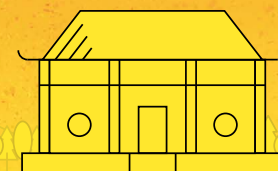


Why we need social protection in Asia and the Pacific



What is social protection?

Social protection is a set of policies which help women, men and children have an adequate standard of living and good health throughout their lives. In its most basic form, it should provide essential health care for all and basic income security:

- for children, to support a nutritious diet and access to education and care;
- for adults, to keep poverty at bay when they are unable to earn sufficient income because of maternity, unemployment, sickness or a disability; and
- for older persons to live independently and with dignity.

Universal guaranteed access to health care and basic income security is known as a social protection floor. It is a security on which everyone should be able to rely in times of need.

In every country of Asia and the Pacific social protection is a human right. It has been recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966) as a right to be enjoyed universally. All States have committed to guaranteeing basic social protection and several have enshrined this in their constitution, others in national legislation. The level of social protection to which people are entitled depends on the national context but the income security provided should afford them basic shelter and housing, water and sanitation, food, basic education and essential healthcare.

A cornerstone of sustainable development

Universal social protection is central to achieving sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals the world over. Universal social protection demonstrably prevents poverty and improves human well-being. It enables the accumulation of assets and human capital propelling social and economic progress. Social protection promotes inclusive economic growth by enabling more women to work and by giving individuals and families the space to invest in their businesses and children's education. Well designed, universal social protection schemes help protect the environment and combat climate change, especially in rural areas. It makes everyone less vulnerable to crises, such as natural disasters, economic shocks or pandemics. Social protection is central to the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development.

Social protection changes lives

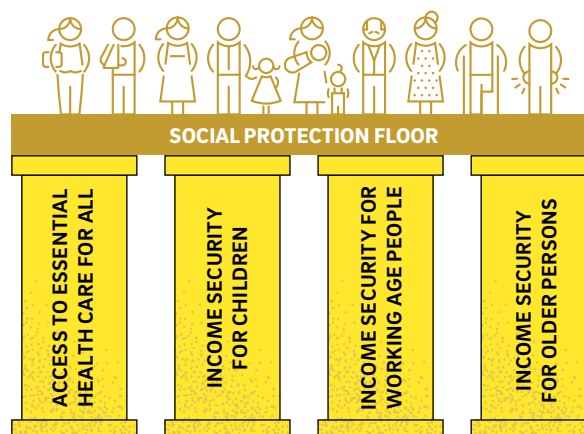
— **Where social protection has been extended in Asia and the Pacific, lives are being transformed.**

- Social protection has reduced the national poverty rate by 40 per cent in Georgia and the old age pension scheme has reduced child poverty by 30 per cent as older persons often look after their grandchildren.
- In Thailand, China and the Philippines old age pension schemes are improving recipients' nutrition and health. Recipients in Thailand spend half their pension on food.

— **More equal and inclusive societies are being built.**

- Rural pension schemes in China mean girls are starting school earlier and staying in education longer. In Pakistan, a stipend for girls of just \$2.5 per month has increased school enrolment by over 30 per cent in Punjab.

FIGURE 1 Foundations for a social protection floor: access to health care and basic income security throughout life



Why we need social protection in Asia and the Pacific

- Universal social protection programmes have reduced inequality in Georgia where the Gini coefficient has dropped from 0.41 to 0.36, with 75 per cent of the reduction attributed to the universal pension scheme.
- In Nepal, the old age pension was expanded to all without discrimination following the civil war, fostering peace and social cohesion.
- **More dynamic, stable and sustainable economies are taking shape.**
- In the Republic of Korea, for every additional dollar spent on social protection 3 dollars has been generated, measured as an accumulated expansion of GDP over two and half years. Mongolia, Thailand and Japan have also registered expansions to GDP when social protection schemes have been extended.
- In China, social protection is helping families use land more sustainably and 32 million households in rural areas have received cash for conservation work to support the reforestation of 27 million hectares.

Securing Asia-Pacific's future

Our future would be more secure if universal social protection were extended across the region, helping individuals, societies and economies adapt to emerging trends.

The Asia-Pacific region is ageing more rapidly than all other regions in the world, with the percentage of people over the age of 60 projected to rise from 14 per cent in 2020 to 60 per cent in 2050. Universal social protection would provide older persons with income security and help share the increasing financial burden of care across different age groups.

The world of work is being reshaped by mechanisation and digitalisation. In the coming years, one in five jobs are expected to be affected by automation. Social protection is needed to stop the unemployed falling into poverty as jobs in traditional industries disappear and to give workers the space to reskill and seize new opportunities.

Rapid urbanisation continues to across our region. It is often unplanned and haphazard, increasing exposure to health and environmental disasters. Universal social protection would make a huge contribution to reducing this exposure and ending urban poverty, especially among the third of the region's urban residents who live in slum-like conditions.

Migration is projected to increase in coming decades in Asia and the Pacific. Migrants are among the most vulnerable in our societies in a region already home to 65 million international migrants. Extending social protection to this vulnerable group is a challenge we must overcome if we are to end exclusion in our region.

Social protection would enable women, men and children to respond better to shocks and crises. The frequency and intensity of disasters linked to extreme weather events is expected to rise in Asia and the Pacific. COVID-19 and SARS and economic crises have shaken the region over past decades. Universal Social protection is crucial to stop lower income households being pushed into poverty by such events, avoiding desperate measures such as the selling of assets or taking children out of school, and enabling families and economies to bounce back better.

FIGURE 2 Social protection: a virtuous cycle promoting economic growth

