



Social Protection Floors as the Preeminent Strategy  
United Nations 55<sup>th</sup> Commission for Social Development  
Civil Society Declaration

The statement in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that poverty is “the greatest global challenge facing the world today” has rightfully caused the international community to ask questions about its root causes and stubborn persistence. Understanding genuine causes *and* solutions to the various poverty traps demands a dispassionate and objective reflection on the inadequacies of longstanding development policies and practices, and calls for innovative structural and systemic changes. Similarly, situating development at the heart of the UN Agenda calls for a new understanding of the role of the state as an enabler of ‘a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive.’ At one time defined by a shared ethnic identity, and at others defined by border, by language, or even by the authorized use of force, **the State must now be defined as the catalyst of the transformative and participatory change envisioned in the 2030 Agenda.**

The institution of social protection, including floors, is one of the clearest means of fulfilling the vision of eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development for all. The concept of protecting at risk or vulnerable citizens is rooted in the recognition of the equal moral worth of all members of society – in short, it **puts people at the center and leaves no one behind.** Every member of society has the human right to social protection, which must translate into the establishment and maintenance of social protection floors as a fundamental element of national social security systems. Progressively, social protection - in order to fulfill its potential of involving all people in the development of their communities - must gradually extend beyond the implementation of floors towards ever more comprehensive systems.

Moreover, social protection is a vital mechanism to provide citizens with the opportunity to develop their inherent capacities for the advancement of their own communities and nations. **Inclusive dialogue preceding implementation of social protection policies fosters cooperation between institutions and empowers all to contribute to the well-being of all citizens.** Such processes are based on and reinforce values such as equality, solidarity, and inclusion, and capitalize on the cultural diversity of communities as a tool for coherent development.

#### **A strategy to eradicate poverty ...**

Goal 1, Target 3 of the 2030 Agenda ‘to end poverty in all its forms everywhere’ calls for the implementation of nationally appropriate social protection systems for all, including floors. Social protection and decent work policies have emerged as fundamental tools for ending poverty, reducing inequalities and building socially inclusive societies. Social protection and decent work policies operate as complementary sides of one coherent development strategy. It is incumbent upon all governments to implement social protection including floors nationally and endorse them globally, seeing them not as financial commitments, but as investments which will reap rewards for all. In this light, they rely also on the shared commitment of the people’s representatives in government to implement them at appropriate levels corresponding to the principle of subsidiarity. With the adoption of Agenda 2030, efforts must now shift from declaring commitments to developing concrete strategies for implementation.

**Social protection is a proven, successful strategy to reduce all forms of poverty.** Studies in Africa and Asia, for example, have indicated that cash transfer schemes show much faster results in poverty reduction than those expected from “trickle-down” effects of economic policies. Conversely, studies show that the risk of falling into poverty is very high where social protection floors do not exist. This illustrates the capacity of social protection policies as a tool of poverty prevention. It also holds promise to draw upon the wide range of talents and skillsets from all people, especially those who experience marginalization. As people are provided with opportunity, capacity for development is raised within a society, creating new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.

Beyond their instrumental role in eradicating poverty, these policies lay a foundation for greater involvement of people in the development of their own communities and the advancement of their country at large. In this light social protection policies should gradually move beyond the implementation of safety nets, which merely treat the symptoms of poverty, to addressing the root causes of poverty and vulnerability.

### **... and achieve sustainable development ...**

Lying behind many challenges to sustainable development is the root issue of inequality. The international community has, for example, acknowledged that economic growth on the global scale, has not been shared equally within or across countries. As a multidimensional issue, inequality affects people in vulnerable situations at much higher rates, which exacerbates and intensifies existing injustices and power imbalances and, in the long run, contributes to social instability.

Social protection paves the way to more sustainable action across various fronts. Social insurance and long-term cash transfers provide people with stability and confidence regarding their decision making processes. A safer economic reality often results in people investing in their family's health and education ensuring they are better able to leverage the potential of all family members and ensure succeeding generations have greater capacities to meet their needs. When utilized effectively, the negative feedback loop of poverty and lack of opportunity can be ended.

**Financing social protection should be understood as a wise investment opportunity rather than as short-term service delivery.** Low-income countries can afford basic social protection; even small programs produce positive benefits which can accrue over time. For example, the cost of extending health insurance to the entire population in Rwanda has been about 1 percent of total GDP, the same percentage Ethiopia is spending on its Productive Safety Net Program which reaches 8 million food-insecure rural households. Social protection programs can start with relatively modest initial allocations and continually expand expenditures in an organic process, building on past success with renewed investments. Moreover, **consultations on the fiscal capacity of a country to implement social protection floors should also consider the costs of inaction.** The ILO estimates that the level of poverty and inequality in OECD countries today would be twice the current rate were it not for social protection services. OECD countries have to continue improving their social protection schemes and avoid austerity measures that affect the funding of social policies. Higher rates of poverty would represent a far larger fiscal burden than the implementation of the policies. Thus, the relevant question might not be whether countries can afford to implement social protection plans, but whether they can afford not to.

### **... for all!**

To ensure that development reaches all people, **people themselves have to be active participants in the process, from planning and implementation to monitoring and review.** Rather than approaching citizens as mere recipients of assistance, social protection efforts hold the potential of empowering all members of society to become active agents in development efforts. Citizen engagement in analyzing policies, reflecting on the capacities and realities of local communities, and engaging in and monitoring the implementation of policies will allow for greater transparency, policy effectiveness, and trust among all members of society. Similarly, experiences from the grassroots should inform the drafting of new, forward looking strategies and ensure that no population is excluded from development or becomes stigmatized by it. Efforts to raise participation in this way will also provide a valuable opportunity to change the relationship between citizens and institutions – a critical yet often overlooked necessity. A coherent and integrated approach, together with people-centered policies, can convert social protection into “an instrument of social and economic transformation to redress conditions of injustice and exclusion that perpetuate poverty”.

## **A call to action**

The transformative potential of social protection floors depends on the specific design of its policies, the way in which they take account of structural, institutional and political dynamics, and the extent to which they address the underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability. The NGO Committee on Social Development, with constituencies spanning the globe, declares its commitment to support social protection as a means to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality. We therefore call upon Member States:

- to conceptualize and implement social protection floors as a means to build socially just societies that provide all people the opportunity to live in dignity.
- to combine social protection with decent work policies and foster pro-employment environments.
- to do so in accordance with international human rights, and to apply the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability.
- to put people at the center of policymaking.
- to seek maximum participation in dialogues to identify specific needs and avoid the exclusion of any group.
- to aim policies at reducing inequalities and power asymmetries across sectors of society.
- to enshrine social protection into national law.
- to develop concrete and feasible financing plans that include social protection in national budgets:
  - to acknowledge social protection as a beneficial investment for sustainable development and as an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty.
  - to consider the cost of inaction when evaluating fiscal capacity for social protection floors.
  - to allocate a percentage of Official Development Assistance for social protection globally.
- to consider the different dynamics of poverty and to adapt policies targeted at poverty *prevention*.
- to foster inclusive dialogue with citizens, civil society, and activists.
- to coordinate with UN agencies regarding the implementation of these objectives and to enhance the knowledge sharing processes on a global level.
- to build present and future strategies on past achievements and lessons learned.
- to gradually extend social protection floors, both in quantitative terms (number of people covered; benefit levels) as well as in qualitative terms (range of services).