

# Universal Social Protection: Key concepts and international framework

Social Protection for All Issue Brief

April 2019



International  
Labour  
Office

Over the past years many countries have achieved significant extension of social protection coverage for child benefits, maternity benefits, old-age pensions, health protection, and other benefits, showing that universal social protection is not only relevant, but also feasible. There is also growing interest by the international community to promote universal social protection. A number of countries and development partners have joined the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (USP2030), which aims at accelerating progress in building universal and sustainable social protection systems, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in particular target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This brief presents key aspects of universal social protection, and highlights how it is anchored in the current international legal and policy framework. It summarizes the progress that has been achieved so far and delimits the concept from other ideas and terms that are currently present in policy discussions. It also presents some key indicators that can help to assess progress towards universal social protection.

## Universal social protection in the Sustainable Development Goals

Universal social protection has a central role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere) sets, among others, the target to “implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures *for all*, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable” (SDG target 1.3). In addition, universal social protection contributes to achieving other SDGs, in particular the goals on health (target 3.8), gender equality (target 5.4), decent work and economic growth (target 8.5), reduced inequalities (target 10.4), as well as the one on peace, justice and strong institutions (target 16.6).

Universal social protection is also one of the cornerstones of a human-centered agenda for the future of work, as charted out by the Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019).

## A comprehensive framework for universal social protection

The concept of universal social protection is enshrined in the international human rights framework. It is re-

flected in several treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security” (Art. 22) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) that recognises “the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance” (Art. 9); as well as the related right to adequate standard of living. The principle of universality of human rights underscores that every member of society possesses these rights, regardless of where they live, their gender, their race, their religion, cultural or ethnic background, their language, or other possible grounds of discrimination.

ILO social security standards are an integral part of the internationally agreed framework for the development of social protection systems. In particular, ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202), and the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102), are the cornerstones for developing universal social protection systems: First, national social protection *systems* should guarantee at least a basic level of social security for all, throughout the life

### Key points

- ▶ Universal social protection has a key role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in particular SDG target 1.3 on “social protection systems and measures for all, including floors”.
- ▶ Universal social protection encompasses three aspects:
  - Universal coverage in terms of persons protected;
  - Comprehensive protection in terms of risk covered; and
  - Adequacy of the protection provided.
- ▶ There is no one-size-fits-all solution to achieve universal social protection. Protection can be provided through a range of means, methods, and approaches, and needs to be adapted to national circumstances.
- ▶ Universal social protection is firmly grounded in the international rights framework: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention (No. 102), and the Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202).

course, including effective access to essential health care and income security: this is the social protection floor. Second, national social protection systems should be further strengthened by the progressive achievement of *higher levels of protection* to ensure adequate protection.

### Key aspects of universal social protection

According to this international framework, universal social protection encompasses three key aspects:

- *universal coverage* in terms of persons protected;
- *comprehensive protection* in terms of risks covered; and
- *adequacy of protection*.

### Universal coverage

According to ILO Recommendation No. 202 nationally defined social protection floors guarantee at least a basic level of social security for everyone throughout his or her life course, ensuring that all in need can effectively have access to social protection. These guarantees should cover at least all residents and all children, subject to other international obligations.

Universal social protection however does not stop at a basic level of protection. Recommendation No. 202 also sets out that countries should progressively ensure higher levels of social security for as many people as possible and as soon as possible.

Social protection systems should respect and promote the principles of non-discrimination, gender equality and responsiveness to special needs; social inclusion (including those persons in the informal economy); and respect for people's rights and dignity.

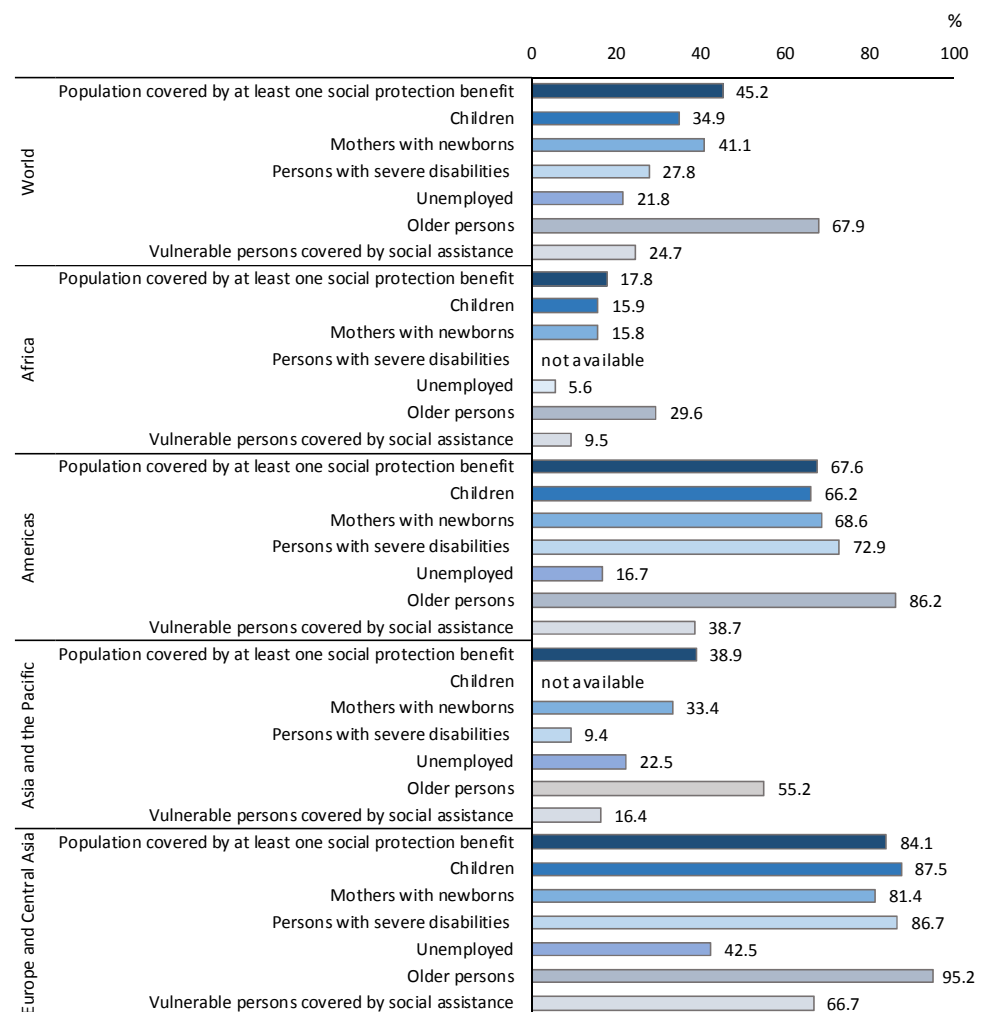
Figure 1 provides global and regional estimates of effective social protection coverage for different population groups according to SDG indicator 1.3.1. It provides an indication of both coverage in terms of persons protected, as well as risk protected.

### Comprehensive protection

Universal social protection also requires comprehensive protection in case of a broad set of social risks and contingencies. Such comprehensive protection should encompass in particular the core areas of social protection systems, including sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, old-age benefits, employment injury benefits, child or family benefits, maternity benefits, invalidity/disability benefits and survivor benefits, which are reflected in Convention No. 102 and in SDG target 1.3. In addition, Convention No. 102 also includes access to medical care, which is reflected in SDG target 3.8 on universal health coverage.

Figure 2 shows the progress made over the past decades towards comprehensiveness of social protection systems with regard to the first eight policy areas (not including health protection). As new social risks may arise in the future, such as long term care, these would have to be addressed as well.

**Figure 1. SDG indicator 1.3.1: Effective social protection coverage, global and regional estimates by population group (percentages)**



Source and notes: ILO (2017a, p. 169).

**Adequacy of protection**

Universal social protection needs to be adequate to achieve the expected policy outcomes. ILO social security standards provide a framework of internationally accepted minimum standards with regard to social protection systems. For social protection floors, the basic social security guarantees should prevent or at least alleviate poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion, and allow life in dignity.

**For conceptual clarity: universal social protection and other concepts**

The term “universal social protection” is widely used in policy discussions. In order to avoid confusion and to add further conceptual clarity, it is helpful to delimit the term from other concepts.

**Not to be confused with: a one-size-fits-all model**

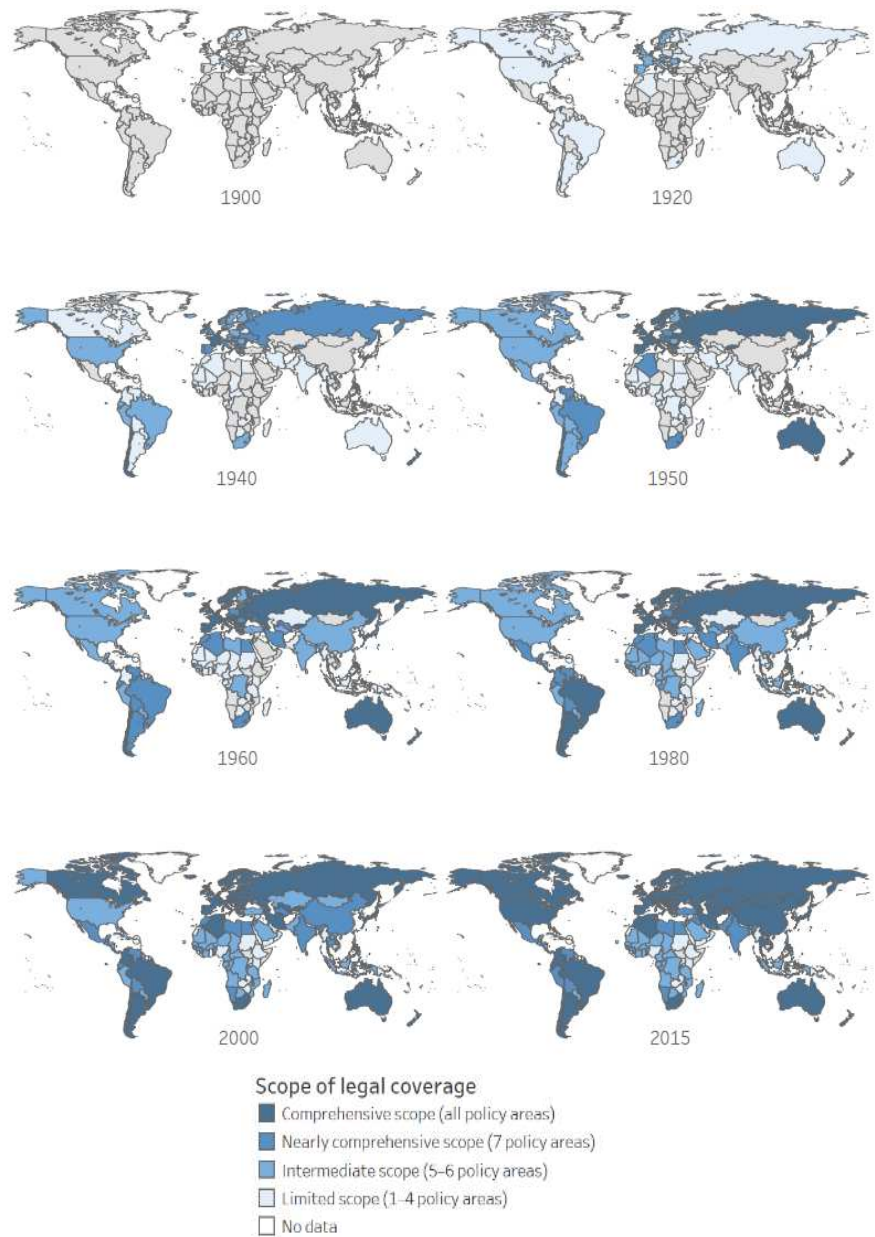
There is no one-size-fits-all model to achieve universal social protection, as the focus is on the outcome, rather than on the means.

Recommendation No. 202 clearly specifies that social protection floors should be nationally defined, and that countries should consider “the most effective and efficient combination of benefits and schemes in the national context”. Likewise, they should consider different methods to mobilize the necessary resources. This is what has happened around the world; countries have chosen different ways of achieving universal social protection.

**Not to be confused with: universal schemes or programmes**

According to the internationally agreed legal and policy framework described above, universal social protection refers mainly to social protection *systems*. However, the term “universal” is also used to describe individual *schemes and programmes* that are non-contributory, typically tax-financed, without a means-test, and with broad population coverage. There are two types of universal schemes/programmes:

**Figure 2. Towards comprehensive social protection systems: Number of policy areas covered in social protection programmes anchored in national legislation, 1900–2015**



Source and notes: ILO (2017a, p. 5).

- schemes/programmes that cover broad categories of the population, for instance children or older persons (also known as *categorical schemes*); and
- schemes/programmes that cover the resident population, such as a national health service or a universal basic income (see below).

Many countries that have achieved universal social protection are relying on universal schemes, in combination with other schemes and programmes. However, this is not the only option that countries have at their disposal, as other approaches are also compatible with the framework for universal social protection. For example, while many countries achieve universal social protection for children through a universal child grant, other countries achieve this objective through a combination

of several schemes (ILO and UNICEF, 2019). For instance in Argentina, more than 80 per cent of children are covered through a mix of social assistance and social insurance.

### *Not to be confused with: universal basic income*

Universal social protection means that everybody is adequately protected against the full range of risks throughout the life course. However, this does not require that everybody receives a benefit at every point in time, as would be the case with a Universal Basic Income (UBI).

Universal social protection could be achieved through a UBI that achieves universal coverage, comprehensive protection, and provides an adequate level of protection. However, UBI proposals can differ substantially in their design, and not every UBI proposal complies with key elements and principles of universal social protection (Ortiz et al., 2018). For example, for a UBI to meet the principles of universal social protection, the range and level of benefits would need to be adequate to fully meet the needs of recipients.

## How to achieve universal social protection?

The international human rights framework, international social security standards and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set out a clear internationally agreed framework for achieving universal social protection.

The *Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (USP2030) called on all countries to live up to their commitment to develop nationally owned social protection systems for all, including floors. It called upon countries and development partners to undertake the following five actions, to support the global commitment on universal social protection:

- **ACTION 1. Protection throughout life cycle:** Establish *universal* social protection systems, including floors that provide adequate protection throughout the life cycle, combining social insurance, social assistance and other means, anchored in national strategies and legislation.
- **ACTION 2. Universal coverage:** Provide universal access to social protection and ensure that social protection systems are rights-based, gender-sensitive and inclusive, leaving no one behind.
- **ACTION 3. National ownership:** Develop social protection strategies and policies based on national priorities and circumstances in close cooperation with all relevant actors.
- **ACTION 4. Sustainable and equitable financing:** Ensure the sustainability and fairness of social protection systems by prioritizing reliable and equitable forms of domestic financing, complemented by international cooperation and support where necessary.
- **ACTION 5. Participation and social dialogue:** Strengthen governance of social protection systems through institutional leadership, multi-sector coordination and the participation of social partners and other relevant and representative organizations, to generate broad-based support and promote the effectiveness of services.

Many countries have already achieved significant progress with regard to achieving universal social protection for at least one area of their social protection system. This includes most high-income countries, as well as a growing number of middle- and low-income countries, including Argentina, Cabo Verde, China, Georgia, Lesotho, Mongolia, Namibia, Nepal, South Africa, and Uruguay (see map and country briefs on [www.usp2030.org](http://www.usp2030.org)).

However, more efforts are needed to expand coverage and ensure comprehensive and adequate protection for all.

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