

**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**

Committee on Social Development

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Consideration of the draft action plan to strengthen regional cooperation on social protection in Asia and the Pacific**Action plan to strengthen regional cooperation on social protection in Asia and the Pacific****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

Never before has the need for social protection been greater. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has accentuated the central role that social protection plays in building resilience and mitigating risks for individuals, households and society at large. The crisis has also highlighted the importance of social protection schemes that cover everyone throughout their lives.

Social protection is one of the core national strategies for preventing poverty and vulnerability and also serves as an enabler for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieving target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Recognizing its importance as both a fundamental right and an effective mechanism for promoting sustainable development, many countries in Asia and the Pacific are increasing their efforts to broaden social protection coverage.

Nevertheless, the region's investment in social protection is lower than the global average, resulting in 60 per cent of the population remaining vulnerable to ordinary contingencies throughout their lives, such as sickness, unemployment, disability, pregnancy and old age.

The Committee on Social Development, at its fifth session, convened from 28 to 30 November 2018, recommended strengthening regional cooperation on social protection through the establishment of a regional modality. In response, the secretariat has worked with experts nominated by member States to develop an action plan to strengthen regional cooperation on social protection in Asia and the Pacific, contained in the present document.

The draft action plan was submitted to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for endorsement at its seventy-sixth session, but the Commission requested the Committee at its sixth session to review the action plan with a view to providing advice on the follow-up, as appropriate. In this regard, the Committee may wish to review the action plan with a view to endorsing it.

* ESCAP/CSD/2020/L.1.

I. Introduction

1. Social protection is one of the core national strategies for preventing poverty and vulnerability. By ensuring an adequate standard of living, it is a powerful tool for reducing inequalities and building resilience against shocks and crises over the life cycle, such as the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. By fostering shared prosperity, social protection can also increase social cohesion and boost economic growth. Social protection therefore serves as an enabler for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2. The right to social security and the right to an adequate standard of living are fundamental human rights enshrined as far back as 1946, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and as recently as 2015 in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for countries to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all.

3. Recognizing its importance as both a fundamental right and an effective mechanism for promoting sustainable development, many countries in Asia and the Pacific are increasing their efforts to broaden social protection coverage.

A. Social protection in Asia and the Pacific

4. With an average spending level of 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), developing countries in the region are spending only one third of the global average of 11.3 per cent of GDP and far below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development average of more than 20 per cent of GDP.¹

5. As a result, only 2 out of 10 jobless people receive unemployment benefits, only 3 out of 10 mothers receive maternity benefits, only 4 out of 10 people have access to health care and only 5 out of 10 older persons receive an old-age pension.²

6. These low levels of social protection coverage leave approximately 60 per cent of the region's population without coverage and therefore vulnerable to contingencies throughout their lives. This situation has become even more visible during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Mostly unprotected, 1.2 billion people still live in poverty, of which 400 million remain in extreme poverty. These numbers are now expected to increase as a result of the pandemic. Inequality is also on the rise and many people face increasing challenges caused by their vulnerable employment situation as well as pandemics, natural disasters, urbanization and changing family structures.

7. Recent estimates indicate that an additional 233 million people in the region could be lifted out of poverty by 2030 if governments increased their spending to reach the global average.³

¹ *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Poorly Protected* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.2).

² International Labour Organization, *World Social Protection Report 2017–19: Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva, 2017).

³ *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Poorly Protected* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.2).

8. Social protection programmes, when they exist, are often weakly designed and implemented. With the well-intentioned purpose of directing limited resources to those in most need, countries in the region often rely on poverty-targeting, which is a method of proxy means testing. Such programmes are in most cases not effective in reaching the poor because of obsolete or incorrect information about the potential beneficiaries, including their income situation. The best performing poverty-targeted programmes in the region still have exclusion rates of more than 40 per cent.⁴

9. In many countries, benefit levels are generally so low that their impact is limited, while information about existing programmes and how to apply for them are often unknown to those who need them the most. Existing programmes also tend to be small, overlapping and fragmented with too many actors and limited coordination.

10. As a result, programmes tend to be relatively costly but limited in impact. In South-East Asia alone, more than 60 million people are pushed into poverty yearly due to health expenditures; a figure that does not include those who are already poor, who are instead pushed deeper into poverty.⁵

B. Moving forward

11. In the 2030 Agenda, member States pledged that no one would be left behind. The year 2020 is an important landmark for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals as there remain only 10 more years for countries to reach agreed targets, including those on social protection.

12. Having adequate social protection systems in place is crucial not only for countries to better face the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic but also to handle future regional megatrends of, for example, population ageing, climate change, urbanization, migration and increasing inequalities.

13. Social protection has been identified as an enabler for implementing the 2030 Agenda.⁶ To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver on the commitments contained therein, while also addressing these ongoing trends, most countries in the region need to step up their efforts to build sustainable and reliable social protection systems.

14. With this in mind, the Committee on Social Development, at its fifth session, which was convened from 28 to 30 November 2018, recommended strengthening regional cooperation on social protection. It also encouraged the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in coordination with relevant United Nations agencies, to explore and develop a modality for regional cooperation to support member States in that regard.⁷ This recommendation was brought to the attention of the Commission and endorsed at its seventy-fifth session, in 2019.

⁴ ESCAP, *How to Design Inclusive Social Protection Systems* (ST/ESCAP/2820).

⁵ Hui Wang, Lluís Vinyals Torres, and Phyllida Travis, “Financial protection analysis in eight countries in the WHO South-East Asia Region”, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 96, No. 9, pp. 610–620E (17 July 2018).

⁶ United Nations Sustainable Development Group 2019, “Leaving No One Behind: A UNSDG Operational Guide for UN Country Teams: Interim Draft”, March 2018. Available at <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/Interim-Draft-Operational-Guide-on-LNOB-for-UNCTs.pdf> (accessed on 31 January 2020).

⁷ See ESCAP/CSD/2018/4.

15. The secretariat established a Group of Experts for Strengthening Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific, consisting of official representatives of members and associate members, to provide guidance and input on the content and format of the modality for strengthening regional cooperation on social protection.

16. All ESCAP members and associate members were invited to join the Group of Experts through a call for nominations in effect from 26 February 2019 to 19 April 2019. As of 11 June 2019, 18 official nominations representing all five ESCAP subregions had been received.

17. The secretariat convened the first meeting of the Group of Experts on 25 June 2019 to commence the process of developing the regional modality. In total, there were three rounds of draft revisions and two in-person meetings of the Group of Experts, with the second meeting held on 6 and 7 November 2019.

18. As a result of the discussions and suggestions at the two meetings of the Group of Experts and the written feedback received from the nominated experts on the different versions of the modality, a draft action plan to strengthen regional cooperation on social protection in Asia and the Pacific was prepared and was submitted for consideration by the Commission at its seventy-sixth session. The Commission requested that the Committee further review the action plan at its sixth session.

19. The objective of the action plan is to promote social protection for all with a view to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by strengthening regional cooperation among countries in Asia and the Pacific.

20. The action plan will provide governments in the Asia-Pacific region with a shared vision, strategy and platform for promoting partnership, peer learning and the sharing of good practices, as well as for identifying needs for technical assistance.

21. In the action plan, social protection refers to nationally defined policies and programmes that provide equitable access to all people and protect them throughout their lives against poverty and risks to their livelihoods and well-being. This protection can be provided through a range of mechanisms, including cash or in-kind benefits, contributory or non-contributory schemes, and programmes to enhance human capital, productive assets and access to jobs. It includes, but is not limited to, child benefits; benefits and support for people of working age in case of maternity, disability, work injury or unemployment; and old-age pensions. It does not cover areas such as health services and education.

II. Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific

A. At the national level

22. Between now and 2030, governments of Asia and the Pacific should, on a voluntary basis and in line with national circumstances, take the following actions:

(a) Ensure the right to social protection for all without discrimination throughout the life cycle, including by adopting necessary legislative, regulatory, administrative and other measures to this end;

(b) Progressively design and realize, including through social dialogue, comprehensive and sustainable social protection systems for all that

enable every person to access social protection at adequate benefit levels and thereby enjoy an adequate standard of living, in accordance with national circumstances, throughout his or her lifetime;

(c) Ensure that social protection systems are shock responsive, gender sensitive and relevant to the needs of vulnerable populations;

(d) Ensure that the implementation of social protection is efficient, coordinated, non-discriminatory, reliable and transparent, with public availability of appeal and complaint mechanisms institutionalized as part of the service delivery process;

(e) Allocate sufficient public funds, and increase these levels where required, towards the realization of social protection for all at the national level, with due regard to social and intergenerational solidarity and the sustainability of national social protection systems;

(f) Encourage national civil society entities and private sector organizations to engage actively in the field of social protection, as appropriate, towards the realization of social protection for all;

(g) Consider setting achievable national targets, including intermediate targets, based on country contexts within the indicator framework of Sustainable Development Goal 1.3, including through the establishment of the following:

(i) A national baseline of the population covered by social protection programmes for 2021, by sex and age;

(ii) Intermediate targets for the population covered by social protection programmes by 2025, by sex and age;

(iii) National targets to reach the entire population with social protection programmes by 2030, by sex and age;

(h) Develop strategies to achieve these targets and integrate them into national development plans and social protection sectoral plans and frameworks;

(i) Develop and strengthen national data management systems and processes to facilitate the collection, management and analysis of social protection data that are accurate, relevant and timely;

(j) Promote partnerships, peer learning, knowledge exchange and the sharing of good practices among countries in Asia and the Pacific through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation frameworks;

(k) Ensure that development support from partners is aligned with core national social protection priorities and corresponding technical assistance and capacity building needs;

(l) Share national experiences in the form of a progress report, to be produced on a voluntary basis, on the progress made and challenges faced in implementing the Action Plan, at future sessions of the Committee on Social Development.

B. At the regional level

23. To review and facilitate progress towards the realization of the Action Plan, the secretariat, in collaboration with relevant United Nations agencies, should take the following actions:

(a) Consolidate national experiences on the implementation of the Action Plan into periodic progress reports;

(b) Develop a regional platform for ESCAP members and associate members to facilitate peer learning and the sharing of good practices;

(c) Provide technical advice and capacity-building support to all ESCAP members and associate members at the regional, subregional and national levels, upon their request.

III. Issues for consideration by the Committee

24. The Committee may wish to review the draft action plan contained in the present document with a view to endorsing it and providing the secretariat with guidance on its operationalization.
