



Social Protection: A Coherent Strategy for Shared Prosperity
United Nations 56th Commission for Social Development
Civil Society Declaration

Achieving prosperity in its full sense requires the broadest and deepest possible participation in the economic and social life of society. Both within and across nations, the creation of social conditions that would end extreme poverty and, beyond this, provide all people with a genuine opportunity to flourish, and live in dignity throughout their lives, is among the greatest challenges of today. In recent years, social protection has emerged as a unifying concept for an array of measures aimed at building fairer and more inclusive societies. As a “set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability throughout the life cycle,” social protection “includes benefits for children and families, maternity, unemployment, employment injury, sickness, old age, disability, survivors, as well as health protection.”¹ The establishment of social protection regimes has shown itself to be one of the most effective and straightforward strategies to simultaneously address human rights and fundamental material needs, and to strengthen capacity to constructively engage in the life of society at all levels. As such, it is a strategy that the international community has explicitly taken on as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Among its targets, Goal 1 of the Agenda, to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere,” calls for the implementation of “nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors,” as well as the achievement of “substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable” by 2030.

Social protection systems represent the universality of eradicating poverty and building broad-based prosperity. In particular, the concept of social protection floors reflects the conviction that there are thresholds which a community – whether local, national, regional, or international – will refuse to let any of its members fall below. Especially given that poverty is not static, social protection floors represent a community’s trust and support as individuals travel in and out of poverty as the result of different life events.

However, it is not only those living in poverty who stand to gain from such measures. Unlike discredited theories about the shared benefits of unfettered wealth-creation at the top, social protection has truly shown the potential to serve as that much-touted “rising tide that lifts all boats.” It is a potent mechanism for promoting social equity and demonstrates significant salutary effects for all strata of society. Living in more equitable societies means increased health, stability, and happiness for everyone – which represents the *actual* goal of development, beyond economic benefits.

Although social protection is a shared endeavor involving a wide array of stakeholders, the place of public institutions is preeminent. Non-governmental organizations will be vital to steering, monitoring, and implementing social protection measures, and the private sector can likewise play a crucial role, but national governments and international bodies must lead and regulate efforts, given the high degree of coordination and multi-sectoral collaboration required to

¹ International Labour Organization, World Social Protection Report 2017-2019



implement a coherent and consequential system. While not without complications, a state-led, rights-based approach, in many ways derives power from its simplicity. In the face of the most basic of needs, public social protection floors and other measures offer direct redress, unconditioned by employment or other status, shareholder interests, or fluctuations in charitable-giving. At a deeper level, much of the promise of the public establishment of robust social protection regimes lies in their potential to progressively undo systemic injustices and foster long-term shifts in attitudes, nurturing a societal ethic of reciprocity and a sense of responsibility to one another.

A stabilizing force in a world of instability

From near-constant transformations in the spheres of employment and communications technologies, to massive waves of international migration and climate change and its impacts, we live in a time of unprecedented upheaval. While the twenty-first century has seen impressive achievements in poverty reduction and improvements in global living standards, the outset of the 2030 Agenda finds the world in a precarious position, with many of the gains of previous decades in jeopardy of being reversed. Low-, middle-, and high-income countries alike are experiencing more uncertainty and instability in their political, economic, and ecological systems, with our planetary boundaries already being breached. As the notion of “disruption” is increasingly prized as a social good, longstanding institutions and practices are giving way to new and often unpredictable social arrangements, and “risk” is becoming an ever more common feature of contemporary life.

Against this backdrop, the need for adequate social protection systems becomes all the more clear. At present, 71% of the world’s population is not adequately protected, with over 750 million people living in abject poverty and utter insecurity.² Only about 29% of the world’s working population have effective access to comprehensive social protection.

It is patently clear that people cannot make meaningful contributions to societal development if they are sick, malnourished, uneducated, persecuted, without a home, or without a basic degree of income security – that is, if they are fighting simply for basic survival. Public institutions must resolve to guarantee access to the goods and services necessary for humanity to adapt and flourish amidst the challenges – and opportunities – of this inflection point.

A scheme of proven effectiveness

Where implemented with rigor, social protection regimes have shown themselves capable of effecting broad-based improvements in social well-being. Countries in every corner of the globe offer glimpses of their transformative impact.

² According to the International Labour Organization’s World Social Protection Report 2017-2019, 5.2 billion people are not, or are only partially, protected. According to the World Bank, 767 million people live on less than \$1.90 per day as of 2013.



Uruguay, for instance, has for many decades benefitted from a solid social protection regime focused on education, health, social security, and housing.³ Spending more on social programs than any other government in Latin America (over 80% of total public spending and about 25% of its GDP)⁴ has helped the country stand out in the region, in the words of the World Bank, “for being an egalitarian society and for its high per capita income, low level of inequality and poverty and the almost complete absence of extreme poverty.”⁵

In Ireland, robust public investments in social welfare and development contributed decisively to transforming one of Europe’s poorest nations into a country with one of the highest standards of living in the world in just a matter of decades. Bolstered by international support in the form of Structural and Cohesion Funds from the European Union, Ireland made its citizens a priority and allocated an above-average share of the monies to human capital development – particularly in the area of education.⁶ Following the dramatic economic reverses precipitated by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, this investment in people showed its long-term transformative impact, as Ireland was able to begin rebounding by 2014.

Furthermore, in Indonesia, faced with a fragmented healthcare system that covered little more than 50% of the country’s quarter of a billion citizens, the government began phasing in the world’s largest single-payer health insurance system, with the ambitious goal to provide universal coverage by 2019, just years years after its introduction. A year into its implementation, the program had a membership of 133.4 million, exceeding its target of 121.6 million, and customer satisfaction was reported at 81%.⁷

In order to build on these success stories, it is important that social protection policies incorporate protection, prevention, promotion and transformation as each of these elements reinforce the other and improve societal outcomes. Notions of social protection should not be limited to what has come before, but should be expanding to encompass the needs of a particular time and place – for example, the impacts of climate change, access to land, protection for refugees and migrants, regardless of status, and support for care and community work. Moreover, to view social protection purely through the lens of adversity limits its scope and runs the risk of reinforcing patterns of thought harmful to those receiving such assistance.

A responsibility of the government, a right of all people

To be secure in one’s person, to be “protected,” is not a privilege but a right that the governments of the world have agreed to uphold. Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

³ http://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/4037/1/S1201025_en.pdf

⁴ <http://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/uruguay-s-award-winning-innovations-social-protection>

⁵ Placing great focus on social equity, Uruguay reduced moderate poverty from 32.5% to 9.4% between 2006 and 2016, while reducing extreme poverty from 2.5% to 0.2%. (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uruguay/overview>)

⁶ The Irish case, with its relation with the European Union, also speaks to the importance of international solidarity in pursuing comprehensive social protection for all people. While country-led efforts are indispensable, the greatest gains will come when countries recognize our global interdependence.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/may/15/indonesias-universal-healthcare-insurance-verdict>



states: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.” This right was reaffirmed in the Social Protection Floors Recommendation unanimously adopted by 184 members of the International Labour Conference in 2012. With this, the global community has accepted the commitment to achieve at least a baseline, of social protection for all people of all ages, to live a life of dignity, peace, freedom and justice.⁸

For most countries, closing the gaps to secure adequate social protection does not require unreasonably large amounts of funding. One recent report^[8] on 142 countries found that about half would have to allocate less than 3.5% of their GDP to close their health security and income security gaps, and about a third would only have to allocate an additional 2% of their GDP to close their social protection floor gaps. However, for other countries the financial challenge would be more significant; 12 African nations would need to direct more than 10% of their GDP to provide adequate protection. As a result, it is clear that the establishment and maintenance of global social protection floors will likely only be achievable as a shared endeavor of the international community.

Moreover, governments should not only consider the costs of such measures in isolation, but with respect to the costs of *inaction*. To use market based persuasion, social protection measures could be viewed as investments destined to yield major returns in human, environmental, and financial capital in the future.

Translating global promises into social reality at the national and international levels will be largely a question of political will and intent. By looking at these policies through the lenses of social justice and service to the common well-being, political leaders must take ownership of this issue and find financing solutions – whether through new taxes or shifts in current budget allocations. This may even entail leadership embracing a more decidedly redistributive role for the state.⁹ However bold the countries of the world strive to be in this regard, in developing policy proposals it will be useful to emphasize that social protection is not a partisan issue - consensus should be the starting point for its implementation.

In the final analysis, social protection is founded on the most basic and universal conceptions of human worth. While the specifics of its implementation and administration must be the subject of rigorous, objective research and deliberation, the underlying premise is not controversial. It is a question of value, and it speaks to the sort of society which all fair-minded people wish to live in – one in which fears of being unable to even survive would no longer darken any person’s horizons. Moreover, experience has shown that, to the extent that it is universally applied and embraced, social protection ceases to be seen as unsustainable, dependency-fostering hand-outs, and instead helps to reshape long-term relations within a society. Social protection broadens and

⁸ <https://www.merit.unu.edu/civil-society-social-protection-floor-index-five-qas/>

⁹ In this connection, it is worth noting that actors as diverse as Finland, India, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and prominent tech gurus have all expressed interest in proposals of a universal basic income.



deepens the social contract, promoting greater understanding of the fact that the well-being of the individual is ultimately dependent upon, and contributes to, the well-being of the whole.

In light of the above, and in accordance with with the provisions of the International Labour Organization's Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202),¹⁰ we urge Member States introduce language into the Commission's resolutions related to Social Protection. In addition to building on the substantive policy recommendations found in numerous UN documents, we would encourage language that ensures social protection policies and processes include civil society input in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the programs – including those who are meant to benefit from the programs. Social protection and poverty eradication also cannot be divorced from people's access to knowledge and their ability to make informed decisions. For this reason all should be guaranteed access to compulsory and innovative educational systems, by which, among other things, they would gain understanding regarding their rights, as well as their obligations to the rest of the community. Moreover, an emphasis should be placed on research on the sort of transformative actions and practices that will foster greater levels of participation and inclusion, devolving resources to the grassroots and ensuring that those that are currently unprotected have a voice. Only in this way will the international community achieve the dual objectives of reaching the furthest behind first and leaving no one behind.

¹⁰ The recommendations articulated there are as follows:

- 1) Provide effective access to a nationally defined set of essential health care goods and services, including maternity care, that meets the criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality;
- 2) Ensure basic income security for children, assuring access to nutrition, education and care;
- 3) Arrange for basic income security for persons in active age, with particular attention to sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; and
- 4) Guarantee basic income security for older persons.