

# Towards universal, gender-responsive social protection?

## A global review of national social protection policies

Social Protection for All Issue Brief

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Social protection is a human right.<sup>1</sup> It is essential for eradicating poverty, reducing inequality and promoting decent work and inclusive growth. While 71 per cent of the global population still has no or only partial access to comprehensive social security coverage, many countries have made impressive strides in strengthening their social protection systems and building nationally appropriate social protection floors (ILO 2017). National social protection policies and strategies build a longer-term vision and consensus around the key components of social protection systems and their implementation, extension, monitoring and evaluation. As such, they act as the foundation of a corresponding legal framework that enshrines policy orientations into tangible rights and obligations.

Strategies and policy frameworks can catalyze the development of social protection systems, if they are designed in the right manner, duly financed and diligently implemented. The process is of equal importance as the outcome itself. International human rights instruments and international labour standards contain important principles that can guide the formulation of equitable and sustainable social protection policies and strategies. The Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) for example, calls upon countries to adopt national strategies for the extension of social security, underlining the importance of a participatory process, based on national consultations involving effective social dialogue and social participation.

The extent to which social protection strategies and policies are gender-sensitive also has a bearing on their success. Given that women are over-represented among the global population with partial or no access to social security (UN Women 2015), strategies and policies that address gendered risks and vulnerabilities are more likely to advance the global commitment to 'leave no one behind.'

This brief presents key findings from a joint UN Women/ILO analysis of national social protection strategies and policies from a gender and human rights perspective. The aim of the research was to generate a picture of: 1) the process through which these policies are produced; 2) the scope and breadth of the

provisions they contain, including the extent to which their content is anchored in international standards; and 3) the presence of implementation mechanisms that foster accountability and sustainability of social protection systems.

The brief begins with an overview of methodology. The next sections examine the extent to which the strategies and policies are based on international standards and acknowledge stakeholder participation. Next, we analyze the content of the documents, reviewing various forms of social protection (contributory, non-contributory) as well as links to public services and infrastructure. This section also asks whether strategies position gender equality and women's empowerment as an objective to be achieved in and through social protection and foresee actions to close benefit gaps between women and men, and formal and informal workers. The final section looks at implementation mechanisms to foster accountability and sustainability.

### Key points

- ▶ Social protection strategies and policies are most commonly available in Africa, the Americas and, to a lesser extent, Europe and Central Asia. Other regions have few (Asia and Pacific) or no available policies (Arab States).
- ▶ Participation in the formulation of these documents is uneven across regions and in terms of who is consulted. Consultation rates of national women's machineries and social partners is extremely low.
- ▶ While most countries commit to providing universal access to a social protection floor, fewer commit to providing progressively higher levels of coverage.
- ▶ Most documents acknowledge some gendered risks and vulnerabilities, but a much smaller share propose any concrete actions to address these.
- ▶ Informal workers remain largely absent in social protection documents, although Africa seems to be leading the way in terms of planning for coverage extension.

<sup>1</sup> Social protection is defined as the set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability throughout the lifecycle. (ILO 2017).

## Methodology

We developed a set of indicators, 22 of which were used in the preparation of this brief, based on a review of international human rights instruments, international labor standards such as the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) and academic and grey literature focused on gender-sensitive social protection.

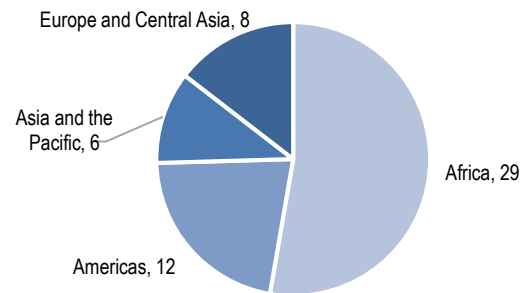
A sample of 55 national social protection strategies and policies (hereafter “documents”) was drawn from a global database of 80 documents compiled by UN Women through desktop research and outreach to United Nations regional and country offices. Given language constraints within the team, only documents produced in English, French, Portuguese or Spanish could be included. Furthermore, the final sample was narrowed down to only include documents that were deemed comparable and had been produced between 2010 and 2019.

National development plans and poverty reduction strategies were excluded, although some social development strategies were included when there were more in-depth explorations of social protection. To build the database, we sourced social protection documents through online research, professional networks, and the 2019 ILO General Survey concerning the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) in which governments were asked to share strategies or policies.

The availability of social protection strategies and policies across regions is highly variable. While these were widely available across Africa (29) and the Americas (12), comparatively few documents were found in Europe and Central Asia (8), Asia and the Pacific (6) and none in the Arab States.

National social protection strategies and policies are produced and updated periodically. As a result, our sample included documents published between 2010 and 2020. The vision and content of the strategies and policies reflect the time period in which they were produced. Some of the more recent European documents, for example, reflect contemporary austerity measures, where the spirit of the strategy tends more towards labour activation and in some cases privatization, rather than the provision of higher levels of social protection coverage. Documents from the Americas reflect the platform of many governments throughout the period to reach excluded populations through conditional cash transfers and social pensions.

Figure 1: Regional distribution of the 55 national social protection policies/strategies included in the sample



## Overarching frameworks: are they based on international standards?

Most social protection documents in the sample acknowledged human rights and their applicability in the national context (51 out of 55) and more than three quarters (42 out of 55) explicitly referenced binding human rights instruments and international labour standards (see figure 2) in relation to the provision of social protection. These include, but are not limited to, international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), as well as regional instruments, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1981), and the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102). Every strategy in Africa acknowledged human rights, followed by the Americas with 83 per cent. Gender-specific human rights instruments (such as CEDAW) and international labour standards (such as ILO Convention No. 183 on maternity protection) were less frequently mentioned (34 out of 55).

A human rights-based approach identifies rights holders and their entitlements, and corresponding duty bearers and their obligations, and works towards strengthening the capacities of rights holders to make their claims and of duty bearers to meet their obligations. Recognizing social protection as a human right also means ensuring that every member of society will be adequately protected. Sixty-two per cent of the documents express a commitment to the provision of social protection for all, or the progressive realization of universal access to social protection (see ILO 2019a). This is in line with the ‘horizontal’ dimension of social protection in Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) (see Figure 2). 69 per cent of the reviewed documents further include a vision for moving beyond poverty reduction towards progressively higher levels of protection in line with the ‘vertical’ dimension of social protection in Recommendation No. 202 (see figure 2).

This includes, for example, providing higher levels of income security, better access to health care, and

provision of protection for a broader range of contingencies to as many people as quickly as possible, guided by ILO Convention No. 102 and more advanced standards. Five out of 6 documents in Asia and the Pacific, 23 out of 29 in Africa, and 8 out of 12 in the Americas made such an explicit commitment. That only 2 out of 8 documents in Europe and Central Asia commit to higher levels of protection may be indicative of austerity measures adopted in the period from which our sample is taken.

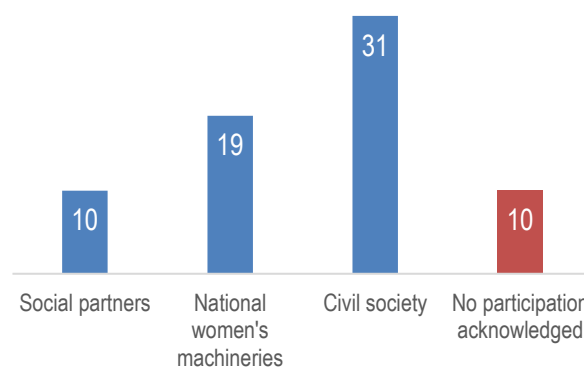
Social protection can be an important pathway for advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. However, only 13 out of 55 documents made an explicit commitment to achieving gender equality or reducing gender inequalities through the provision of social protection, with little regional variation.

### Formulating a strategy: a participatory process?

The Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) underlines the importance of meaningful participation of workers, employers and other stakeholders in the formulation of national social protection strategies and policies. Experience shows that the participation of relevant stakeholders can lead to more evidence-based strategies while also fostering a sense of ownership and facilitating a smooth implementation process. Consultations can involve a variety of actors, such as relevant government institutions across different sectors, civil society organizations and workers' and employers' representatives (social partners). Within the state, national women's machineries (government institutions in charge of gender equality and women's affairs) are often charged with bringing a gender perspective into sector-specific policies. To ensure that social protection documents are

gender-sensitive, their inputs should be sought as part of broader inter-ministerial consultation processes. Most of documents in the sample were developed through a participatory process (82 per cent). In the Americas, all documents involved stakeholder participation. Participatory processes were evident in 5 out of 6 cases in Asia and the Pacific; in Africa, 23 out of 29; and in Europe and Central Asia, 5 out of 8 (figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of national social protection policies/strategies that acknowledge participation / consultation of different actors in their development (out of 55)



The question of whose participation is acknowledged reveals striking variation. Averaging across regions, social partners are least often consulted, with their participation recognized in 18 per cent of the documents. Social partners were consulted in 4 out of 29 documents in Africa, 3 out of 12 in the Americas, 2 out of 8 in Europe and Central Asia, and 1 out of 6 in Asia and the Pacific.

In just over one third of cases were national women's machineries involved in the formulation of a strategy. Consultation with civil society organizations was slightly higher, at 56 per cent. Interestingly, in the Americas, the consultation rate with civil society was the same,

Figure 2: ILO two-dimensional approach to Social Protection



occurring in just over half of the reviewed strategies (7 out of 12). In Asia and the Pacific as well as in Europe and Central Asia, consultation of national women's machineries was completely absent, while civil society organizations participated in the formulation of half of the strategies in our sample (3 out of 6 and 4 out of 8), respectively).

While external support of this nature is more common in contexts with less well-developed social protection systems, at least half of all documents were produced with external support in every world region.

External actors (e.g. donors, international financial institutions, UN-agencies) provided technical and/or financial support in the development of 75 per cent of strategies and policies globally.

### Are key components of national social protection systems present?

The principles laid out in Recommendation No.202 include the consideration of a multiplicity of mechanisms in building comprehensive social protection systems, including floors, as well as ensuring the availability of quality public services. Mechanisms should address different risks along the life cycle, providing benefits in cash or in-kind, through non-contributory schemes, providing universal, categorical, or poverty-targeted benefits such as social assistance as well as contributory schemes, commonly social insurance. Infrastructural investments to support the delivery of basic quality public services and people's access to them, such as health, education, energy, water, and sanitation, are also important for the functioning of social protection systems.

#### *Contributory and non-contributory components*

In looking at contributory and non-contributory mechanisms, we sought to identify whether the documents indicated an intention to achieve the more advanced range and levels of benefits set out in the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) and other ILO standards. All strategies in our sample featured improvements to non-contributory mechanism and over 91 per cent (50 out of 55) referenced improvements to social insurance provisions. The latter included specific actions intended to ensure the maintenance or sustainability of contributory systems. Regarding social insurance, we include maintenance of current benefit levels, recognizing that in the context of austerity and population ageing in countries with well-developed public pension systems, many of these systems are under stress. This seems to be the pattern observed in Europe and Central Asia, where 7 out of 8 of the strategies and policies were coded positively, but the

emphasis tended to be on maintenance of the existing systems rather than general improvements. A positive picture emerged in the Americas, with all but one document in the sample indicating an extension of contributory systems. In Africa, too, most countries are considering the development of social insurance mechanisms (27 out of 29 documents).

The coordination of social protection policy with other policy areas as well as internally, between contributory or non-contributory mechanisms, or the combination of both, is an important step to closing protection gaps. However, while most documents cover both mechanisms, few include an explicit discussion of how to improve coordination and create linkages between contributory and non-contributory schemes, on the one hand, and between social protection, public services and infrastructure, on the other.

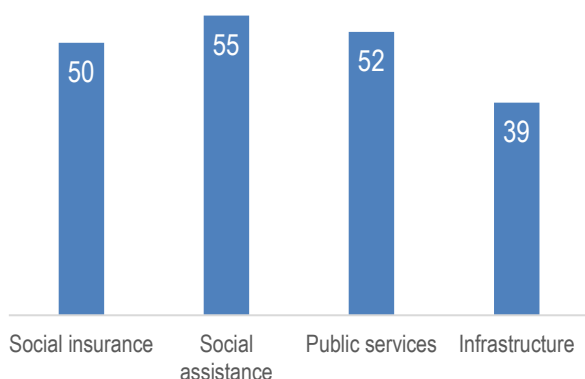
#### *Public services and infrastructure*

The vast majority of documents (95 per cent) put forth a vision of social protection that included access to public services. This includes all documents in Europe and Central Asia (8 out of 8); 5 out of 6 in Asia and the Pacific; 11 out of 12 in the Americas; and 28 out of 29 in Africa. The most commonly cited public service was healthcare, followed by education, including improvements to primary and secondary education, and sometimes adult education targeting women. Childcare services and social housing were also mentioned, although much less commonly. Long-term (elder) care services were infrequently mentioned, which is surprising given population ageing.

A significantly lower percentage of documents include infrastructural improvements as an integral component of social protection systems (71 per cent). These include increasing the housing stock, improvements to water and sanitation, increased stability in access to electricity and heating, and investments in rural infrastructure to facilitate agricultural livelihoods. A comparatively smaller share of documents for the Americas and Asia and the Pacific included such references to infrastructure (8 out of 12 and 4 out of 6 respectively), followed by Africa (20 out of 29) and Europe and Central Asia (7 out of 8).



Figure 4 Overview of components included in national social protection policies/strategies, number of policies/strategies out of 55



While it is heartening to see commitments to providing poverty reduction measures through non-contributory schemes, when viewed in combination with the lower figures for public services and infrastructure, there is some cause for concern. For example, the rise in provision of conditional and unconditional cash transfers must be accompanied by accessible and quality public services and infrastructure if they are to have a sustainable impact on the lives of individuals and families (UN 2019).

### Are coverage gaps addressed?

In keeping with Recommendation No.202, which calls for the provision of protection along the life cycle protection, systems should seek to close coverage gaps. Yet overall, only about two-thirds of the documents adopt a life cycle approach.

It is also widely acknowledged that significant coverage gaps in social protection exist between men and women and between formal and informal economy workers (ILO 2019b). Yet specific actions to extend coverage to informal workers are present in just about a half of the documents reviewed (29 out of 55). Typically, the intention is to extend the coverage of contributory schemes including pensions and health insurance. Almost three quarters of the documents in Africa (21 out of 29) include reference to this effect, compared to only half of those in Asia and the Pacific (3 out of 6) and quarter of those in the Americas (3 out of 12) and Europe and Central Asia (out of 8).

While most documents acknowledge some form of gendered risks and vulnerabilities, less than a quarter (13 out of 55) positioned gender equality and women’s empowerment as an objective to be achieved in and through social protection. While about half of the strategies featured specific measures to address gendered risks and vulnerabilities as part of their social assistance programs and public services, only about a

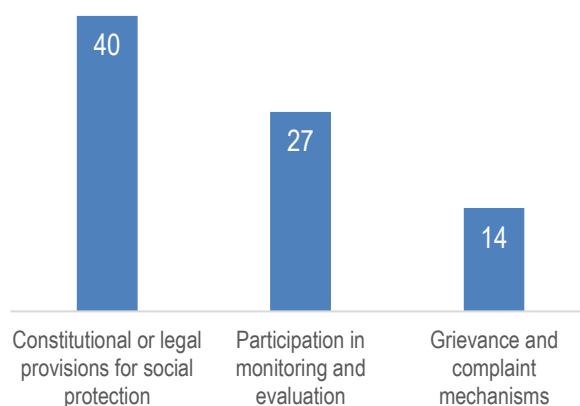
quarter referenced specific measures to address gendered risks and vulnerabilities under social insurance.

### Implementation mechanisms for accountability and sustainability

In addition to being well-designed, social protection policies and programmes need to be properly implemented and financed. In order to ensure sustainability, reliability and predictability, benefits must be anchored in the law. Moreover, the persons that schemes aim to reach should be able to make their voices heard in the implementation and evaluation of social protection provisioning.

Almost three-quarters of reviewed social protection documents refer to the existence of constitutional provisions or specific laws through which a claim to social protection can be made.

Figure 5: Number of national social protection policies/strategies by references to different accountability mechanisms (out of 55)



The share of documents that do so is highest in Africa (24 out of 29) and Asia and the Pacific (5 out of 6), but relatively low in the Americas (7 out of 12), and Europe and Central Asia (4 out of 8). This surprising finding may well reflect that in Europe and Central Asia it is taken for granted, and thus not stated, that social protection benefits must have a legal basis.

Involving social protection beneficiaries in the design, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs increases the likelihood that these will meet people’s needs, and reduces the potential for negative unintended consequences. Just under half (27 out of 55) of documents include participatory monitoring and evaluation methods, such as social audits, community score cards, and qualitative impact or process evaluations. Such methods are present in about half of all documents in Africa (16 out of 29) and Europe and Central Asia (4 out of 8); but less than half in the

Americas (5 out of 12), and only a third in Asia and the Pacific (2 out of 6).

Even fewer documents incorporate grievance, feedback and complaint mechanisms intended to inform policy assessment and reform, at 25 percent of documents overall.

## Conclusion

National social protection strategies and policies are reflective of the political, social and economic period in which they are developed, and they set the tone for many years to come. Many countries are engaging in the development of new or revision of existing social protection policies or strategies. It is thus vitally important that their formulation involves the participation of relevant actors, including gender equality advocates, workers' and employers' representatives and other representative organizations of persons concerned. Unfortunately, policy processes seems all too often to exclude these groups. It is also critical that documents include a package of protections that is robust enough to ensure not only that all people (young and old, women and men, informally and formally employed) are progressively protected in a adequate and complete way, as to improve their everyday quality of life, as set out in international social protection legal frameworks. This requires a systems perspective on social protection that aims at guaranteeing at least a basic level of protection for all while striving to provide higher levels of protection beyond poverty prevention.

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