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## Placing people at the centre of NDCs 3.0: The power of social protection to accelerate climate action

*This note aims to support Ministries of Environment, Finance and other key national partners to integrate social protection within their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to accelerate climate action. The ambition and effective implementation of updated NDCs will determine whether the world will be on track to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement: to limit the temperature increase, to finance and build abilities to adapt to climate impacts and to strengthen resilience of people and the planet. Social protection, designed to address life risks and already operating at scale, can play a foundational role in reaching these ambitious goals and delivering a just transition. Strong social protection systems have been essential in supporting ambitious climate change mitigation actions; they can build foundational resilience and adaptive capacity across the population and can be designed to respond rapidly, or even in anticipation, of extreme climate events.*

*This note outlines **how integrating social protection into the development and implementation of NDCs can accelerate climate action to:***

- ⇒ deliver on mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage goals,*
- ⇒ meet the needs and activate the capacities of large parts of the population with direct reach to vulnerable groups,*
- ⇒ draw on significant data, analyses and capacities of ministries/agencies involved in delivering social protection, and*
- ⇒ ensure NDCs are aligned with existing decisions and commitments at the international level.*

**The Task Force on Linking Adaptive Social Protection and Climate Financing**, established in 2024, brings together multilateral climate funds, development banks, UN organizations, bilateral development partners and the NDC Partnership to integrate social protection in climate commitments, strategies and financing - having recognized the international momentum behind social protection as a key tool for climate action. This note builds on the contents of the *Joint Guidance Note Integrating Social Protection in the NDCs* developed for social protection practitioners by members of the USP2030 Social Protection and Climate Change Working Group.

## The role of social protection in climate action

### Personal impacts



### Delivered at scale

*“We received money on Thursday morning [the day after the floods began] when there was water everywhere. With that money, we were able to buy groceries using a Bhela [raft]”.*

*Four days before floods in Bangladesh peaked in July 2024, this support reached people in affected areas covered by the government’s Mother and Child Benefit Programme and the Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest, supported by international partners.<sup>1</sup>*

*Indonesia has a long and turbulent history with fuel subsidy reforms, a key mitigation policy. A turning point came when measures taken to permanently reduce most subsidies were paired with effective social protection programmes. Social unrest, common in previous reforms, was averted through cash transfers that targeted affected groups and helped offset the impact of price increases, ensuring fairer outcomes.<sup>2</sup>*

## 1. The connections between social protection and climate action

Climate change is reshaping the nature of risk, creating new and often unforeseen unpredictability with devastating consequences. Effective climate action seeks to reduce these risks through mitigation, adaptation and addressing the remaining loss and damage. National social protection systems, designed to address poverty, vulnerability and inequality through a range of established approaches (see Box 1), are uniquely positioned to contribute to this effort. When designed with climate in mind, their goals – of protecting people, reducing vulnerability, promoting more resilient livelihoods and transforming societal imbalances – align directly with the needs of a climate-resilient future, including through:

- **Directly addressing risk:** Social protection is fundamentally about managing risk. It supports individuals through expected transitions in their lives, unexpected shocks like illness or job loss, and, critically, in the context of climate change, large-scale shocks affecting significant populations. Social protection systems can build resilience

and adaptive capacity, deliver support to at risk populations before, during and after shocks, and empower and support people to actively adapt to evolving circumstances.

- **Supporting social justice and a Just Transition:** Climate action must be inclusive, ensuring that those most vulnerable and affected, often having contributed least to climate change (*IPCC 2022*), are protected. Social protection advances social justice by addressing poverty, inequality, and exclusion. It is also essential for achieving climate objectives in a way that is socially just, respects labour and human rights and reinforces other development objectives – thereby increasing public acceptance for climate policies. Without social protection, there is no viable path to a sustainable, equitable transition (*ILO 2023*).
- **Meeting the scale of the challenge:** Social protection systems operate at scale with direct reach to vulnerable populations, making them

<sup>1</sup> (WFP Internal Note 2024)

<sup>2</sup> (UNDP 2021)

indispensable for global climate action. The quick scale-up of these systems during COVID-19, with over 3,000 measures initiated globally (Gentilini et al. 2020), demonstrates their potential for immediate use and rapid expansion. Currently, for the first time ever, more than half of the global population (52.4 per cent) has access to some form

of social protection (*ILO 2024*). However, to meet the demands of climate change, social protection systems must be made climate-ready and coverage must expand further, in particular in low-income countries where on average only 9.7 per cent of people are covered.

## Box 1: What is social protection?

**Social protection policies and programmes** are provided by governments to protect people from income shortfalls, vulnerability and poverty throughout their lives in the face of adverse situations such as income loss, illness or the impacts of crises, transitions and social exclusion. Social protection instruments include the following.

- **Programmes providing income support and income-earning opportunities**, such as cash and in-kind transfers or public works, help people when incomes are lost or insufficient to meet costs of living, their health is affected or their ability to work is otherwise compromised.
- **Social insurance schemes**, such as unemployment insurance, sickness benefits, health insurance, old age/pensions or accident insurance, pool individual or collective risks at the national level including when such risks are created or exacerbated by climate change.
- **Active labour market interventions, such as job placement or subsidized skills development**, can enable (re)entry into the labour market or help build productive skills or assets.

**Social protection programmes can be designed and adapted for climate change.** While standard instruments provide vital protection against income losses and other (also climate-related) life risks, they can be specifically adapted to focus on climate vulnerable populations, prepare their systems and operations for extreme weather events, and provide focussed support to people for employment transitions, sustainable behaviour and investments.

## 2. The value-added of social protection across mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage

While the connections between climate risk and social protection are strong, its practical importance comes from its power to accelerate climate change mitigation and adaptation and to efficiently address loss and damage.

### ⇒ **Social protection enables ambitious climate change mitigation:**

**Social protection systems can play a pivotal role in facilitating ambitious mitigation policies by preventing or addressing the dislocations they can cause.** While the green transition may lead to net job gains, workers in unsustainable industries

often face job losses. Similarly, fuel subsidy reforms, which have the potential to radically reduce global carbon dioxide emissions, can negatively affect vulnerable populations through price increases, triggering protests and halting reform efforts (Black et al. 2023). Social protection can offer economic and labour support during these transitions. In countries such as Indonesia and Morocco, successful fuel subsidy reforms were underpinned by social assistance programmes, and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund routinely emphasize the importance of social protection in ensuring the success of such reforms (Feltenstein 2017).

**Social protection can also directly contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.** Combining the provision of social protection income support with sustainable natural resource management can increase carbon capture and storage, and promote ecosystem regeneration. For example, by increasing tree cover through public employment, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme achieved 1.5% of the annual greenhouse gas emission reductions pledged in their NDC (Hirvonen et al. 2022).

⇒ **Social protection supports people and communities to adapt to climate change:**

**Social protection can provide income security, access to health care, improved food security and access to education, reducing vulnerability and increasing peoples' resilience and adaptive capacity** to prepare for, cope with, and recover from climate-related impacts. For example, child benefits and cash transfers have helped protect incomes and consumption during droughts in Zambia and floods in Indonesia (Asfaw and Davis 2018; Pfütze 2021).

**By contributing to increased assets, productivity, and savings, social protection programmes can also support the adaptation and diversification of livelihoods.** These effects are enhanced in combination with measures like agricultural extension services, in-kind support (e.g. drought-resistant seeds

and tools), agricultural insurance, or education and training for sustainable livelihoods (Tenzing 2020; FAO 2024). Nicaragua's Atención a Crisis Programme combined cash transfers with grants for productive investment, and results showed more climate-resilient livelihood diversification away from activities vulnerable to climate-related shocks such as drought (Macours, Premand, and Vakis 2022).

⇒ **Social protection helps avert, minimise and rapidly address loss and damage:**

**Social protection systems can be designed to reach people quickly and expand to provide additional support to those who have lost – or are at risk of losing – their incomes, assets, or livelihoods due to extreme weather events.**

Where linked to early warning systems and mechanisms that allow rapid access to finance, strong social protection systems can provide more timely, cost-effective, people-centred support at scale, and do so more effectively than ad hoc measures (Huber and Murray 2023): Kenya's Hunger Safety Net Programme, for example, can scale up in advance of imminent hazards to provide emergency cash transfers to pre-identified vulnerable groups (Merttens et al. 2018). Social health protection can ensure people with injuries or sickness are able to cover their expenses.

## **Box 2: Social Protection in UNFCCC decisions and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports**

- *IPCC 2023 Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* – Recognises the contribution of social protection to climate change adaptation and how it can enable deeper societal climate ambitions.
- *Global Goal on Adaptation Framework* – Recognises the role of social protection in reducing the adverse effects of climate change on poverty and livelihoods.
- *Decision on Operationalizing the Loss and Damage Fund* – Calls for the scale-up of support for social protection mechanisms.
- *Just Transition Work Programme* – Advocates for the incorporation of social protection into climate action for a just and equitable transition.
- *Baku Principles on Human Development for Climate Resilience* – Articulate the need to invest in social protection to build resilience for all.

### 3. Integrating social protection into NDCs in practice: examples and approaches

Two reviews of the latest round of NDCs carried out in 2024 found an emerging focus on social protection, with 13–14% of NDCs mentioning social protection as a programming or policy instrument (*Crumpler et al. 2024; Furnaro et al. 2024*). These examples suggest that progress is being made but also indicate there is significant scope for further integration and leveraging of social protection systems to support climate action in NDCs 3.0. Examples include:

#### **Mozambique: specific measures on strengthening adaptation through social protection.**

In Mozambique's *NDC*, four specific measures for adapting social protection for climate action are identified:

- Developing and implementing approaches for community-based adaptation through Local Adaptation Plans.
- Strengthening basic social protection measures in relation to climate change so that it contributes to the resilience of vulnerable populations.
- Strengthening the capacity for targeting and orientation of the Productive Social Action programme (i.e., the national public works programme) to increase the resilience of vulnerable groups.
- Strengthening links between the social protection system and the natural disaster response system, including linkage with early warning systems.

#### **Malawi: combining mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage.**

Malawi's *NDC* identifies a major role for social protection in climate change adaptation as well as in responding to shocks through cash transfers, school feeding, and public works programmes. In addition, it highlights potential mitigation benefits from public works programmes that promote carbon sequestration and ecosystem services.

#### **NDCs that include social protection with a focus on climate vulnerable groups.**

Effective NDCs guide social protection programmes to identified climate vulnerable groups who are underserved by social protection. For example:

- **The Commonwealth of Dominica's *NDC*** includes the introduction of social safety nets as part of the Sustainable Fishing Communities and Livelihoods Strategy, recognising the high risk of fishing communities.
- **Pakistan's revised *NDC*** identified a key role for social protection instruments like cash transfers and social pensions for disaster-affected communities.
- **Kenya's *NDC*** commits to developing social safety nets for youth and other vulnerable groups.
- **Moldova's *NDC*** identifies a role for social safety nets in increasing the climate resilience of rural livelihoods for vulnerable groups.

#### **Antigua and Barbuda: focus on social protection as part of a just transition.**

Building on the Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP) which identifies social protection as key to enable a "just transition for the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs", Antigua and Barbuda's *NDC* committed to:

- training the affected national workforce in new mitigation technologies,
- offering financial support to green entrepreneurs and businesses, and
- supporting farmers and their families to deal with drought and hurricanes.

## 4. A quick guide to integrating social protection into NDCs 3.0

*This section builds and expands upon information from the NDC 3.0 Navigator, a helpful tool for countries updating their NDCs.*

The NDC updates offer a critical window of opportunity to expand the role of social protection to accelerate climate action. While the last section highlighted promising examples, there is much potential for increased ambition:

- for more countries to include social protection in their NDCs and
- in terms of the level of integration in NDCs to assign social protection a concrete, comprehensive, and strategic role in climate action going forward.

This section suggests 4 different levels towards the full integration of social protection in updated NDCs. Different countries are at different starting points both in terms of current social protection systems, their level of climate readiness and how, if at all, these are reflected in current NDCs. While stronger and deeper inclusion will lead to greater impacts of social programme for climate action, taking initial steps can also set the stage for more rapid integration.

### What can success look like in your NDC?

⇒ **Level of integration 1: Mentioning social protection as an effective instrument to address risks and contribute to climate action.**

Outlining the role of social protection in supporting ambitious mitigation policies, adaptive capacity and resilience in the face of shocks will provide an important reference in the NDC. Some NDCs refer to the role of social protection in response to COVID-19, which highlights its proven capacity to provide rapid economic protection at scale during crises.

⇒ **Level of integration 2: Outlining specific roles that social protection can play in the country in supporting mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage.** A next step is to outline the specific role that social protection can play nationally in addressing the identified climate mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage risks. This may fit in the overview or relevant climate sections and takes a concrete step towards engaging the social protection sector to support climate action.

⇒ **Level of integration 3: Pointing to specific social protection programmes and actions that can be adjusted, expanded or created to address climate risk.** A major contribution is to specify particular social protection programmes that can support national mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage ambitions, and integrate these into relevant sections. This may include specific programmes and target groups, as well as associated programme modalities such as strengthened and climate ready administrative or operational systems.

⇒ **Level of integration 4: Integrate social protection actions in NDC action plans, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks and financing strategies.** A final step is to integrate social protection actions into NDC actions and priorities, incorporating costings where included. This can form the basis for integrating social protection actions into broader M&E and financing frameworks which build on the NDC.

### Who are key partners to support efficient integration of social protection in updated NDCs?

Building relationships between climate and social protection experts is at the heart of accelerating climate action through social protection. While this will vary by country, key partners may include:

- **Ministries of Social Development, Labour and Social Security or Welfare**, which lead government social protection efforts. These may be complemented by agencies leading key programmes.
- **National partners, organisations and experts** working on social protection can provide tailored information on affected groups and needed actions.
- **International partners** with a focus on social protection and climate can provide national and international support and experience, including the NDC Partnership, FAO, ILO, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, the World Bank as well as bilateral agencies, such as GIZ.

## How to go about integrating social protection in your NDC?

Integrating social protection into NDCs offers an excellent foundation to expand its role in climate action and improve outcomes for vulnerable groups in the longer term. While beyond the scope of this paper, key areas may include: further understanding

the impacts of climate change and transition policies on vulnerable populations, assessing strengths and weaknesses of social protection systems for climate action, building stakeholder knowledge on the climate-social protection nexus, and integrating strengthened climate financing opportunities through inclusion of social protection.



### Consultation: How to engage with whom

- ✓ **Reach out to the national ministries<sup>1</sup> or agencies with responsibility for social protection** and systematically include them in regular consultations and workshops to develop the NDC (3.0).
- ✓ Share the review of your existing NDC (2.0), other available reports (measurement, reporting, and verification of mitigation/MRV, Biennial Transparency Reports, National Communications, Biennial Update Reports) and any plans or draft documents for the updated NDC 3.0 with them. **Ask them to review it and identify potential social protection contributions** (including e.g. cash transfers, public works or social insurance mechanisms).
- ✓ **Get in touch with the NDC Partnership**, UN and other development partners for additional support (including expertise, capacity building, successful NDC examples).
- ✓ **Foster knowledge exchange** between national social protection and climate experts to align strategies and investment plans, maximizing impact for climate objectives. This may include engaging with social partners, NGOs, research and development partners.



### Analysis: How to inform and jointly shape the NDC

- ✓ **Together with partners identify social protection entry points and contributions.** This could include the role social protection can play in supporting key mitigation and adaptation actions.
- ✓ Undertake or consider pre-existing **assessments of the impacts of climate risks on people's livelihoods, health and living standards and socio-economic impacts of climate policies** or conduct estimations of (positive and negative) impacts, e.g. on job or income losses and livelihoods, poverty and vulnerability and health impacts.
- ✓ Based on the priority sectors to be included in the NDC 3.0, **identify workers and vulnerable groups** who may be affected and need additional income and livelihood support.
- ✓ **Request support to inform the NDC with available data** from agencies with a mandate for social protection (based on social registries and databases containing information about the population, their needs and vulnerabilities), incl. climate or broader vulnerability analyses, to identify if groups in need of support are also being reached by social protection programmes.
- ✓ **Jointly with social protection ministries, identify opportunities to address these risks** (by adapting or expanding existing social protection programmes or considering new ones).
- ✓ **Agree on including social protection as a concrete measure in the NDC measure template provided to Ministries of Environment**, within the identified priority sectors for NDC 3.0.

<sup>1</sup> In most countries, this includes: a **Ministry of Social Affairs / Welfare/ Solidarity or Social Development**; and/or the **Ministry of Labour** (e.g. for unemployment benefits and vocational training); potentially also the **Ministry of Health** (if responsible for public health insurance); **Ministry of Family Affairs** (child/family benefits, sometimes also school feeding); in some cases also **Ministry of Planning** (e.g. for social assistance/services infrastructure). The key ministries are often organized and easily consulted through a **National Social Protection Council/Committee** or sectoral working group with international partners.



## Operationalization: How to integrate social protection in means of implementation

- ✓ **Integrate social protection actions in implementation plans**, incl. e.g. how to **adapt or expand existing programmes** to support identified commitments and vulnerable or affected groups.
- ✓ Include **social protection ministries and agencies as implementing partners** in the NDC document, outlining commitments, roles and responsibilities, and ensure coordination across social protection and climate actors.
- ✓ **Integrate climate-focussed social protection actions as part of financing needs**. Where possible, ensure that social protection programmes identified to achieve NDC targets **relate them to national budgeting processes and fiscal allocations** (and where funding options are not yet available, pursue national consultations on financing strategies or explore climate funds).
- ✓ **Encourage coordination and coherence between climate and social protection policies and frameworks**. Outline gaps and opportunities in social protection policies and strategies for considerations of climate action, and conversely gaps in consideration of social protection in climate policies.

*“Climate change and global poverty are two sides of the same coin. Both challenges must be addressed together. If we fail on one, we will also fail on the other.”*

*(Lord Stern 2009)*

In a nutshell, these are a few key steps you can take now to ensure your NDC makes the best use of the national social protection system to achieve climate goals. Beyond these steps and the NDC update, implementing and financing these commitments will take further joint efforts over the next five years. The

consultations, analysis and operational links forged in this process provide a strong foundation for this endeavour to jointly tackle the long-term social, economic and environmental challenges the climate crisis will bring.

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*The NDC Partnership* brings together more than 200 members, including more than 130 countries and over 100 institutions, to create and deliver on ambitious climate action that helps achieve the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The *USP2030* Social Protection and Climate Change Working Group serves as a knowledge-sharing platform and fosters interdisciplinary cooperation to highlight the integral role of social protection in climate action.

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