Social Protection: Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion in the SDG Agenda

Unexpected life circumstances can happen to anyone; natural disasters or illnesses strike or job circumstances change and increase the burden of care for children or elderly family members. Yet, it is estimated that 73% of the world’s population do not have access to comprehensive social protection to help them deal with life’s risks and 39% of the people around the world are not affiliated with a health system or insurance scheme. So for the large majority of people on the planet, the fundamental human right to social security is only partially met or not at all. It is widely recognized that social protection programmes have made an important contribution to the achievement of the MDGs and they are gaining momentum among governments. Social protection will play a fundamental role in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 1 on poverty reduction calls for nationally implemented social protection systems (1.3); Goal 3 on health asks for universal health coverage (3.8); Goal 5 on gender equality includes social protection policies as a way to value and recognize unpaid care and domestic work (5.4); and Goal 10 on reducing inequality calls for the adoption of social protection policies to achieve greater equality (10.4).

**Policy Recommendations**

- **Leave no one behind: Treat social protection as a basic human right and ensure protection for the most vulnerable and excluded.** Social protection ultimately aims to leave no one behind, but this is more difficult than it sounds because the most vulnerable and excluded are often the hardest to reach. Ethnic minorities, remote or rural populations, women and girls, people with disabilities, the informal labour sector and others are often, if unintentionally, excluded from social protection programmes. UNDP works with governments to build their capacity to capture and analyze population data and to design programmes and improve delivery to leave no one behind.

- **Coordinate programs across government to cover all stages of life.** As people progress through life they access social services at different stages. These services, such as education, health care, cash transfers to mothers, decent jobs or pensions, are normally implemented by a range of different ministries and/or development partners. By focusing on one need at a time, governments may not tackle the root causes of deprivation and exclusion or prevent individuals from falling back when transitioning from one stage in life to another e.g. leaving school without support for finding a job. UNDP advocates for and supports governments to move towards a comprehensive social protection system that is well coordinated across ministries and between local, regional and national levels to provide more seamless support services across the full life cycle.

- **Link social protection with environment and climate risk.** Now more than ever, the development challenges faced by governments and development partners are complex and transcend the traditional mandates of ministries or sectors. For example, climate change and the degradation of the natural environment are putting more people at risk of poverty, natural disaster and deprivation. The vital policy links between poverty and inequality and the environment are typically overlooked, in both developed and developing countries. Building on successes such as in Brazil, Ethiopia, South Africa and Zambia to link environmental and social benefits, UNDP aims to help governments deliver social protection systems that protect the poor

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and excluded against increasing levels of climate risk and vulnerability, while ensuring the sustainable management of natural resource. Through this approach social protection objectives may be addressed via funds normally reserved for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

- **Build national support to secure sustainable & domestic financing.** Social protection programmes are costly and for many developing countries funding them remains a very important challenge. This is particularly the case in least developed countries, fragile states or highly indebted countries, where some argue that resources are too limited to be able to invest in social protection programmes. In these cases, multilateral and bilateral cooperation often fill in the gap, operating or funding social protection services in different sectors (education, health, agriculture). These cooperation programmes are not always well coordinated; the funding may be cut-off or limited to a pilot phase/region, and the objectives may be misaligned to the government's priorities. Sustainable financing for social protection, therefore, hinges on anchoring the agenda within domestic financing. UNDP aims to support government to more effectively mobilize their own resources, through tax reforms and innovative forms of financing that provide the fiscal space for greater investments in social protection.

- **Building the case for social protection across the political spectrum** Governments have a commitment to protect citizens from poverty and exclusion. Some governments still view social protection as a policy option, a luxury, or a ‘handout’. Strong political will is needed across the party spectrum, within the government and the population, to support social protection systems that are adequately funded and that are sustainable from one government administration to the next. The case for social protection is clear. In addition to being a human right, social protection is also a wise investment in productivity and economic growth. Each dollar spent has a multiplier effect that promotes inclusive economic growth, job creation, expansion of local markets, etc. Businesses are now recognizing the purchasing power of the poor and that cash transfers can have a dramatic effect on local economies. UNDP works with governments to do in-depth monitoring and evaluation of programmes, an essential part of building the public and political support necessary for a sustainable social protection system.

**UNDP support on social protection is growing**

The mounting realization that crises, whether financial, climate, conflict or a natural disaster, are a new ‘norm’ has led to an increased demand for UNDP to support countries to enhance their social protection systems, including through South-South cooperation. UNDP’s work on social protection at the country level is in the following three areas:

**Policy advice and advocacy**

UNDP provides advisory support to frame national strategies, policies and laws concerning social protection, with emphasis on linking social protection programmes across sectors, particularly to labour markets/employment policy.

- In **Bangladesh** UNDP supported the country’s first National Social Protection Strategy, which extends safety nets to poor people over the entire life cycle, and helped improve living conditions for over 6 million people.
- With **UNDP support and data collected** by our regional and national projects the government of **Croatia** adopted a new Strategy for Inclusion of Roma 2013-2020, in order to help minorities overcome discrimination in the labour market.

**Capacity development**

UNDP helps strengthen national capacities for designing, implementing and monitoring social protection. By supporting national statistics institutions, UNDP helps ensure that social protection schemes reach the intended groups and are more cost-effective.

- In **Honduras** and **Haiti**, UNDP is providing assistance to the government to set up single beneficiary registries for social protection initiatives to help with targeting of the most vulnerable households.
- Through UNDP’s support to the **Egypt** Ministry of Social Affairs, a social pension database was created and monthly transfers were processed to 1,414,000 Egyptians, including 709,000 women.

**Knowledge & South-South cooperation**

UNDP leverages its extensive network and experience to facilitate South-South collaboration on experiences, solutions and projects on social protection between countries and regions.

- UNDP and the RIO+ Centre brought together 12 African countries to share experiences with Brazilians on implementing social protection. This resulted in defining of a new a continental social protection policy at the African Union Ministerial level. This effort has laid the foundation for more in-depth South-South technical exchanges between Latin American and African governments.