



# UNDP ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL SYNTHESIS OF SUPPORT TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

UNDP REGIONAL BUREAU  
FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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## Brief description of the publication

Amid recent and ongoing global polycrises, social protection has remained a key pillar of inclusive policies, ensuring the well-being of people and stabilizing national economies. For social protection to fully deliver on its potential in the Asia and the Pacific region, a major reform at the regional level towards a gender- and age-sensitive, inclusive and financially sustainable system integrated into national sustainable development strategies is an imperative. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP) commissioned this working paper to take stock of UNDP's past and ongoing support to social protection in Asia and the Pacific region countries in shaping the global, regional and national discourse and thinking around a system that is a best fit to address the uncertainties emanating from protracted economic, social, political and climate crises. This paper illustrates the range of interventions and types of support that UNDP has provided in the region to help advance social protection in nine categories: (1) socio-economic impact assessments (SEIA), (2) analytical work to advance social protection, (3) scale-up/reform of national social protection systems, (4) transformative approaches to social protection, (5) financing of social protection, (6) digitalization of social protection, (7) shock-responsive social protection, (8) leveraging multi-stakeholder partnerships and (9) regional initiatives. This paper also identifies emerging opportunities and entry points to bolster UNDP's support for social protection at country and regional levels alongside a new and forward-looking agenda on social protection in the Asia and the Pacific region.

## Authors of the publication

This working paper was prepared by Nard Huijbregts, Anna Cristina Cerlinca and Michael J. Samson (Economic Policy Research Institute) and Mizuho Okimoto-Kaewtathip, Regional Team Leader and Advisor on Inclusive Growth, UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub, with research support from Bazlul Khondker. The paper also benefited from contributions from UNDP country offices in the Asia and the Pacific region, including UNDP Afghanistan (Arvind Kumar, Saurabh Sinha, Muhammad Attahi, Mohammad Haroon Haand and Abdul Azim Doosti), UNDP Bangladesh (Nazneen Ahmed), UNDP Bhutan (Tshering Lhamo and Sangay Wangmo), UNDP Cambodia (Ivan Gonzalez de Alba and Theara Khoun), UNDP Fiji Multi Country Office (Scott Hook), UNDP India (Digvijay Singh and Amit Kumar), UNDP Iran (Claudio Providas, Gulbahor Nematova and Arghavan Farzin Motamed), UNDP Lao PDR (Raniya Sobir and Sinthavy Malavong), UNDP Malaysia (Haniza Khalid, Asfaazam Kasbani, Herlianna Naning and Norhafiza Shafie), UNDP Maldives (Mohamed Shahudh), UNDP Mongolia (Yasin Janjua and Ninjin Bolortsogoo), UNDP Nepal (Binda Magar and Satish Pandey), UNDP Pakistan (Meeran Jamal, Sana Ehsan, Umer Malik and Ammara Durrani), UNDP the Philippines (Bishnu Chettri, Maria Irina Velasco, Sheena Kristine Cases and Arlan Brucal), UNDP Samoa Multi Country Office (Christina Mualia-Lima and Potoae Roberts Aiafi), UNDP Sri Lanka (Dulani Sirisena), UNDP Thailand (Dadanee Vuthipadadorn and Anuk Serechetapongse), UNDP Timor-Leste (Firuz Shukurov) and UNDP Viet Nam (Jonathan Pincus and Do Le Thu Ngoc). The paper also benefited from contributions from UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific: Jaco Cilliers, Philip Schellekens, Swarnim Wagle, Koh Miyaoi, Devika Iyer and Trang Dang as well as UNDP's global Inclusive Growth Team: Mansour Ndiye, Nathalie Bouche and Dajna Sorensen.

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United Nations Development Programme, 3rd Floor, United Nations Service Building, Rajdamnern Nok Avenue, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

## Foreword

Social protection has re-emerged as a key policy instrument for countries in the Asia and the Pacific as they rushed to protect their economies and safeguard the well-being of people in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the repeated experience of scrambling to scale-up existing social security programmes and introducing new emergency cash transfers during periods of ‘shock’ often magnify the shortcomings of national social protection systems in the region.

The current slowdown in the global economy and the war in Ukraine has renewed the emphasis to address the structural issues driving deepening inequalities. In essence, social protection would now need to transcend a notion of focussing solely on ‘quick wins’ to temporarily cushion the loss in income, to investing in people’s capabilities and resilience and act as a stimulus for economic recovery and human development progress.

This paper, ‘UNDP Asia-Pacific Regional Synthesis of Support to Social Protection’, was commissioned to take stock of UNDP’s past and ongoing support to social protection in countries in the Asia and the Pacific region and more importantly, with an objective of informing and shaping the renewed thinking on, and instruments of, social protection that can address the uncertainties of today. The paper highlights a range of innovative social protection practices spearheaded by UNDP in the Asia and the Pacific region in close collaboration with governments and partners and suggests ways for UNDP to further intensify this support.

Managing risks and vulnerabilities is now a prerequisite for an inclusive and sustainable development agenda, with social protection acting as an intermediary. I hope this paper informs strategic dialogues on this topic, to navigate protracted crises and accelerate reforms towards an inclusive, sustainable development.

**Kanni Wignaraja**

United Nations Assistant Secretary-General  
Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, UNDP

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil society organization
DFA	Development financing assessment
GDP	Gross domestic product
IBC	Issue-Based Coalition
IFI	International financial institution
ILO	International Labour Organization
INFF	Integrated National Financing Framework
IRBM	Integrated result-based management
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LDC	Least Developed Countries
MCO	Multi-Country Office
MLRCs	Mobile Labour Resource Centres
MSME	Micro, small and medium-sized enterprise
PWD	Persons with disabilities
RBAP	Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (UNDP)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund



# 1. Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 set in motion a health crisis that soon evolved into a humanitarian and development crises, with multiplier effects felt globally and at all levels of society. The socio-economic downturn that followed, the war in Ukraine, and the emerging effects of climate change all combined to define a new international development context—one that poses new threats and challenges towards achieving the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Gender inequality, uneven access to basic health, education or nutrition services, the precarious socio-economic situation of workers in informal sectors, and the predominance of women and young persons in economically insecure jobs and unpaid care were all brought under the spotlight and exacerbated by the cascading crises. A decade of progress towards reducing poverty, inequality and exclusion is in danger of rolling back, highlighting the severity of recent and ongoing crises and the fragility of the progress achieved so far.

The spread of COVID-19 also brought about new public and political awareness of the potential and promise of social protection to ensure the well-being of citizens and stabilization of national economies through the creation of internal demand. As countries rushed to protect their economies and preserve the well-being of people, social protection emerged as an “indispensable public health response as well as a measure for stabilizing household income and responding to crises”.<sup>1</sup> Across the Asia and the Pacific region, low- and middle-income countries responded to the health crisis through a combination of scaling-up existing social security programmes and introducing new emergency cash transfers and delivery of food, with mixed results.<sup>2</sup> For those who received assistance, it provided temporary support. However, the

cumulative impact of these interventions has not been sufficient to deliver the necessary relief to the population or avoid a severe economic downturn. In most cases, large segments of the population, the so-called ‘missing middle’, were not covered by any intervention and were pushed into poverty, forming the ‘newly poor and vulnerable’.<sup>3</sup> Even where support did reach beneficiaries, it was too little and provided for too short a time to make a difference to the household’s ability to weather the storm.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the experience of scrambling to verify social registries, set up and manage responsive registration and payment systems, identify sustainable financing sources or coordinate across different bodies did serve to highlight the shortcomings of national social protection systems in the region and the urgent need for a redesign to match the new development context. The difference between countries in the ability to intervene rapidly and efficiently brought to the forefront the importance of well-designed and implemented, and sustainably financed social protection systems. Outdated beneficiary registries, inefficient payment mechanisms and a largely paper-based system, among others, hampered the potential of social protection interventions in many countries if newly introduced or scaled-up as an emergency response.

1 Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board, ‘Key COVID-19 Lessons and Recommendations for Working Towards Universal Social Protection’, SPIAC-B Joint Statement, SPIAC-B, New York, 2021.

2 Kidd, S., Athias, D. and Tran, A., ‘Addressing the COVID-19 economic crisis in Asia through social protection’, United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, 2020.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

Moreover, although low- and middle-income countries in Asia only spent 0.02–0.8 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on the expansion of social protection interventions (compared to 5.7 percent in G7 countries),<sup>5</sup> most still required hefty investments and created large deficits that challenge the continued funding of an expanded social protection system, even as the crisis has made social protection more important than ever.

In the Asia and the Pacific region, the combined effects of poverty, a slower labour market recovery, rising climate risks and the soaring cost of living will have lasting impacts on those furthest behind, especially women, youth and informal sector workers. At a time when more than 90 percent of countries globally are experiencing reversals in human development,<sup>6</sup> the needs of those typically excluded from the system are greater than ever. As the cost-of-living crisis is expected to drive 71 million people into poverty globally<sup>7</sup>, with 8.7 million people from the Asia and the Pacific region,<sup>8</sup> there is an impetus for scaling-up and doubling down on investments in social protection today. This imperative is even stronger in the Asia and the Pacific region, where poverty and widening inequalities are evident,<sup>9</sup> and the 'last mile' will inevitably become a long journey for many countries.

For social protection to deliver on its potential in the Asia and the Pacific region, it will require a shift towards a comprehensive, universal approach that is gender- and age-sensitive, inclusive

and financially viable and integrated into national sustainable development strategies. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) strives to support countries in strengthening their social protection systems in line with this ideal. At the heart of this vision is UNDP's institutional leadership in human development since 1990. UNDP seeks to enhance human capabilities and potential by broadening people's individual and collective choices and freedom, thus enhancing their agency and resilience.

**The human development approach gives UNDP the impetus to promote social protection as part of the sustainable development agenda and a non-negotiable element of recovery and pre-crisis solutions.**

Globally, UNDP is an active member of joint UN cooperation on social protection and an advocate for social protection as an investment in human development. Several strategic documents capture and detail UNDP's commitment to social protection. The UNDP Social Protection Corporate Offer 2.0 articulates 12 social protection solutions cross-cutting three key thematic components of responsive and accountable governance, resilience and environmental stability.<sup>10</sup> Also, the key strategic priorities presented in the Strategic Plan for 2022–2025 include tackling poverty and inequality, confronting the structural obstacles

5 Kidd, S., Athias, D. and Tran, A., 'Addressing the COVID-19 economic crisis in Asia through social protection', United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, 2020.

6 United Nations Development Programme, 'Human Development Report 2021-2022', UNDP, New York, 2022.

7 United Nations Development Programme, 'Addressing the cost-of-living crisis in developing countries: Poverty and vulnerability projections and policy responses', UNDP, New York, 2022.

8 ESCAP, The War in Ukraine: Impacts, Exposure and Policy Issues In Asia and the Pacific, (Bangkok, 2022). Available at: [www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Policy%20Brief\\_Ukraine%20war\\_final.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Policy%20Brief_Ukraine%20war_final.pdf)

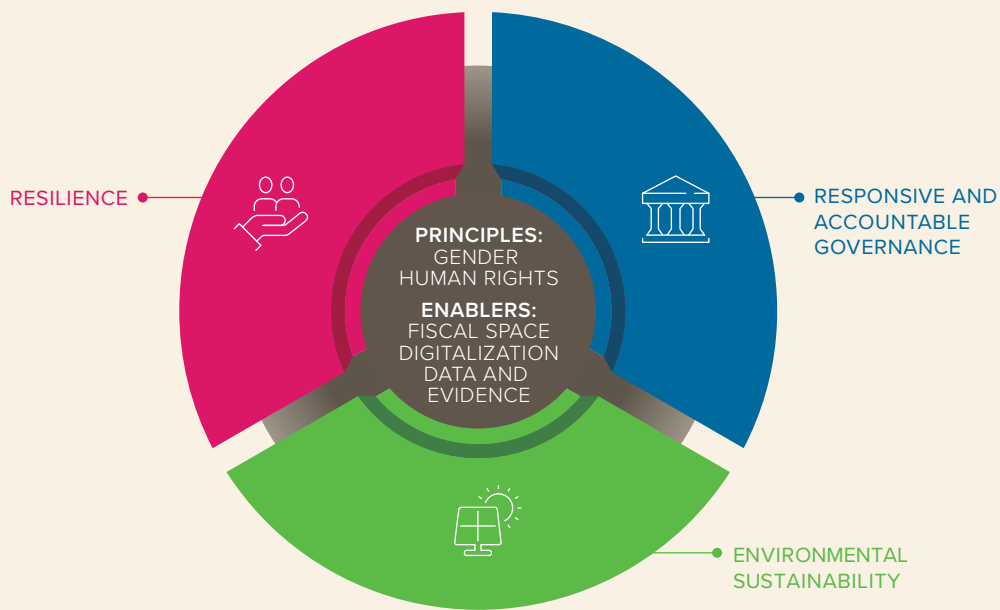
9 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Asian Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme, 'Building Forward Together: Towards an inclusive and resilient Asia and the Pacific', United Nations, Bangkok, 2022.

10 United Nations Development Programme, 'Social Protection Corporate Offer 2.0', UNDP, New York, 2022.

to gender equality and building the resilience of countries to shocks and crises.<sup>11</sup> Overall, UNDP's engagement in social protection is firmly grounded in the

human development approach that will tackle inequalities and give citizens the freedom and opportunity to live the lives they aspire to.

### Thematic areas and cross-cutting principles and enablers of UNDP's approach to social protection



Source: United Nations Development Programme, 'Social Protection Corporate Offer 2.0', UNDP, New York, 2022.

11 United Nations Development Programme, 'Strategic Plan 2022–2025', UNDP, New York, 2021.

## 2. Objectives and outline

As part of its engagement as a strategic partner in social protection, the UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP) commissioned this working paper to take stock of UNDP's past and ongoing support to social protection in countries in the Asia and the Pacific region. This paper aims to develop the regional and global knowledge base with evidence and experiences from the Asia and the Pacific region and to identify emerging opportunities and entry points for strategic support at country and regional levels. Ultimately, UNDP aims to guide dialogue and enable transformational change at the policy narrative and direction levels.

The paper presents the results of the mapping and is organized into five main sections. The introduction has set the stage for the mapping. It looked at the overall social protection response in the Asia and the Pacific region in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cascade of crises that followed, highlighting gaps and shortcomings in the overall response as well as enablers for 'building back better' and, more importantly, for protecting people sooner. Section 2 introduces the objectives and outline, and Section 3 discusses the data sources, methods and limitations of the approach used to develop this paper. The main contribution of this working paper is presented in

Sections 4 and 5. Section 4 takes a closer look at UNDP's social protection support in the Asia and the Pacific region,<sup>12</sup> which is classified as belonging to one or more of nine categories. For each support category, the mapping looks at the rationale for providing this type of support in the context of UNDP's corporate offer and comparative advantage, and the details of UNDP's support of different activities through examples from selected countries. Finally, Section 5 takes stock of preliminary outcomes and lessons learned from UNDP's past and ongoing support to social protection in the Asia and the Pacific region and looks at ways to advance and refine its approaches.

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<sup>12</sup> The following countries were included in the synthesis: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Samoa Multi-Country Office (MCO) (covering Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau), Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Thailand and Viet Nam.

### 3. Data and methods

This paper uses a qualitative methodology for collecting and analyzing data, namely a structured desk review, key informant interviews and discussions, and analysis of country-specific project information through a sorting matrix. In the first stage, a comprehensive desk review took stock of the existing data and evidence in the Asia and the Pacific region. Reports, research papers, reviews and policy briefs produced by UNDP or in collaboration with research partners and other UN agencies were included in the review.

Data collected through the desk review were complemented by data harvested through correspondence, interviews and discussions with UNDP staff in Asia and the Pacific region countries and at the Bangkok Regional Hub. Country offices contributed programmatic information on past and ongoing social protection support and helped shape the understanding of each country's context with specific challenges and opportunities for partnership. All relevant country experiences were considered

regardless of the period of implementation. In a majority of cases, country offices provided examples of social protection support since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to the present. However, in some cases, examples from earlier years considered to provide important lessons in the context of this mapping were also included. The information supplied was organized using a sorting matrix, which identified and classified common forms of support.



## 4. UNDP’s support to social protection in the Asia and the Pacific region

UNDP strives to become a stronger partner for social protection across the Asia and the Pacific region. In the region, social protection evolved from a ‘first wave’ of fragmented interventions aimed at providing immediate relief into a ‘second wave’ of developmental social protection that saw social protection integrated with development objectives, such as education and health care. Emerging trends point to a ‘third wave’ of integrated climate, development and equity strategies.

UNDP’s past and ongoing activities in several countries in the Asia and the Pacific region have been reviewed to illustrate its range of interventions and types of support to help advance social protection. The forms of support were divided into nine categories for mapping, clustered around UNDP’s operational comparative advantage.

This is not surprising, as one of UNDP’s main strategic advantages is its ability to provide comprehensive solutions to complex socio-economic challenges. The following subsections detail each category and the relevant interventions.

The 12 social protection solutions proposed in the UNDP Social Protection Corporate Offer 2.0 were also considered as a way of systematizing types of support. However, past country programmatic data translated to a greater degree into the nine categories proposed and allowed to translate the corporate offer at country level.

The **nine categories** for the mapping are:

- ① Socio-economic impact assessments
- ② Analytical work to advance social protection
- ③ Scale-up/reform of national social protection systems
- ④ Transformative approaches to social protection (including the nexus between social protection and livelihood/employment, and between social protection and climate)
- ⑤ Financing of social protection
- ⑥ Digitalization of social protection
- ⑦ Shock-responsive social protection
- ⑧ Leveraging multi-stakeholder partnerships
- ⑨ Regional initiatives

However, the different categories are not exclusive as more often than not, different types of support fell into more than one category.

## 4.1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

In the context of the pandemic, UNDP provided technical leadership in the socio-economic-focussed response of the UN system.<sup>13</sup> A key part of its role was leading development of country-specific socio-economic impact assessments. The rapid assessments of country contexts were informed by a gender perspective and included risks to the most vulnerable segments of populations. They looked at the economic impact of COVID-19, policy options to contain it, approaches to protect the most vulnerable, social protection instruments available in each context and how they could be best used for an immediate response. Drawing on the rich analytical content produced, the assessments served to inform dialogue with national partners in the Asia and the Pacific region and to derive context-specific policy options for the response.<sup>14</sup> In conducting the impact assessments, UNDP leveraged its extensive experience in the region and expertise in multidimensional poverty, gender equality and inclusion, social protection systems, economic empowerment and the labour market, among others.

In line with its commitment to ‘leave no one behind’, in most contexts, UNDP assessments **strived to highlight the impacts of the combined crises on particularly vulnerable segments of the population**. In **India**, for example, the focus of impact assessments was on migrant workers, women and minorities. UNDP India provided financial and technical support to conduct a survey of 9,300 *Safai Sathis* (waste pickers) in 2020, which fed into a baseline analysis of their socio-economic situation in the context of COVID-19. The preliminary studies revealed significant potential to advance the formalization of work, build skills-training initiatives and improve access to children’s education in the community.

UNDP India also produced studies that particularly explored pandemic impacts on migrant workers, especially women. The studies provided evidence for government decision-making and informed UNDP’s approach to social protection in India, namely a systems approach based on support to communities, civil society organizations (CSOs) and regional governments to strengthen social protection systems.

Similarly, in **Nepal**, UNDP in partnership with Pokhara University conducted a socio-economic vulnerability assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on the most vulnerable women from marginalized and excluded groups in three local municipalities in Gandaki province. The assessment largely supported the respective local governments in identifying the most vulnerable populations and making visible their urgent livelihood and basic income needs for survival. The findings of the assessment further informed the design of social protection interventions for this target group (the PRAYASH programme). In **Bangladesh**, UNDP conducted a survey (27 May to 8 June 2020) to collect real data on COVID-19’s socio-economic impacts. The 2,500 survey respondent households were drawn from 350,000 beneficiaries of UNDP projects in 64 districts. The analysis revealed that the pandemic-induced socio-economic consequences amplified existing multidimensional vulnerabilities among households, largely reflecting the inadequacy of existing social protection programmes. Thus, the assessment suggested the development of a shock-responsive social protection system.<sup>15</sup>

13 United Nations, ‘A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19’, United Nations, New York, 2020.

14 United Nations Development Programme, ‘The Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19 in the Asia Pacific Region’, UNDP RBAP, Bangkok, 2020.

15 UNDP, Addressing COVID-19’s uneven impacts on vulnerable populations in Bangladesh: The case for shock-responsive social protection, Dhaka, 2021.

In **Thailand**, the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 was commissioned in 2020 by the UN Country Team in Thailand led by UNDP and UNICEF in collaboration with the National Economic and Social Development Council and ADB. In the same year, a subnational-level socio-economic impact assessment of COVID-19 in Phuket was conducted, shedding light on the pandemic's asymmetric impact (by gender) on employment in the formal and informal sectors, particularly in the hardest-hit tourism-oriented sectors. These assessments emphasized the need for the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to strengthen the country's social protection system by expanding the coverage to better reach the informal sector and migrant workers, especially women in these groups as well as collaborating with CSOs and empowering local communities to improve social protection delivery and enhance social cohesion through mutual support. Similarly in **Bhutan**, the rapid socio-economic impact assessment of COVID-19 on Bhutan's tourism sector in 2020 formed the basis for supporting a national agriculture stimulus plan and upskilling laid-off people in the tourism and allied sectors.

In **Timor-Leste**, UNDP supported the development of the SEIA 2.0 outcomes database, which has the potential to inform policy development not only during the pandemic recovery phase, but also more broadly further into the future. SEIA 2.0 is a national survey launched by UNDP, together with the General Directorate of Statistics, that took stock of COVID-19 impacts, government restrictions and government economic recovery measures on 4,292 households (23,362 people), as well as on 1,086 formal and informal micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) across all municipalities. SEIA 2.0 successfully attained broad-scale and nuanced data disaggregated by location, gender, age, and disability status on household coping mechanisms, employment, education and food security,

as well as less tangible themes such as satisfaction with government action and social cohesion.

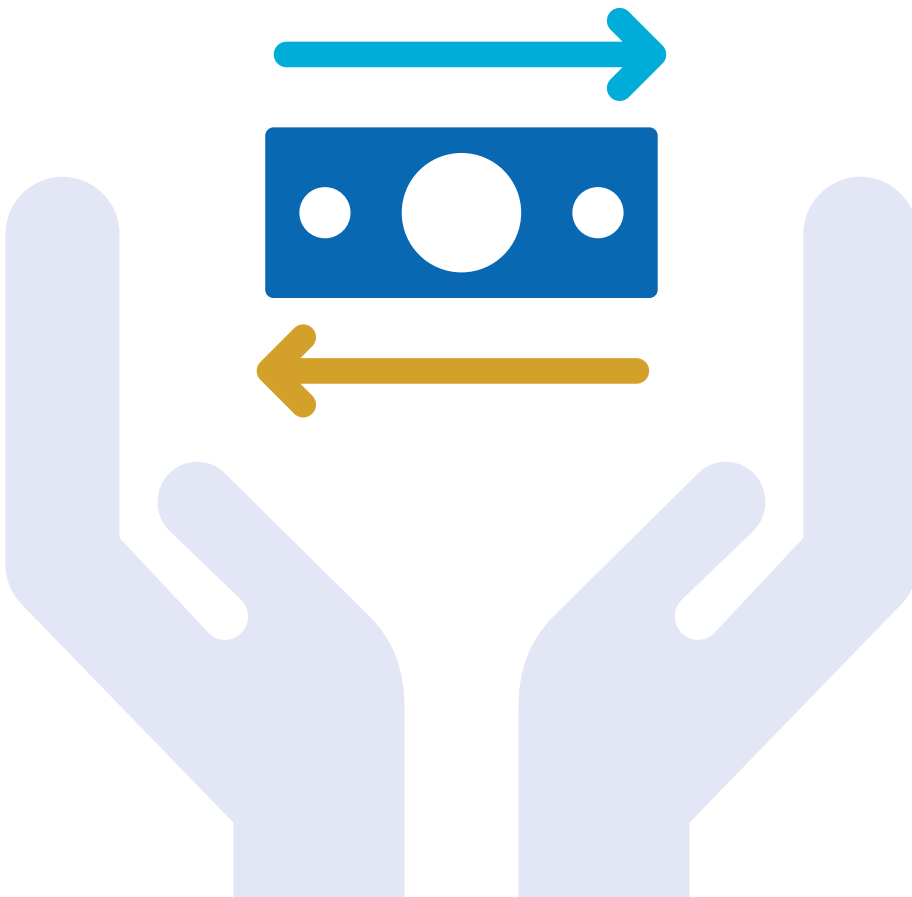
### The socio-economic impact assessments informed medium-term and high-level policy agendas at the national development plan level.

In **Pakistan**, the COVID-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment and Response Plan was developed through a joint effort of relevant ministries in the Government of Pakistan, UNDP and other UN agencies, with UNDP extending financial and technical support in developing the assessment. The plan included both an immediate short-term response to cope with the most exigent socio-economic risks and impacts of COVID-19, as well as medium- to long-term policy, regulatory and institutional measures to bring a holistic perspective to the response strategy. In **Indonesia**, the findings of the UNDP assessment report provided immediate policy recommendations that informed dialogue with national policymakers. From 2021 to 2022, UNDP conducted the socio-economic impact assessment in collaboration with UNICEF and Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Economic Development (PROSPERA-DFAT). This engagement was part of the SDG joint programme of Leaving No One Behind: Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) for All in Indonesia. The survey outcomes were published in a number of high level and technical policy forums including the 'Analysis of the Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Households and Strategic Policy Recommendations for Indonesia' (May, 2021), 'Socioeconomic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Households in Indonesia: Three Rounds of Monitoring Surveys' (December, 2021) and 'The Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Households in Indonesia: A Second Round of Surveys in 2022' (August, 2022).



In **Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR)**, on behalf of the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) and with guidance from the Ministry of Planning and Investment and in consultation with stakeholders, UNDP Lao PDR assessed the pandemic's socio-economic impacts on people, households, businesses and sectors between April and August 2020. The report guided government interventions and informed the development of the 9th Five-Year National Social Economic Development Plan (2021-2025).

Similarly, in **Fiji**, an assessment conducted in July 2020 highlighted the importance of preparing national health systems, extending social protection, developing new economic and financing opportunities in the Green/Blue economy and strengthening the informal sector. The work was impactful in devising a range of policy recommendations for building the resilience of households and the government. UNDP Pacific used this work to consider a more general policy response by Pacific Island countries and territories to create climate-resilient pathways post-pandemic.



## 4.2. ANALYTICAL WORK TO ADVANCE SOCIAL PROTECTION

The production of strong analytical work is one of UNDP's main comparative advantages, underpinning all advisory and implementation work it supports. The pace of current converging crises and the scale of impact on the most vulnerable segments of the population have required prepositioning of policy and institutional analysis to highlight the current state of affairs and gaps in existing social protection systems in the region. Increasingly, there is high demand for policy and strategic advice from governments and partners to explore policy options to respond to the crises, often taking existing schemes to scale.

**Much of the analytical work conducted by UNDP country offices has been effectively applied to strengthening of social protection systems for poverty reduction and inclusive growth.**

In **Cambodia**, for instance, UNDP supported the Royal Government of Cambodia in 2020 to improve its analytical capacity to understand the costs and benefits of various social protection schemes and interventions, especially in terms of their distributive effects and capacity to reduce poverty and inequality. This was achieved through an interactive, online social protection microsimulation tool and capacity building for the government. The tool, which is available for policymakers and practitioners, facilitated rapid estimation of the coverage, adequacy and impact of various tax-financed social protection schemes, including maternity benefits, child benefits, disability benefits, old-age benefits and the Family Package Programme in accordance with the National Social Protection Policy Framework 2016–2025. Furthermore, UNDP's analytical work is often geared towards testing novel approaches and tools to advance social protection. Through the Thailand Policy Lab, UNDP **Thailand** partnered with the School of Public Policy at Chiang Mai University to develop a framework for the Thailand Innovative Policy Analysis and Design (TIPAD) between October 2021

and September 2022. This framework stimulates a new way of approaching the policy process beyond top-down and vertical policymaking by articulating empirical, normative and emotional modes of knowing in designing a future-oriented policy. It encompasses empathy rather than solely relying on data and statistics in the typical conventional processes. The preliminary results of the experiment were expressed in three sets of proposed policies: participatory budgeting, lifelong learning as well as database and service accessibility. The key principle of TIPAD is that sound public policy should comprise a customized portfolio/series of policies designed by “sentimental policy analysts and designers”, who could facilitate an empathetic deliberative process.

UNDP **Pakistan** provided policy advisory and technical assistance to the Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division of the Benazir Income Support Programme (previously known as Ehsaas), with a focus on producing evidence-based research and analyses, policy dialogues, and advocacy activities, especially in the context of making the social protection strategy more inclusive and participatory in terms of post-COVID-19 realities. In this context, UNDP published three policy papers on (1) financial literacy, (2) dynamic social registries, and (3) complaint management systems, to synergize global perspectives, best practices, and local context with social protection systems.

It also produced two other policy papers on social protection with gender lens: (1) home-based women workers and (2) social protection in Pakistan and finding alternative means to finance gender-responsive social protection.

Lastly, UNDP research and analysis also **paves the way for the innovative use of non-traditional data sources to assess socio-economic impacts**, as has been the case in Mongolia. UNDP **Mongolia** collaborated with the National University of Mongolia, Ministry of Finance and the Information Technology Centre for Custom, Taxation and Finance to conduct pilot research on COVID-19's impact on consumption, poverty and inequality in the country in 2020. The study used big data generated by the value-added tax (VAT) e-system to analyze changes in household spending in Mongolia, thus

allowing alternative estimates of poverty and inequality. It also provided a model on how VAT data can be used to track changes in spending, poverty and inequality much more frequently than was possible until now, which can be replicated in other contexts. The analysis showed that the shock of the pandemic on household spending, especially that of the poorest 40 percent of households (as measured by expenditure), was softened by an economic stimulus package introduced in April 2020.<sup>16</sup> The stimulus spending included a large social protection component, most of which was spent on increased universal child allowance (UNDP 2021).<sup>17</sup> Building on lessons learned, UNDP Mongolia is currently using expanded VAT and other datasets to conduct an impact analysis of COVID-19 and the Russia–Ukraine conflict on Mongolian households, businesses and the economy.



<sup>16</sup> Initially, spending declined during lockdowns, but subsequently increased as social benefits were distributed in phases (UNDP 2021).

<sup>17</sup> UNDP 2021. Mongolia: Poverty and Inequality During COVID-19 using Big Data. United Nations Development Programme, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

### 4.3. SCALE-UP/REFORM OF NATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Support for the scaling-up and reform of social protection systems, deeply rooted in a systems approach, is an important component of UNDP's social protection offering<sup>18</sup> and a key feature of UNDP's social protection support in the Asia and the Pacific region. This type of support is often a continuation of analytical work that UNDP undertakes and the operationalization of policy recommendations and programming insights that accompany the analytical work.

First, UNDP **supports the development of national social protection policies and strategies**. In **Bangladesh**, for example, UNDP supported the reform and preparation of a new National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) centred around a life-cycle and poverty graduation approach. Under the leadership of the Bangladesh Planning Commission, UNDP provided technical and financial support for the development of the strategy and invested in building the capacity of stakeholders. Similarly, in **Viet Nam**, UNDP assisted the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs in the development of the Master Plan on Social Assistance Reform and Development (MPSARD) that follows a human rights-based and life-cycle approach to social protection and is built around the recognition of social protection spending as development investment. In 2017, MPSARD 2017–2025 and Vision to 2030 were approved, serving as the first comprehensive social assistance framework in Viet Nam. The plan embraces an ambitious scaling-up of social assistance, with the overall aim of progressively realizing universal access, including social pensions and child grants.

UNDP is also providing support for **the review and reform of existing strategies, policies and systems, with a particular commitment to gender equality and inclusion of the most vulnerable**. For example, in **Bangladesh**, UNDP funded the preparation of a mid-term implementation review of the NSSS, which looked at implementation progress against indicators

laid out in the NSSS's first implementation roadmap, identified gaps in implementation and recommended strategies to accelerate NSSS implementation. In addition to technical and financial support, UNDP facilitated discussions with implementing line ministries and policy ministries such as the Planning Commission, Ministry of Finance and Cabinet Division. In **Malaysia**, UNDP, together with government and development partners, is supporting the forthcoming 'Strengthening Social Protection Policy for Inclusive Development and Growth' project, which aims to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and targeting of the social protection system in line with the 12th Malaysia Plan 2021–2025. The project aims to strengthen social protection policy to address poverty and build an inclusive society that ensures social justice and a decent standard of living for the population. UNDP works with the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, World Health Organization, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Bank and in collaboration with several government ministries (Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Ministry of Finance, Implementation Coordination Unit, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development, Ministry of Rural Development, National Registration Department, Ministry of Home Affairs and Department of Orang Asli Development) and local governments in this project. To achieve the expected outcomes, UNDP Malaysia will provide technical and financial

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 'UNDP's Social Protection Offer 2.0', UNDP, New York, 2022.

support and facilitate collaboration and coordination with UN partner agencies in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.

**UNDP is also backing the scaling-up of existing social protection programmes and the introduction of new ones focusing on segments of the population who are particularly vulnerable or most left behind.**

In **Cambodia**, for example, the pandemic created the opportunity for UNDP to increase its involvement in the social protection sector with the overarching objective of providing support for the inclusion of chronically and newly vulnerable segments of the population. To this end and at the request of the Ministry of Planning, UNDP Cambodia supported the scaling-up of IDPoor by providing 1,700 tablet computers to accelerate the registration of new beneficiaries through On Demand IDPoor. Due to the switch to On Demand IDPoor, the programme was rapidly scaled-up to cover vulnerable people and those pushed below the poverty line by COVID-19. Together with the World Bank and Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), UNDP Cambodia is now working on improving the IDPoor targeting mechanisms for the programme to be gender-sensitive and avoid high inclusion and exclusion errors.

UNDP Cambodia also guided the development of a social protection complaints mechanism and supported the COVID-19 cash transfer programme roll out and its evaluation. Moreover, UNDP Cambodia is working with the government on a pilot graduation programme, combining cash with assets and training for recipients, to build their productive potential and capacities. Furthermore, through collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, UNDP Cambodia is supporting implementation of an ageing

policy by piloting care institutions for elderly people and proposing a multi-tiered pension system. It further seeks to bring the informal sector into the policy spotlight through partnerships with ILO and the National Social Protection Council.

In **India**, UNDP designed a framework for conceptualizing, designing and implementing welfare and well-being measures for transgender people. Along with civil society partners, UNDP India developed an evidence-based and participatory framework on a gamut of social welfare measures for transgender communities by conducting a systematic assessment of the current situation, implementation gaps and challenges, and multi-stakeholder consultations. The framework incorporates community needs and aspirations along with good practices within India and globally to arrive at broad objectives and specific policy suggestions. It is being used as a policy planning and governance model by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and other government stakeholders for the implementation of welfare directives notified in the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act and Rules. UNDP also supports awareness-raising sessions conducted to provide key information on flagship schemes and government entitlements while improving last mile service delivery to the community. These interventions enhanced institutional capacities across all levels of government ensuring inclusion of 14,000 tribal households in social protection schemes. The initiative was replicated in the states of Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh to equip beneficiaries with knowledge of entitlements and support local authorities to optimize coordination and delivery of schemes including pensions, labour welfare and COVID-19 ex-gratia payments. Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh, more than 32,000 households were supported with information on schemes and entitlements they are eligible for, out of which 20,000 households gained access to at least one scheme or entitlement during 2020-2021.

**UNDP country offices are piloting innovative approaches to strengthen national social protection systems to generate solutions that could be scaled-up through upstream policy work.**

By engaging with local communities and those most affected, pilot approaches contribute towards enhancing principles of good governance, such as inclusion, participation, transparency, improving efficiency and effectiveness, social cohesion and resilience to multidimensional life-cycle shocks, which are fundamental to strengthening social protection systems. In **Malaysia**, UNDP partnered with the State Government of Sarawak to capture the impact of Temporary Basic Income (TBI) to offer a policy option for shock-responsive social protection. TBI is a form of social protection measure that can reduce income uncertainty and increase the security of vulnerable households.<sup>19</sup> Expected to be completed by August 2023, the TBI impact study will ride on the Sarawakku Sayang Special Assistance (BKSS) programme to document the impact of a 'safety net' income on households' nutrition, health and education including consumption, protection and accumulation of productive assets, and the diversification of livelihoods. The study will also explore the impact of entrepreneurship support and the use of digital payment as a more efficient means

of transferring funds. For this project, the country office will leverage the available UNDP Rapid Financing Facility (RFF) fund to understand and recommend an 'out-of-the-box' social protection policy initiative suitable for the chosen local context.

Similarly, in **Nepal**, UNDP together with UN Women in 2021 piloted a TBI programme targeting marginalized and excluded women in Nepal to help meet their immediate survival needs and become more economically empowered, informed and resilient to face the evolving COVID-19 context at that time. As part of the project, UNDP Nepal provided financial and technical support for a feasibility analysis of basic income for women in the country, the design and implementation of the TBI pilot, capacity building and high-level advisory expertise to local governments, and the generation and dissemination of knowledge products on the socio-economic progress of marginalized and excluded women. The Prayash pilot project has been scaled-up to a multi-year project called Sambodhan, adopting successful practices and approaches that have been expanded to additional provinces in Nepal. The Sambodhan project builds the systems and knowledge base to address socio-economic vulnerabilities in Nepal, integrating social protection systems at the local level to unlock access to social protection systems and schemes for vulnerable people while establishing linkages to income generation opportunities.

<sup>19</sup> Molina, G.G., and Ortiz-Juarez, E., 'A Temporary Basic Income for Developing Countries', UNDP Global Policy Network Brief, UNDP, New York, 2020.

## 4.4. TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

### 4.4.1. Social protection and livelihoods/employment nexus

As part of its mandate, UNDP actively pursues an integrator role, developing synergies across sectors and the SDGs. One important nexus that UNDP supports is the linkage between social protection and livelihoods/employment. Building the case for inclusive and gender sensitive social protection systems in both formal and informal economies is urgent as the structural shifts in workplaces are expected to accelerate in the near future. Across the Asia and the Pacific region, **UNDP supports initiatives that promote transformative approaches to social protection, especially through economic empowerment, skills development and financial inclusion that enhance capabilities and opportunities for those furthest behind.**

One example of initiatives that bring together social protection and livelihood enhancement objectives are **graduation-based social protection programmes that often lead to socio-economic empowerment of women, youth and informal sector workers.** In Iran, together with the Vice-Presidency for Women and Family Affairs, the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare and Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, UNDP backed the introduction of a conditional cash plus and in-kind support programme targeting vulnerable, female-headed households in three provinces severely affected by COVID-19. The programme, which builds on a rapid socio-economic analysis already undertaken in Iran, was part of UNDP's Rapid Socio-Economic Response (RASER) to help the worst-affected micro and small businesses and people through innovative and interlinked job revival/generation and

social protection schemes. By focusing on circular economy and value chains and linking home-based businesses and MSMEs with local consumers and markets, the programme strengthened the link between social protection and job creation. Furthermore, by linking cooperatives, the private sector and local communities, the programme served to build the capacity of local organizations, improve business results, and increase the sustainability of initiatives and the resilience of communities. Behavioural change programmes on health and greening principles for businesses also formed part of the initiative. In **Bangladesh**, UNDP has supported the 'Strengthening Women's Ability for Productive New Opportunities' (SWAPNO) programme since 2015. SWAPNO is a productive employment and sustainable livelihoods-based poverty graduation programme implemented by the Local Government Division. The transfer-based poverty graduation project has targeted ultra-poor women in rural areas who are divorced, widowed, abandoned or left with husbands with disabilities. SWAPNO's interventions follow a graduation model that encompasses livelihood promotion, financial inclusion, social protection and social empowerment. UNDP **Cambodia**, in partnership with World Vision International and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, has also been piloting a graduation-based social protection programme<sup>20</sup> that will enable extremely poor households to generate their own income streams by addressing the root causes of their economic exclusion through small cash support, asset transfers, and behaviour change and skills training.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 'Making Social Protection in Cambodia More Inclusive, Effective and Efficient', press release, 15 July 2020, <https://www.undp.org/cambodia/press-releases/making-social-protection-cambodia-more-inclusive-effective-and-efficient>.

The outcomes of the pilot will inform national policy choices in the context of the National Social Protection Policy Framework. In **Nepal**, UNDP's support focused on solidifying linkages between social protection and income-generating opportunities for vulnerable women, as well as strengthening local government's capacity for governance of social protection service delivery. Through the implementation of the Prayash programme, UNDP Nepal supported the provision of an unconditional cash transfer to vulnerable women as basic income to meet their immediate needs, financial literacy training and linkages to existing government livelihood programmes and subsidized health insurance schemes. The scaled-up Sambodhan programme has an additional focus on strengthening the local government's capacity for governance of social protection service delivery by strengthening systems, developing a knowledge base on socio-economic vulnerabilities, providing temporary basic income and establishing better linkages to income-generating opportunities. In **Pakistan**, through support for the reorganization and expansion of the country's flagship social protection programme, the Benazir Income Support Programme—previously known as Ehsaas, UNDP worked towards the strengthening of safety nets and increasing financial inclusion, particularly among female beneficiaries. The programme reorganization and expansion were partly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's emergency cash response. With UNDP technical support, 115 social protection policies and programmes were brought together under the broader framework of the Benazir Income Support programme to enhance delivery.

On inclusion and economic empowerment of youth, in **Bhutan**, UNDP partnered with the Gross National Happiness Commission, Ministry of Labour and Human Resources of the Royal Government of Bhutan, Youth Co: Lab and the Citi Foundation and applied a systems approach to tackle the issue of youth unemployment. They identified critical pain points such as a mismatch of skills, highly targeted social safety nets and a lack of platforms on the demand creation of jobs. In 2022, the report informed an inclusive employment programme supported by UNDP Bhutan in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources and the Desuung Skilling Programme.

In **Thailand**, UNDP's 2023 study on Thai Women's Unpaid Care and Domestic Work and the Impact on Decent Employment indicated measures to tailor welfare programmes for women. These include increasing the level of pay for maternity leave to better recognize the lost earnings women face and recalibrating social and workplace protections for informal, domestic and care workers.

Furthermore, since 2020, UNDP has supported the development of a draft legal gender recognition law, which will allow transgender, non-binary and intersex people to change gender titles on legal documents to match their gender identity, hence removing the legal barrier to access health services and social welfare. In addition, UNDP actively engages with key national stakeholders to promote the employment of persons with disabilities (PWD) in the public and private sectors, which includes skills enhancement programmes for PWD and capacity building programmes for public and private employers on working with PWD.



Social protection reduces vulnerabilities and enables economic empowerment opportunities among the informal sector workers who constitute a large part of the workforce in the Asia and the Pacific and yet lacks safety nets. In **India**, UNDP collaborated with the Government of Chhattisgarh and non-governmental stakeholders to establish Mobile Labour Resource Centres (MLRCs) during COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020–2021. MLRCs were created with the objective of establishing a system for the protection and welfare of migrant workers. They facilitate the process of finding employment, capacity building or enrolling for social security schemes for workers locally. A communication link was established between the worker and employer at the local level and with government departments to increase new employment opportunities. MLRCs were initiated in 115 Gram Panchayats of nine districts in Chhattisgarh, enhancing accessibility to social protection scheme benefits for the poor who were unable to reach Labour Resource Centres or government offices. Services planned by MLRCs include mapping of workers, employment opportunities, awareness development, linking workers with suitable social protection schemes, supporting pre-migration preparation, departmental coordination, legal aid and promotion of Labour Resource Centres. Building on the positive outcomes of the pilot, the Office of the Labour Commissioner, Government of Chhattisgarh, with support from UNDP and the Omidyar Network, is scaling-up the centres across all districts of Chhattisgarh, anticipating to reach more than 700,000 migrant workers. In **the Maldives**, UNDP assessed pandemic impacts on its informal sector, a cohort largely not covered under formal social protection schemes. The assessment recommended conducting a systemic review of existing

national schemes to identify easier enrolment options for the informal sector. In **the Philippines**, UNDP partnered with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao's Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE) and the Pintig Lab to co-develop the information management system that would include informal sector workers in the Social Protection Database as beneficiaries of social protection support as well as employment facilitation programmes. The database has been turned over to MOLE for full implementation of the pilot.

#### 4.4.2. Social protection and climate change nexus

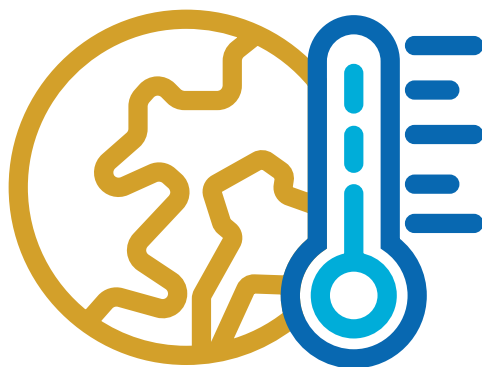
The intersection between social protection and climate is at the heart of UNDP's social protection support. The climate crisis has added a layer of urgency and complexity to the development context, which contributes to the web of vulnerabilities faced by people across the spectrum. Countries in the Asia and the Pacific region are particularly sensitive to the impacts of the climate crisis, and UNDP has been a long-standing partner addressing climate change threats and effects against a sustainable development background. As social protection emerges as an indispensable tool with which policymakers can address short- and long-term needs of chronically and newly vulnerable segments of the population, UNDP is able to lead transformative approaches at the nexus between social protection and the climate crisis.

**UNDP's work in this area focuses on strengthening social protection systems to improve the ability of poor and vulnerable people to cope with climate change impacts.**

One example is UNDP **India's** work on strengthening India's social protection system by integrating climate information services and risk management into the framework. With support from the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office, UNDP, in collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development and state governments, mainstreamed climate resilience into the planning and implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. This public works programme is one of the world's largest social protection programmes, supporting around 70 million rural households and communities to cope with poverty and marginalization every year.

UNDP **Pakistan's** policy research paper 'Poverty, Vulnerability & Social Protection: The Case of Pakistan' also stresses identifying alternative financing options for social protection. Given the fiscal austerity in the country and the adverse impacts of climate-induced disasters, UNDP Pakistan is looking at insurance and risk financing as a potential solution. Currently, insurance and risk financing instruments are being designed to create an enabling environment, strengthen regulatory and policy frameworks as well as develop inclusive insurance and sovereign risk financing solutions that will also leverage existing social protection mechanisms to address climate-induced vulnerabilities in Pakistan.

UNDP's work also serves to **highlight the types and degrees of climate risks faced by different categories of vulnerable populations and prepare a foundation to design and implement social protection interventions to address such risks**. One specific example is from **the Philippines**, where the UNDP Philippines Climate Action Programme team, in collaboration with the Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery for Building Resilience team at UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub, prepared a mapping and analysis of vulnerable groups for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction in support of the country's digital readiness strategy.<sup>21</sup> The study, published in 2021, enhanced the identification and localization of population segments most vulnerable to climate change, the compounded risks they face and priority areas for intervention from their perspective. The study also considered the challenges and opportunities for supporting those most vulnerable through digital solutions. Thus, the outcomes of the mapping are also relevant for the future development of such digital solutions, as well as to inform the design and implementation of other social protection interventions that could address the vulnerabilities of these target groups. Through the study, UNDP supported implementation of various tools for collecting data/information, which included an online survey, focus group discussions and quantitative modelling tools.



<sup>21</sup> UNDP. 2021. 'Mapping and Analysis of Vulnerable Groups for Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction (CCA-DRR) in Support of the Digital Readiness Strategy in the Philippines. Bangkok: UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub.

In **Bangladesh**, UNDP is supporting the Livelihood Improvement of Urban Poor Communities project, the largest urban poverty reduction initiative in the country that works to improve the livelihoods and living conditions of up to four million poor people living in low-income settlements in urban areas. The programme provides direct financial support and basic services to low-income households, builds climate-resilient housing, provides skills and enterprise development support for women and girls, and enhances climate adaptive capacity of low-income communities through resilient infrastructure and strengthening municipal capacity for improved urban management, policy and planning.

Finally, UNDP's work in **Bhutan** has provided a gender-sensitive understanding of climate change impacts and the action needed to

address them. More specifically, UNDP Bhutan provided financial and technical support to the National Environment Commission and the National Commission for Women and Children to conduct a study on the linkages between climate change impacts and gender, with a focus on the agriculture, energy and waste sectors.<sup>22</sup> The study, published in 2021, explored the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change in relation to access to resources, participation and benefits, also from a social protection perspective. The methodology included extensive interviews involving 600 households across 10 districts in the country. The study analyzed the extent to which gender issues have been considered within Bhutan's policy, legal and institutional frameworks, and their suitability for supporting gender-responsive climate action, and made recommendations at governance, planning and policy levels.



<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.undp.org/bhutan/publications/gender-and-climate-change-bhutan>.

## 4.5. FINANCING OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

Financing the horizontal and vertical expansion of social protection in a manner that is sustainable over the long term and at a level that will deliver the socio-economic results expected is a complex task. It will require no small amount of political will, multisectoral national reform and concerted efforts from international financial institutions (IFIs), UN agencies and other national and international development partners. UNDP leverages a strong comparative advantage to support countries in identifying practical strategies for diverting existing resources and generating new revenue for financing social protection. UNDP brings together lessons learned from its work on SDG financing and expertise from specialists and experts at the central, regional and national levels, such as its network of in-country economists. Therefore, particularly when compared to other UN agencies, UNDP can provide unique expertise in fiscal space analysis and integrated financing solution design.

In several contexts, such as Viet Nam, Sri Lanka and Cambodia, UNDP's work is supporting inclusive and responsive **policy reform and the generation of country-specific evidence that makes the investment case** for strengthening social protection systems. In **Viet Nam**, for example, guided by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, UNDP is researching and documenting policy reform options to increase the inclusivity and responsiveness of the social assistance system. Of particular added value is UNDP's ability to include costing of different policy options and analysis of the overall fiscal and financing mechanisms for the social assistance system. Furthermore, UNDP Viet Nam assisted in the development of a policy paper, 'Viet Nam Can and Should Finance a Larger Cash Assistance - Fiscal Stimulus Programme without Fear of Inflation', to further extend the evidence base in support of expanding existing social assistance interventions in the country. In **Sri Lanka**, UNDP is partnering with UNICEF to conduct a **systematic assessment of social protection financing**. This is a flagship financing initiative which will provide the Government of Sri Lanka with a menu of financing options for various scenarios, enabling the future scaling-up of programmes towards universal social protection.

Similarly, in **Cambodia**, three policy briefs were produced and published in partnership with the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which also includes impacts from the Russia–Ukraine war. The focus of the assessments was to make the case for social protection in the country, modelling the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the presence or absence of the country's social protection intervention, namely the On Demand IDPoor cash transfer. Furthermore, UNDP Cambodia leveraged its ability to analyze alternative big data sources to study the impact on mobility of different socio-economic variables before, during and after the spread of COVID-19. The online tool enabled the monitoring of changes in aggregate mobility in select Cambodian provinces since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak using a footfall index.

**UNDP is also supporting countries to set up national financing frameworks for developing thematic financing instruments.**

In the **Cook Islands**, for example, under the ‘Strengthening Resilience of Pacific Island States through Universal Social Protection’ programme, UNDP together with UN Women, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Government of the Cook Islands is working on the development of the first country Development Financing Assessment (DFA). The DFA will further support the development of an Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) for the Cook Islands. Similarly, a DFA is being undertaken in Vanuatu that will also later serve in the development of its national INFF and support Vanuatu’s access to finance after its graduation from the least developed country status. In **Mongolia**, INFF was formulated by the Government of Mongolia with support from UNDP and subsequently endorsed by the National Committee for Sustainable Development. UNDP Mongolia, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, initiated a pilot on integrated results-based management (IRBM) approach in planning and budgeting processes in Ministry of Labour and Social Protection programmes, in collaboration with the Ministry of Economy and Development and Ministry of Finance, to enhance accountability and transparency and alignment to national policies. In **Thailand**, the Ministry of Finance and the National Economic and Social Development Council is formulating an INFF with support from UNDP. As a first step, the country’s DFA was commissioned. Building on the UN’s Social Protection Diagnostics Review: Social Protection for Migrant Workers and Their Families in Thailand and UNDP’s study on Thai Women’s Unpaid Care and Domestic Work and the Impact on Decent Employment, the policy recommendations in the DFA suggested a number of options to scale-up the financing of the country’s social protection, including the use of negative income tax for expanding safety nets, enhancing

the coverage and adequacy of social protection, particularly for informal workers and pregnant women, repurposing child benefits to help finance care infrastructure, and formulating a social taxonomy to attract private finance pipelines to support social infrastructure. Furthermore, within the framework of the Tripartite Agreement between UNDP, Insurance Development Forum and the Government of Germany, the ‘Inclusive insurance and risk financing in Thailand: Snapshot and way forward 2023’ was commissioned, which identified forward-looking workstreams such as promoting inclusive insurance for vulnerable populations using government budget (premium subsidy), scaling-up crop insurance to enhance farmers’ resilience by covering a greater variety of agricultural products and introducing more tailor-made insurance products for women.

A number of countries are also in the initial stages of formulating INFFs with a view to leveraging investments for social protection. **Sri Lanka** is putting many INFF building blocks in place, including taxation reform to close tax loopholes, SDG tagging, SDG investor mapping to help mobilize private capital, and scoping the potential to leverage a debt-for-nature swap at scale once a framework for debt sustainability is in place. The government’s proposed fiscal strategy in the medium term (2022–2025) and macroeconomic direction (Ministry of Finance’s Annual Report 2021) already uphold increasing budget allocation for the social safety net programme for the most vulnerable segments of society. Ultimately, UNDP Sri Lanka and UNICEF aim to take the INFF building block on social protection forward through policy advocacy to make the most compelling case for sustainable investment in social protection. This includes addressing the needs of the newly poor not covered by existing programmes and going beyond emergency cash transfers.

In Indonesia, the National Development Planning (BAPPENAS) in partnership with UNDP and the United Nations Resident Coordinator, launched<sup>23</sup> its assessment as a first step towards developing the country's INFF to accelerate achievement of the SDGs. The assessment intends to map Indonesia's financing landscape, outlining SDG financing needs and potential sources of public finance (both international and domestic), as well as highlighting social protection as one of 10 investment areas that could help achieve most of the SDG targets.

In **Pakistan**, UNDP and the Islamic Development Bank provided crowdfunding training to CSOs as an alternative tool for them to raise financing for poverty alleviation efforts. A total of 23 CSOs were selected for training to strengthen capacities for raising funding through digital crowdfunding platforms. Out of the selected CSOs, 13 completed their crowdfunding campaigns, five have gone live on the platform, while others are in line to be launched at an International Crowdfunding platform, Launch Good.



<sup>23</sup> Martin, L., 'Indonesia launches Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) Assessment to bridge SDGs financing gap', INFF, 9 August 2022, <https://inff.org/news/indonesia-launches-integrated-national-financing-framework-inff-assessment-to-bridge-sdgs-financing-gap>.

## 4.6. DIGITALIZATION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Digitalization is at the heart of inclusive, accountable and responsive governance systems that aim to enhance the social contract between the State and people. Digitalization of social protection systems enhances administrative efficiencies and coordinates delivery to effectively utilize resources for social protection programmes. By doing so, it also contributes to bringing coherence and coordination across social protection policies.

UNDP's commitment to enhancing digital capacity for social protection is captured in multiple strategic documents. Two of the 12 social protection solutions included in UNDP's Social Protection Corporate Offer 2.0 are to support digital capacities for identifying the needs of those left furthest behind and to enhance the capacities of countries for the management of social protection systems. At the same time, strategic innovation and digitalization are two of the three enablers for maximizing development impacts as part of UNDP's strategic plan for 2022–2025. Finally, digital disruption and innovation is one of the four main areas of intervention—alongside social protection, green economy and governance—prioritized in UNDP's 'Beyond recovery: Towards 2030' response.

Over the years, UNDP has invested in building a next generation “network of innovation and digital solutions” across its global team<sup>24</sup> and is now recognized as a leader in digital transformation and innovation capability within the UN system. UNDP brings together expertise from its Accelerator Lab and regional and global best practices to guide the long-term reform of social protection systems driven by digital transformation and innovation. Considering countries' existing capabilities and prioritizing where demands are greatest, UNDP's support of digitalization of social protection varies across countries in the Asia and the Pacific region.

**UNDP supports the use of innovative technologies and the digital space to optimize processes such as data collection, analysis and advocacy.**

One example is from **Cambodia**, where UNDP is currently working on a study examining the determinants of poverty in the country (PovRisk). UNDP Cambodia is set to launch a platform which uses artificial intelligence and machine learning to collect and analyze big data and satellite images to provide insights into key socio-economic indicators for poverty mapping.

Multiple UNDP country offices are backing **the development of digital processes and mechanisms to support the delivery of social protection**, such as registration of beneficiaries, self-registration, e-payment systems and grievance redressal mechanisms. In **Viet Nam**, as part of a Joint SDG Fund initiative (UNDP, ILO, UNFPA and UNICEF) to accelerate Viet Nam's transition to inclusive and integrated social protection, UNDP provided technical assistance and policy advice on designing the tools, processes and software for the digitalization of self-registration, verification and management of a social assistance beneficiaries database, testing the designed tools, processes and software in three provinces and drawing plans for scaling-up the system to the national level.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 'COVID-19: UNDP's Integrated Response', UNDP, New York, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/publications/covid-19-undps-integrated-response>.

UNDP Viet Nam has also helped to test and fast-track e-payment and other digital solutions for more efficient and safe delivery of the social protection support package provided by the government during the pandemic. In **the Philippines**, in partnership with the Pasig City Local Government Unit (LGU) in Metropolitan Manila, UNDP implemented 'Adaptable Digitally Enabled Post-Crisis Transformation' (ADEPT), a pilot for disbursing the Supplemental Social Amelioration Programme—a LGU initiative to provide financial assistance to households not covered by national schemes—through a local mobile money operator. The ADEPT pilot was an end-to-end model for efficient and transparent digital cash transfers through beneficiary identification and registration for mobile wallet accounts, financial mobile money literacy training, digital money transfers and a scalable digital finance model through a commissioned monitoring and evaluation report.

UNDP also supports digitalization initiatives that enable **transparent communication between social protection providers and beneficiaries**. In the **Pacific**, for example, UNDP is working with UNICEF to support the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau in developing management information systems to enhance the implementation and management of social protection schemes and programmes. This involves looking at using the potential of mobile technology to ensure effective and efficient administration, coverage and service delivery of social protection. Mobile apps that could inform citizens (via text messaging) about their social protection benefits/transfers have been developed in the Cook Islands, Niue and Samoa. Similarly, UNDP Samoa supported the identification of areas for improving mobile banking and hence financial inclusivity in Samoa, which is all part of improving citizen awareness and the accessibility of social protection schemes and benefits. In **Mongolia**, UNDP contributed to the strengthening of social services, particularly targeted at vulnerable

groups, by supporting the development and operationalization of a digital case management system for social workers to better assist marginalized people and PWD whose lives and livelihoods were disrupted by COVID-19. The system helped to digitally connect 728 social workers with most vulnerable communities through an integrated platform developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. Along with the provision of 1,000 portable tablets and fingerprint scanners to frontline workers, a 30-operator virtual assistance platform equipped with video call and social media messenger capacity helped support outreach to vulnerable people including PWD whose eligibility for social benefits can be assessed remotely, minimizing the need to travel to social welfare offices.

Utilizing the benefits of the digital realm is becoming essential for all efficient and effective social protection programmes. In **Nepal**, following requests from local governments and based on lessons learned from the Temporary Basic Income pilot programme, a digital Socio-Economic Vulnerability Information Management System (SEVIMS) has been developed with UNDP support. SEVIMS is expected to bridge the governance gaps in social protection systems or schemes by allowing the government to identify, monitor and deliver basic social protection services, including allowances, to eligible people. It will also allow for the timely identification of progressive and regressive status under each indicator of human development and human security to target those unable to access support from government services and protection schemes. In **Bangladesh**, UNDP partnered with the information and communication technology division of the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology in a flagship initiative named Aspire to Innovation (A2i) to promote digital administration and simplify governance.



As part of the support, UNDP is assisting the Cabinet Division of the Government of Bangladesh to develop and implement an online grievance redressal mechanism to replace the current paper-based system. The online mechanism is expected to improve efficiency, reduce response times and enhance the rate and quality of resolutions. In addition, UNDP support was extended to the government to digitize social safety net payments as part of the government's overarching plan to digitize all government-to-person (G2P) payments to provide affordable, efficient financial services to marginalized people in Bangladesh. Furthermore, under the Social Protection Policy Support Programme, a web-based social protection dashboard for improved monitoring of social protection reforms is currently under way. In **Pakistan**, as the national government-led cash transfer programmes are leaning more towards digital disbursements and e-payment to the previously unbanked, a greater demand is emerging for digital financial literacy training. UNDP Pakistan is supporting Pakistan's digital transformation agenda, which works towards greater

digitization and integration of government administrative databases and efficient social registries of social protection programmes. In addition, in collaboration with the Oxford Policy and Human Development Initiative, UNDP Pakistan developed an Ehsaas Implementation Tracking Index to improve the social protection programme's efficiency and effectiveness. The next step is to build an online database for live tracking, monitoring, learning, and improving social protection implementation in Pakistan (the Ehsaas programme is now known as the Benazir Income Support Programme).

UNDP is also supporting countries **to review and assess their existing digital infrastructure in the context of digitalizing social protection programme processes**. This is the case in **Sri Lanka**, where UNDP provides technical support for conducting a review of existing digital infrastructure in relevant State institutions to identify the extent to which such system can facilitate the identification and registration of beneficiaries and support disbursement of social protection benefits.



## 4.7. SHOCK-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

When countries are equipped with robust social protection systems, households and communities are more resilient and can recover faster from shocks and crises. Yet, a polycrisis interacts with structural inequalities as well as sudden onset of natural disasters and prolonged conflicts, requiring social protection responses to be adaptive.

UNDP's socio-economic impact assessments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic informed **immediate and short-term social protection responses**. For example, in the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau, the results from assessments of pandemic-induced socio-economic impacts of these countries, undertaken as part of the 'Strengthening the Resilience of Pacific Island States through Universal Social Protection' programme, were translated into country-specific measures. **Samoa** is implementing a COVID-19 response stimulus package in its second phase targeting vulnerable groups and those affected by the pandemic, as well as implementing a novel social assistance scheme for persons with disabilities. In the **Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau**, the governments are expanding the scope and coverage of social assistance schemes, with efforts to enhance local people's awareness and access to social protection schemes. In countries covered by the **Fiji Multi-Country Office**<sup>25</sup>, there was direct delivery of support, evidence generation, technical assistance and advancing social protection. The prime aim was to increase resilience through direct support to frontline delivery of assistance, improved knowledge and understanding to support better policy responses, capacity development in affected sectors, policy on responses for the informal sector and MSMEs. This has linked the existing and new work to support national responses in key areas to protect gains in relevant SDGs and accelerate recoveries.

In **Afghanistan**, prior to the 15 August 2021 regime change, UNDP placed a special emphasis on social protection activities under the prosperity pillar – one of the three programmatic pillars. The social protection and health portfolio intended to help build a social fund for Afghanistan focused on institutional reform by setting up a social protection coordination platform, support the then government to establish a minimum protection floor, facilitate access to financing for social protection, look at digital governance mechanisms for social protection, build resilient and sustainable systems for health, and support provision of social safety nets for the most vulnerable.

Subsequent to the regime change, UNDP commissioned a rapid economic appraisal of the impact of ongoing crises in the country on the formal and informal economy. The assessment warned of a record percentage of the population falling below the poverty line because of the combined crises and provided evidence to substantiate the international alarm call of a 'humanitarian crisis' in the country. Additionally, UNDP conducted impact assessments of COVID-19 shocks and offered a range of policy responses for the consideration of Afghanistan's national and international stakeholders.

<sup>25</sup> In the Pacific, UNDP provides regional and country support to 10 countries (Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) and regional support to five countries (Cook Islands, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Tokelau).

In **the Philippines**, UNDP supports the integration of beneficiary databases to support the effective delivery of cash transfers in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The pilot presents an opportunity to simplify administrative requirements or processes, lower enrolment/registration costs and minimize inclusion and exclusion errors.

In **Sri Lanka**, UNDP played a critical role in **safeguarding human development in the context of the country's financial crisis and ensuring systems-building in anticipation of future shocks**. UNDP Sri Lanka

commissioned comprehensive landscape mapping of the social protection system before the crisis, adopted a broader view of social protection going beyond social safety nets and programmes run by the government, accompanied by a costing of the programmes identified. At the outset of the financial crisis, UNDP developed a policy memo that presented an investment and development case for social protection in Sri Lanka, ensuring effective and timely support to high-level policy dialogue around immediate response options and systemic challenges for social protection reform.



## 4.8. LEVERAGING MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS

The leveraging of multi-stakeholder partnerships is a key strategy for UNDP to deliver integrated solutions for development.

UNDP's work, not only in the Asia and the Pacific region but globally, could not have been carried out successfully without investment in partnerships with other UN agencies, IFIs, national and regional governments, CSOs, private actors and all other development partners. This trend is observable in all the country examples presented above. Particularly relevant are partnerships built within the UN system and with IFIs, as well as strong collaboration with national government ministries, departments and agencies.

Experiences from the Asia and the Pacific region have demonstrated the value of leveraging partnerships in specific areas, such as scaling-up policy support to enhance national social protection systems, resource mobilization and the crisis–development nexus, among others. In **Sri Lanka**, the comprehensive landscape mapping and the policy memo served as a basis to step up UNDP's support on social protection with the government, UN agencies and IFIs, leading to immediate responses by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank, for example, repurposing existing projects towards sustaining existing social protection schemes. It further contributed to positioning social protection on the economic crisis agenda, reinforcing concerted partnerships within the UN system and with ADB, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to collectively work towards medium- and long-term reforms of national social protection system.

In 2022, UNDP supported **Indonesia's** G20 Presidency to develop a scoping note on Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) for the G20 Development Working Group and inform the policy dialogue and member states. The G20 Roadmap for Stronger Recovery and Resilience in Developing Countries, LDCs and SIDS outcome document emphasizes the rationale, need and urgency of ASP as a buffer against immediate and long-run adverse effects of shocks with potential to push countries' development paths backwards, effectively erasing years of progress in lifting living standards.

In the Pacific, UNDP is leveraging partnerships within the UN system to **go from programmes to policy and support of governments with evidence-based policymaking**. Together with partner UN agencies, through the Joint United Nations Programme, UNDP is supporting the governments of the **Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau** to reform their national social protection systems and develop social protection policies and frameworks as part of the 'Strengthening Resilience of Pacific Island States through Universal Social Protection' programme. UNDP provided knowledge leadership in the development of comprehensive, country-specific stocktakes and reviews of the social protection system, which identified key gaps, priority development areas and informed establishment of social protection floors and development reforms in national social protection systems across the four countries. For instance, in **Samoa**, a nationally-owned, inclusive, forward-looking and sustainable social protection policy has been developed, translated and submitted to government for approval and implementation, making social protection a priority consideration in the

public policy agenda. Similarly, a national social protection policy for **Tokelau** has been completed and is undergoing further community consultation and inputs before submission to the government.

Finally, in **Viet Nam**, UNDP partnered with other UN agencies under the SDG Fund on social protection to **support the provision of inclusive social protection**, particularly during COVID-19, to the most vulnerable segments of the population. UNDP Viet Nam is providing technical assistance and knowledge leadership to the

government in assessing and addressing the challenges of migrant workers accessing social protection.

More specifically, UNDP Viet Nam is supporting the government to review social assistance and social protection measures and remove their residence requirements to include the growing population of migrant workers not registered in the places where they work. The registration requirements affect access to social assistance and can increase the cost of access to education and health care depending on local policies.



## 4.9. REGIONAL INITIATIVES

At a regional level, UNDP RBAP has been equally active in supporting governments and other development partners to devise innovative solutions to complex development challenges by linking local challenges to national, regional and global knowledge and resources. Sustainable development, democratic governance and peacebuilding, and climate and disaster resilience represent the development priorities for the region highlighted in the focus areas of UNDP's 2022–2025 Strategic Plan.<sup>26</sup> Social protection, gender, inclusive growth and climate change are threads that run through all the advisory and programmatic work done by UNDP at country and regional levels.

**Particularly in the field of social protection, UNDP RBAP has invested in recent years in building knowledge leadership.**

This aligns with UNDP priorities of providing governments and other development partners with the analytical information necessary for decision-making, ensuring social protection remains high on national and regional agendas and sharing regional experiences at the global level.

The position note 'The Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19 in the Asia Pacific Region'<sup>27</sup> and 'Addressing the COVID-19 Economic Crisis in Asia through Social Protection',<sup>28</sup> published in April and May 2020, respectively, were among the first policy papers published at the onset of the pandemic that analyzed the socio-economic impacts and early country-level responses, including those supported by UNDP. The UNDP RBAP Economist Network, comprising economists in UNDP country offices, has collectively contributed to these knowledge leadership initiatives, bringing in and cross-fertilizing first-hand policy practices. As the pandemic prolonged,

UNDP RBAP also commissioned the report 'Inequality and Social Security in the Asia Pacific Region',<sup>29</sup> prepared in collaboration with the UNDP RBAP Economist Network, to stress the investment case for social protection as a critical policy instrument for addressing widening inequalities.

Furthermore, regional knowledge products produced by UNDP have provided a substantive basis for sharing the experiences nurtured in the Asia and the Pacific region at the global level. As such, they have informed stocktaking initiatives within UNDP and beyond. This includes UNDP's 'Next Practices: Innovations in the COVID-19 Social Protection Responses',<sup>30</sup> a synthesis of innovative practices that emerged and were applied during the pandemic to be leveraged to build more inclusive and sustainable social protection systems in the medium and long terms. Another example is 'UN collaboration on Social Protection: Reaching Consensus on How to Accelerate Social Protection Systems-Building',<sup>31</sup> which took stock of inter-agency work on social protection and major lessons learned since the United Nations Social Protection Floors Initiative was first initiated in 2009.

26 United Nations Development Programme, 'Strategic Plan 2022–2025', UNDP, New York, 2021.

27 See <https://www.undp.org/publications/social-and-economic-impact-covid-19-Asia-Pacific-region>.

28 See <https://www.undp.org/publications/addressing-covid-19-economic-crisis-asia-through-social-protection>.

29 See <https://www.undp.org/publications/inequality-and-social-security-Asia-Pacific-region>.

30 See <https://www.undp.org/publications/next-practices-innovations-covid-19-social-protection-responses-and-beyond>.

31 See <https://www.jointsdgfund.org/event/un-collaboration-social-protection-reaching-consensus-how-accelerate-social-protection>.

UNDP has also leveraged partnerships to ensure social protection is featured more prominently at the regional level. One example is the joint publication 'Reducing Inequality in the Decade of Action to Achieve the SDGs and Recover from the COVID-19 Pandemic',<sup>32</sup> the outcome of the partnership between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China and UNDP. Annual publications were also produced as part of the ESCAP–ADB–UNDP Regional Partnership on Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals in the Asia and the Pacific region. Both partnerships and the knowledge products produced informed regional dialogue on sustainable development and the national and regional implementation of the 2030 Agenda while elevating the importance of regional cooperation in addressing the widening inequalities affecting those furthest behind. Lastly, also at regional level, UNDP leveraged partnerships to enhance UN inter-agency cooperation. In early 2022, UNDP assumed the role of co-chair of the newly established Issue-Based Coalition (IBC) on Inclusive Economic Growth and COVID-19 Recovery, along with UNICEF. Within the framework of the Regional Cooperation Platform, IBC remains a key factor in channelling the UN regional collective offering to support countries, including through Resident Coordinators and UNCTs, to accelerate achievement of the SDGs. Social protection is a key thematic focus of the IBC, alongside macroeconomic sustainability and public finance, poverty and inequality. IBC seeks to elevate

inclusive growth agendas and scale-up policy options, recalibrate evidence-based advocacy on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and emerging polycrises, and foster exchanges of joint UN work. IBC's annual integrated work plan supports regional and country-level inter-agency cooperation and selected policy support to foster exchanges of frontier knowledge and emerging practices. IBC is increasingly working closely with the UNCT to identify countries where coherent support from UN regional offices adds value to country-level policy dialogues, joint programming and resource mobilization.

Within the scope of the IBC, UNDP has also embarked on selected joint initiatives on social protection with UN agencies. Most notably, UNDP partnered with ESCAP and ILO on the joint National Rapid Baseline Survey on Social Protection to inform the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific, which serves as a common framework and principles to engage governments and partners. Comparative and regular data collection and analysis will enhance collective knowledge on social protection across countries in the region and, more importantly, firm up the commitment and actions of governments and partners to make progress towards the SDGs and universal social protection. Such joint initiatives enable UNDP to add value by bringing in frontier thinking and concepts and offering an enabling environment for country-level inter-agency collaboration.



<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.undp.org/Asia-Pacific/publications/reducing-inequality-decade-action-achieve-sdgs-and-accelerate-post-pandemic-recovery>.

## 5. The way forward

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent polycrisis has placed a renewed emphasis on the need for a stronger nexus between humanitarian and development efforts.

**Managing risks and vulnerabilities is now a prerequisite for an inclusive and sustainable development agenda that seeks to enhance the resilience of people and society.**

In this context, the unparalleled social protection response to the polycrisis has repeatedly demonstrated its inclusive and integrated ability to temporarily cushion the socio-economic impact on households. However, as the cost-of-living crisis prevails amid the COVID-19 recovery, social protection will increasingly require stepping up on the transformative agenda to address structural issues of inequalities.

The Asia and the Pacific region is highly heterogeneous, comprising countries of all income levels (LDCs, middle-income and upper-middle income) as well as different contexts (Small Island Developing States, sanctioned and fragile). Recognizing the uneven impact of COVID-19 and the polycrisis across the region, and the varying institutional capacities and governance mechanisms of national social protection systems, UNDP applies the corporate offer to extend tailored support to every country context and enhance people's resilience and reduce inequities. As also demonstrated in this paper, crisis is an opportunity to explore innovative practices and frontier thinking on social protection that is fit for the purpose.

It is against this background that possible ways for UNDP to continue to support countries in the Asia and the Pacific region are discussed as follows.

**Champion the shift towards positioning social protection as an integral component of renewed inclusive, resilient and sustainable development pathways.**

The Asia and the Pacific region still falls short of turning social protection into an enabler of growth and sustainable development and a catalysing agent for building resilience among vulnerable people and households. Social protection should be positioned as a tool to prevent irreversible losses in health, education or livelihoods, as well as to break the inter-generational transfer of poverty and vulnerabilities. Achieving this transformation will require a conceptual shift that brings human development and people's agency to the forefront, maximizing opportunities and capabilities. This conceptual shift, at both theoretical and practical levels, would equip people with the tools necessary to navigate not only a single crisis, but also complex cumulative and polycrises. As such, the potential of social protection as a stimulus for economic recovery and macro-fiscal stability is an avenue that must be further explored.



### **Social protection as the social dimension of just transitions.**

Historically, social protection's relationship with climate change has centered on the shock-responsive and adaptive roles, with competition across development and humanitarian sectors for limited resources. However, the elements of the new uncertainty complex elevate the vital role of social protection in managing present and future crises by supporting people to cope with the idiosyncratic shocks and risks, but also enhance people's resilience and avert irreversible consequences of cascading crises.

Social protection shares the benefits of economic growth, reducing socio-economic inequities and ensuring a just transition that guarantees human security. Through its leading role in the climate crisis, a just transition, governance and peace agendas, UNDP's social protection work can be better positioned to address the social dimension of the new sustainable and inclusive development models. Going forward, the agility and adaptability of social protection systems to structural transformation and a just transition will be key to leveraging an integrated approach and demonstrating impacts on broader development gains in the context of the polycrisis. The integration of social protection as the social dimension of the critical transition to green, blue and sustainable development is still largely on the horizon, but is expected to have important implications on both the pathways for sustainable development and the financing of these strategies.


### **Maximize UNDP's integrator role and systems approach to support immediate response and long-term social protection reform within diverse governance mechanisms.**

The present synthesis has demonstrated how UNDP's global commitment to social protection has been translated at the country level through support to long-term national social protection reform. This includes leveraging the humanitarian-development nexus by capitalizing on crisis responses as an opportunity to support longer-term reform of national social protection systems. Accountable and responsive governance fosters social protection systems that are not only shock-responsive but risk-informed, anticipating the complex inter-play of socio-economic trajectories and megatrends that impact inequalities.

### **Advocate for the role of social protection in containing poverty and fostering recovery from shocks.**

The cost-of-living crisis and country-specific shocks in the Asia and the Pacific region continue to offset growth, the post-shock recovery and social development efforts, particularly in conflict-affected countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar. Social protection coverage, specifically for the poorest strata of society, is increasingly crucial in arresting poverty and stimulating a bottom-up recovery. Moving forward, UNDP may consider advocating for social protection as a means of creating demand and stimulating economic activity at the grassroots level and thereby supporting long-term and inclusive development, particularly in crisis countries.

### **Scale-up integrated financing solutions to optimize the impacts of social protection responses.**



The risks and inequalities pronounced by the polycrisis will require responsive and accountable governance to accelerate the reform and implementation of national social protection systems. Amid austerity measures emanating from the fiscal deficits created by the pandemic response, damp economic outlooks and risks of debt distress, financing for social protection will be increasingly under pressure despite the pressing need to address the cost-of-living crisis. In this regard, the synthesis outlined in this paper has highlighted UNDP's extensive support to countries with practical strategies and solutions for leveraging financing for SDGs to support immediate financing options in response to the crisis and long-term financing strategies alongside national social protection systems reform. This support includes leveraging partnerships with Ministries of Finance as well as the private sector, a range of compelling analytics, including socio-economic impact analysis, multidimensional poverty and vulnerabilities, modelling, as well as policy research and evaluations. Exploring the implications of the low-carbon transition on social protection would be a potential avenue for further research, one that would enable the identification of opportunities to translate economic growth into inclusive and equitable development outcomes, including through leveraging new financing for social protection, job creation, and economic empowerment of women.

### **Promote the digitalization of social protection systems to enhance agile and effective policy support.**

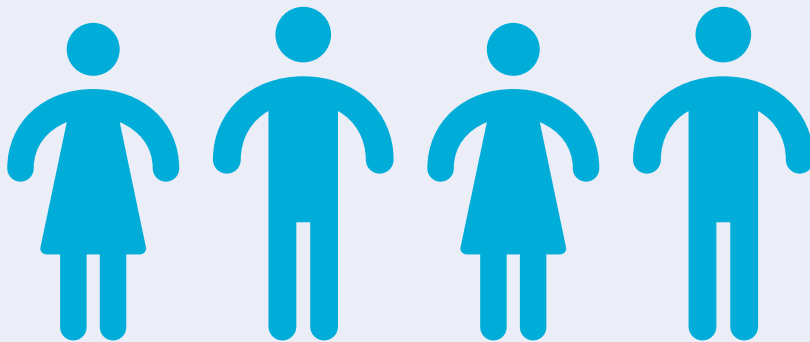
The pandemic has determined many countries to accelerate the digitalization of social protection systems. Yet, in the Asia and the Pacific region, the slow transition has resulted in financial inefficiencies, delayed beneficiary registration and delivery of cash transfers, and weak monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, the digital divide has prevented financial inclusion, especially among women, youth and informal sector workers. UNDP has a distinct comparative advantage in the digitalization of social protection systems. There are opportunities to institutionalize the links between digital transformation strategies and social protection systems in pursuit of better governance, data integration, decision-making and efficient delivery. Digitalization of social protection systems could lead to stronger partnerships with digital service providers, offer a solution to expand coverage to the informal sector and promote financial inclusion, especially among the most vulnerable groups.

**Invest in knowledge management to capitalize on innovations, lessons learnt and scale-up from innovations for social protection.**

COVID-19 was catalytic in expanding UNDP’s footprint and creating the arena to demonstrate innovative solutions across different country contexts. Redesigning shock responsive social protection in the context of polycrisis will need to draw on a mix of innovative policy solutions that effectively address the immediate socio-economic impact, manage the evolving risks and bring about longer-term equitable development outcomes. Thus, while further organizational investment in social protection is essential, increasing investments in knowledge management efforts to fully capitalize on the lessons learnt from innovations is equally necessary. This would enable the identification of opportunities to scale-up promising pilots and tested innovations within the context of national social protection reform processes and the programming environment.

**Leverage and forge stronger partnerships towards a shared and renewed vision on social protection in the context of polycrisis.**

Social protection in the context of polycrisis would, more than ever, require a shared vision and out-of-the-box thinking among government partners, IFIs, UN and other development partners, including bilateral donors, the private sector, academia and CSOs. These include, for example, imagining new financing strategies in debt-distressed contexts, accelerating social protection in the context of LDCs, developing agile social protection systems that cater to blue and green transitions while addressing the needs of informal sector workers, MSMEs and considering implications for care roles and economic empowerment of women, among others.



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United Nations Development Programme  
Bureau of External Relationships and Advocacy  
Communications Office  
One United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017

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