Protection Systems for Vulnerable Populations

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Introduction

Social protection is a range of policies and programs designed to prevent, manage and overcome situations that adversely affect people's well-being. They help individuals and families manage risks, reduce poverty and secure basic standards of living. These systems typically include benefits such as healthcare coverage, unemployment support, pensions, child and family benefits, disability assistance and income security in times of crisis. Social protection is recognised internationally as essential for social inclusion and human dignity.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global crises and disruptions have shown us how weak and fragile our systems are. Even though emergency measures managed to increase the number of people covered by the system in some countries for a short period, many needy groups still stayed outside the coverage due to the lack of funds, poor infrastructure and non-inclusive policies.

Social protection is important because it helps prevent poverty and inequality while protecting vulnerable populations from economic and social shocks. By reinforcing inclusive and efficient social protection measures, societies can enhance resilience, promote social stability and support sustainable development, particularly contributing to the achievement of the key Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Definition of key terms

Informal Economy

All economic activities that are not covered by the government regulations carried out by workers and enterprises, and workers accordingly do not have official employment contracts, social security, or access to formal labour protections.

Means Test

A method to establish if a person or family meets the criteria for government support depending on their income or assets.

Social Assistance

Direct cash or kind transfers (non-contributory) provided to individuals or families to help them maintain their living standards in situations of poverty or vulnerability, taxes being the most common source of financing.

Social Protection

A combination of policies and interventions that aim to safeguard individuals against the risk of falling into poverty, being vulnerable or socially excluded during their entire life cycle.

Social Protection Floor

The minimum level of social protection guarantees access to basic services and income security to all residents, particularly to those at the bottom of a social protection system.

Social Safety Nets

Programs to protect individuals and families from economic struggles and to guarantee a certain minimum living standard, mostly through non-contributory support like cash transfers or food assistance.

General Overview

Social protection systems are crucial in reducing poverty and supporting social cohesion. They are supposed to help individuals throughout their life cycle, particularly during times of vulnerability such as childhood, unemployment, illness, disability or old age. When social protection systems work effectively, they not only protect individuals but also add to economic stability and long-term development by reducing poverty, supporting social cohesion and promoting social inclusion.

Despite large global efforts to expand social protection systems and ensure everyone has some kind of safety net, a significant number of people worldwide still lack sufficient coverage. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) says that just over half of the global population, about 52.4%, has access to at least one social protection benefit. This leaves nearly 47.6% of people without any coverage. Vulnerable groups such as children, seniors, people with disabilities, migrants and women are particularly affected. Gaps in social protection are particularly large in low-income countries. In these countries, coverage rates remain extremely low, often below 10 % and the progress over recent years has not improved much especially when compared to higher-income regions. This means millions of people are exposed to income shocks, illness or unemployment without any protection. The World Bank estimates that two billion people in low- and middle-income countries remain uncovered or have insufficient social protection programmes, emphasising the scale of the global challenge.

One of the largest challenges is the size of the economy. In a lot of developing countries, many workers are employed informally and therefore do not get unemployment insurance or pensions. According to the ILO, informal employment accounts for about 60 % of the global workforce, with the highest amount in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Informal workers often lack stable incomes and legal recognition, so extending coverage to them remains a complicated issue. Vulnerable populations face additional challenges beyond employment status. Children are severely affected in places where child benefits are limited or absent, contributing to poverty that continues within families over generations. Older persons without pension frequently depend on family support or minimal social assistance. People with disabilities often struggle to access benefits due to complicated procedures, poor assessment systems, and social stigma. Migrants and refugees may be excluded entirely because of residency or citizenship requirements, while women are disproportionately affected due to unpaid care work and gender pay gaps.

Financing also presents a significant difficulty. Many governments struggle to give enough resources to social protection while balancing priorities such as debt repayment, infrastructure and education. As a result, programmes may be poorly targeted, underfunded or dependent on donors, raising concerns about sustainability. In some cases, means-tested approaches are used to reduce costs, but these can lead to exclusion errors, particularly where income data is unreliable or administrative capacity is weak.

Recent global crises have further exposed weaknesses in these systems. The COVID-19 pandemic led to major job losses and income insecurity, mainly among informal

workers and low-income households. While many places had temporary emergency measures such as cash transfers or food assistance, these responses often failed to reach all vulnerable groups and were difficult to maintain once the emergency funding was over. Similar pressures have emerged from climate disasters and economic shocks, increasing the need for adaptive and shock-responsive social protection structures .

Strengthening social protection systems opens opportunities. Evidence suggests that well-designed programmes can reduce poverty, improve health and education outcomes and strengthen economic resilience. Approaches, such as social protection floors, have gained attention as a way of having basic income security and access to essential services without exclusion. Digital technologies and improved data systems also offer potential to expand coverage and improve efficiency but they raise worries about privacy and unequal access.

The challenge lies in making inclusive, sustainable and resilient social protection systems that work for different vulnerabilities. Addressing coverage gaps, improving benefit adequacy and ensuring equal access are issues that require coordinated national policies and international cooperation. These considerations form the basis for ongoing global discussions on how social protection can be strengthened to better serve vulnerable populations.

Major parties involved

International Labour Organisation (ILO)

The International Labour Organisation promotes social protection as a human right and sets international standards, including the *Social Protection Floors Recommendation*. It supports universal and inclusive systems, with particular attention to informal workers and vulnerable groups. The ILO's role focuses on guidance, data and technical support for member states.

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

The International Monetary Fund addresses social protection mainly in relation to economic stability and fiscal sustainability. It supports targeted assistance for vulnerable populations, especially during crises. The IMF emphasises cost-effectiveness and efficient use of public resources.

Low-Income Countries (LICs)

Low-income countries face major challenges in expanding social protection due to limited funding, high informal employment and weak administrative capacity. Coverage levels are often low and benefits limited. These countries seek international support to strengthen and expand their systems.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Non-governmental organisations work directly with vulnerable populations and advocate for inclusive social protection policies. They highlight gaps in coverage and support rights-based approaches. NGOs play a key role in accountability and service delivery.

World Bank

The World Bank finances and advises social protection programmes, particularly in developing countries. It supports cash transfers and system-building initiatives. Its focus is on poverty reduction and economic inclusion.

Timeline of events

2000 September 8th The United Nations General Assembly adopts the United Nations Millennium Declaration, from which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are established to guide global development efforts.

2002 March 3rd The International Labour Organisation begins publishing guidelines to encourage countries to expand basic social protection measures. (*Note: this is a general early effort and not an official treaty date; it is widely referenced in ILO activity timelines.*)

2008 September 15th The global financial crisis affects economies worldwide and reveals major weaknesses in social protection systems, especially in developing countries.

2012 June 14th The International Labour Conference adopts the Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202) to support universal access to minimum social protection guarantees.

2020 March 11th The World Health Organisation declares COVID-19 a global pandemic, leading to economic and social disruption that exposes gaps in social protection coverage.

2023 March 24th The ILO holds a high-level meeting on Social Protection Floors for All to review progress and challenges in strengthening social protection systems.

2024 December 2nd The OECD hosts the 5th Policy Dialogue on Social Protection and Development focusing on social protection's role in combating hunger and poverty.

Relevant UN treaties and events

A/RES/55/2; United Nations Millennium Declaration: The General Assembly adopts the Millennium Declaration, which sets global development goals including poverty reduction and basic social services, establishing early international development commitments. 8 September 2000.

A/RES/2200A (XXI); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: The General Assembly adopts the ICESCR, a binding covenant recognising economic and social rights such as the right to social security and an adequate standard of living. 16 December 1966.

A/RES/70/1; Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: The General Assembly adopts the 2030 Agenda with Sustainable Development Goal 1.3 to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems for all. 21 October 2015.

Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (ILO No. 202): The International Labour Organisation adopts a key international standard guiding member States to provide basic social protection guarantees and floors to safeguard citizens from poverty and vulnerability. 14 June 2012.

A/RES/79/1; Pact for the Future: The General Assembly adopts this resolution reaffirming commitments to sustainable development and inclusive policies, including poverty eradication, social cohesion and strengthened social protection measures in follow-up to the 2030 Agenda. 22 September 2024

Previous attempts to solve the issue

2002 – México: Oportunidades (later Prospera / Bienestar)

A government-led conditional cash transfer programme designed to reduce poverty by providing cash payments to families if they meet requirements like school attendance and health check-ups. This model became influential globally as an early large-scale social protection intervention and helped inform similar programmes worldwide. However, the programme's strict conditionality and administrative requirements meant that some of the poorest and most vulnerable households were excluded from support and evaluations show that it had limited impact on reducing extreme poverty overall rather than just improving services access.

2005 – Ethiopia: Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)

A national initiative to support chronically food-insecure households by providing cash or food in exchange for participation in public works, preventing asset depletion and building community infrastructure. PSNP is one of the longest-running social protection programmes in Africa and has shaped regional approaches to food security and labour-linked support. Despite its scale, PSNP has faced challenges with timely delivery, limited geographic and beneficiary coverage and implementation capacity issues, which have constrained its impact and left some vulnerable groups without reliable support.

2008 July – Pakistan: Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP)

The Government of Pakistan launches this unconditional cash transfer programme aimed at cushioning vulnerable households against poverty and economic shocks, especially for women and their families. BISP has since expanded to become a key national social safety net, supported by institutional reforms and international technical assistance. Nevertheless, critics note that benefit levels were often too low to raise beneficiaries above the poverty line, and coverage remained limited relative to the number of vulnerable households, with ongoing targeting and administrative challenges.

2019 March 27th – Pakistan: Ehsaas Programme

The government launches a comprehensive social safety and poverty alleviation programme, building on earlier cash transfer systems like BISP and expanding coverage to millions of vulnerable citizens with emergency cash, scholarships, and targeted support. The World Bank and others have cited it as a model of broad-based social protection coverage in response to modern economic and crisis challenges. Even as Ehsaas expanded coverage and introduced more diverse support mechanisms, it has been hampered by fragmentation of programmes, limited coordination among agencies, and ongoing challenges in ensuring that all vulnerable households are registered and reached with benefits.

Possible solutions

Universal Social Protection Coverage

One central solution to strengthening social protection systems is for Member States to commit to universal social protection coverage that includes all vulnerable groups. In many countries, significant portions of the population, such as informal workers, migrants, older persons, children and persons with disabilities are still excluded, which undermines the goals of social inclusion and poverty reduction. By building social protection floors and ensuring that basic benefits reach everyone regardless of employment status, governments can provide a stronger safety net that reduces inequality and reinforces economic stability. This approach reflects widely recognised international policy recommendations, which emphasise that social protection should be available throughout a person's life course to prevent people from falling into poverty when faced with shocks such as illness or job loss.

Modern and Efficient Delivery Systems

Investing in modern delivery systems and administrative capacity to make social protection programmes more efficient and accessible. When governments use digital registries, payment platforms and data management tools, they can identify eligible beneficiaries more accurately and reduce delays and errors in benefit distribution. These improvements not only help people receive support more quickly but also increase transparency and reduce leakages and administrative costs. Such systems have been supported by international development actors as a way to strengthen social protection infrastructure, particularly in countries with limited institutional capacity.

Shock-Responsive and Crisis-Resilient Systems

Making social protection systems shock-responsive and resilient to crises helps ensure that support can be delivered quickly when people are most in need. The COVID-19 pandemic and other economic shocks showed that static systems often fail to provide timely support when needed most. By creating mechanisms that automatically scale up benefits, expand coverage or increase benefit levels in response to disasters, economic downturns or public health emergencies, states can protect livelihoods and prevent sharp rises in poverty. In practice, this might involve setting up emergency contingencies within social protection frameworks or pre-defining triggers for rapid expansion of cash transfers and other support.

Targeted Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups

Member States can tailor social protection policies to the most disadvantaged populations to ensure that inclusion is meaningful. This means not only designing programmes with broad coverage but also addressing specific barriers that certain groups face such as administrative hurdles, discrimination, lack of identity documentation or geographical isolation. By consulting with communities, civil society organisations and vulnerable groups themselves,

policymakers can craft interventions that are better targeted and more equitable, leading to stronger outcomes for those most in need.