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**Evaluation**

**Evaluation of UNDP support to social protection**

**Executive summary**

*Summary*

The evaluation assesses the relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of UNDP support to social protection over the period 2016-2022. It illustrates UNDP support to key social protection-related areas such as cash transfers, health and care services, social insurance and labour-market support including for the informal sector, as well as shock-responsive social protection. The evaluation emphasizes that workable linkages between social protection and economic empowerment, health and environmental objectives are critical for strengthening UNDP contribution. The report includes seven recommendations to this end.

*Elements of a decision*

The Executive Board may wish to: (a) take note of the evaluation; and (b) request UNDP management to address the issues raised in the report and its recommendations.

**Contents**

I.	Introduction.....	2
II.	Background.....	2
III.	About this evaluation .....	4
IV.	Findings.....	4
V.	Conclusions.....	10
VI.	Recommendations.....	13

## I. Introduction

1. The evaluation of UNDP support to social protection is the first dedicated global assessment by the Independent Evaluation Office in this area. It was conducted as part of the office's multi-year programme of work 2022-2025, as approved by the Executive Board (DP/2022/6).
2. The evaluation supports the accountability of UNDP to the Executive Board and development partners by assessing the contribution of UNDP against the goals stated in its strategic documents and provides evidence to promote organizational learning for improved effectiveness. It takes a forward-looking view, providing recommendations to inform the strategic and programmatic direction of UNDP support over the remainder of the period of the current Strategic Plan (2022-2025) and the global efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goal target 1.3, implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

## II. Background

3. UNDP defines social protection as a set of nationally owned policies and instruments, organized around systems that provide income or in-kind support and facilitate access to goods and services to all households and individuals at least at minimally accepted levels, to: (a) protect them from multiple deprivations and social and economic exclusion, as a matter of human rights and particularly during shocks or periods of insufficient income, incapacity or inability to work; and (b) empower them by increasing productive capacities and enhancing capabilities. At an operational level, social protection systems are articulated around programmes, platforms and institutions that provide coherence and consistency and are organized around contributory or non-contributory forms of income support and around social assistance, social insurance and labour-market interventions.<sup>1</sup>

### Social protection and emerging challenges

4. While there is consensus about the desirability of social protection provision in general, there is significant variation on what this means in practice, in terms of how it is conceived, what it consists of, how it is implemented and for whom it should be provided.<sup>2</sup> Amidst the plethora of interpretations of social protection and its role in development, the consensus that the primary goal of social protection in developing countries is to address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable groups, has contributed to the accelerated propagation of the social protection agenda.<sup>3</sup> Recognition of the importance of social protection has also led to increased global cooperation.
5. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, social protection is endorsed as an instrument for achieving both poverty eradication and the reduction of inequality. The relationship between social protection and other Sustainable Development Goals has also received attention. More broadly, as an intersectoral intervention, social protection is a strategic integrator that harnesses synergies for enhanced impact by simultaneously addressing several of the Goals and their targets.
6. Major gaps in social protection coverage exist, with differences across regions (higher average coverage rates in Europe and Central Asia and the Americas, and higher coverage gaps in Africa,

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP. 2022. UNDP's social protection offer 2.0, New York. October 2022, page 2.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, B., K. Roelen, Enfield S. and W. Avis. 2019. Social Protection Topic Guide. Revised Edition. K4D Emerging Issues Report 18. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2021. Global research on governance and social protection. New York, 2021.

the Arab States and Asia and the Pacific). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), only 47 per cent of the global population are effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, while 4.1 billion people (53 per cent) obtain no income security at all from their national social protection systems.<sup>4</sup> Even where programmes are available, physical, financial and geographical barriers may disproportionately prevent access to benefits and services for certain groups, especially those in the informal economic sector.

7. The coverage of contributory social protection schemes for women is particularly low, especially in the case of old-age pensions, unemployment benefits or maternity protection. One of the factors is that women are not as well represented in formal-sector employment as men. Ensuring adequate social protection for women and men requires addressing labour-market insecurity and inequalities, including gender gaps in employment and wages. Women are also overrepresented in the unpaid and often unrecognized care work at home, which has limited their labour-force participation and productivity.

8. In many contexts, social protection systems operate among high levels of economic inequality and informality, marked by limited fiscal space, institutional fragmentation and competing priorities, climate change, digital transformation and demographic shifts. Gaps in the coverage, comprehensiveness and adequacy of social protection systems are associated with significant underinvestment in social protection, particularly in Africa, the Arab States region and Asia. The emerging global context with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and the triple threat of recession, higher inflation and higher debts have brought even more challenges to the social protection agenda.

### **The UNDP social protection approach and portfolio**

9. In the previous Strategic Plan, 2018-2021, UNDP promoted the progressive expansion of inclusive social protection systems towards sustainable coverage of the poor and the vulnerable. Social protection was anchored not only in UNDP work to reduce inequality and eradicate poverty but also connected to other thematic areas under its six signature solutions. This was further streamlined in the current Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which highlights a rights-based approach to human agency and human development, in which social protection contributes to an equitable access to opportunities. The plan aims to increase social protection coverage, access and quality through stronger services and systems across sectors, supported by increased investment and improved policies and capacities.

10. The UNDP social protection offer provides an integrated vision to tackle three interconnected sets of issues: gaps in social protection coverage; weak governance of social protection systems; and shock-unresponsiveness of existing social protection mechanisms. The offer identifies three mutually supportive thematic areas in which UNDP has strong expertise, to serve as entry points to its social protection support: (a) responsible and accountable governance; (b) resilience; and (c) environmental sustainability. It maps out 12 social protection solutions that cut across the three thematic areas. Cross-cutting principles and enablers for the social protection offer include gender equality and human rights (principles); and financing/fiscal space, digitalization and innovation, data and evidence (enablers).

11. The UNDP social protection portfolio over the period 2016-2022 consisted of 855 projects implemented in 134 countries, amounting to \$2.5 billion in expenditure. Latin America and the

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<sup>4</sup> ILO, 2020. World Social Protection Report 2020-22: Social protection at the crossroads – in pursuit of a better future.

Caribbean is the region with the highest expenditure (47 per cent), followed by Africa (25.1 per cent), Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (10.7 per cent), the Arab States region (10.2 per cent) and Asia and the Pacific (6.8 per cent). UNDP regular (core) resources represent 7.4 per cent of its total expenditure in social protection over the evaluation period, although with significant variance between regions.

### **III. About this evaluation**

12. The evaluation covers the years 2016 to 2022, a period that starts with the launch of the UNDP social protection primer in the first year of the Sustainable Development Goals, and encompasses support delivered before and under the UNDP social protection offer.<sup>5</sup> This time frame includes the COVID-19 pandemic, in which social protection played a significant role in response and recovery, and other global crises and economic transitions that followed. The evaluation assesses all types of UNDP support intended to improve and strengthen social protection policies and measures, as well as the enablers and principles adopted by UNDP in its offer. The evaluation is global, covering all regions of UNDP operations (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Arab States, Europe and the CIS and Latin America and the Caribbean).

13. The evaluation addresses five overarching questions linked to the criteria of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. The evaluation methods used include a literature review, detailed portfolio analysis, meta-synthesis of independent and quality decentralized evaluations, an online survey, semi-structured key informant interviews and select country case studies. In total, 500 people were consulted for the evaluation.

### **IV. Findings**

#### **Global distribution of UNDP support**

14. Globally, the UNDP programme portfolio comprised cash transfers (in both development and crisis contexts), access to health and social care services, social protection for informal workers, labour-market support and, to a very limited extent, social insurance. Support to delivery mechanisms through digitalization to improve the identification and targeting of beneficiaries is another important part of the UNDP social protection portfolio. A majority of expenditures within the portfolio went to countries with a high/very high Human Development Index ranking, and more than half of the total occurred in upper-middle-income countries.

15. Over a quarter of the total portfolio expenditures were concentrated in five large projects in three countries (Argentina, Dominican Republic and Senegal). In these countries, government cost sharing represents a significant portion of the expenditure. UNDP support is embedded in country-led, country-owned social protection programmes and provides institutional strengthening and procurement support.

16. An important part of the UNDP social protection portfolio is the upstream support to policy development and institutional strengthening for the governance of social protection systems at the national level, including technical advisory support.

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<sup>5</sup> An early version of the offer was released in February 2021 and the social protection offer 2.0 was launched in October 2022.

## **The UNDP global approach to social protection**

17. Overall, the UNDP global social protection offer is relevant and corresponds to the central themes of social protection policy and practice globally. The offer's main strength is its focus on linking social protection instruments with initiatives for risk prevention, recovery, environmental protection, livelihoods promotion and economic transitions.

18. At least 5 of the 12 solutions in the offer relate to core components of country-owned systems, mostly under the governance thematic area, and are intended to improve the policies, strategies, beneficiary identification, financing and capacities for managing the system. The most significant area of UNDP support in this regard is for the development of platforms and services which can facilitate social protection specifically or a broad range of government functions, such as management information systems and e-governance platforms. This assistance represents the most prominent intersection of UNDP technical expertise with mainstream social protection system approaches found in the evaluation.

19. The UNDP emphasis on strengthening the shock-responsiveness of social protection mechanisms is aligned with the emerging focus of many national Governments and agencies, promoting social protection as a means to comprehensively address needs before, during and after a shock occurs. The UNDP focus on the intersections between social protection and climate, environment and energy is a recent addition. It aligns well with the need to move away from a predominantly technical focus on discrete social protection instruments and plays to the strengths of UNDP as an integrator with a sustainable development mandate.

20. The UNDP global vision for its social protection support has not been sufficiently translated into practice at the country level to enable coherent solutions. UNDP country offices define social protection interventions differently, depending on the national definitions and priorities, and rarely offer a coherent vision to comprehensively advance, along with partners, a country's social protection system.

21. Similarly, UNDP does not outline a clear approach on how emergency assistance can align with national social protection systems, thus missing an opportunity to enhance the response capacity of national programmes. Although linking social protection and environmental initiatives is an important feature of the UNDP strategy, the synergies are not yet developed into clear social protection programme offers for use by country offices.

## **Policy and institutional strengthening**

22. In a number of countries, UNDP contributed to strengthening policies and institutions that are relevant for the national social protection system. Its most positive results are in countries where it has provided longer-term support to social protection reforms, along with strong commitment and leadership by national Governments. In these examples, UNDP has provided consistent support to the assessment of social protection gaps, developed concrete proposals and brought together diverse knowledge and know-how. In doing so, it has shaped country-specific institutional arrangements and legal frameworks and strengthened national capacities through longer-term stable funding, securing ownership of key government stakeholders through close partnerships. In certain countries, such a comprehensive approach has also positioned UNDP as an immediate point of reference and source of expertise on social protection.

23. UNDP upstream support typically targets broad social inclusion policies, and the advancement of inclusive labour-market participation has also been an important component. National social care system strengthening has been another component of UNDP work, addressing the challenges of care systems and their implications for the autonomy of women and inclusion of vulnerable groups. An emerging area of UNDP institutional strengthening work has been its support for audits and evaluations of national social protection programmes. Overall, while UNDP support to policies and

technical capacities is important for strengthening social protection systems, short-term and fragmented interventions with limited linkages with policy processes reduced the UNDP contribution. When social protection initiatives have been part of a broader support for employment, the potential for sustaining outcomes achieved was greater.

### **Cash transfers**

24. UNDP support to cash-transfer programmes has enabled better targeting of beneficiaries and its engagement in cash (conditional and unconditional) and non-cash transfers has been transformative in several countries. Developing unique registries of beneficiaries has allowed countries to identify and select households in conditions of extreme poverty, thereby ensuring the objectivity and transparency of interventions and better directing scarce public resources to the poorest households. UNDP has not sufficiently linked the livelihood component of the cash transfers with the national social protection agenda, which is a missed opportunity in development contexts (or non-crisis contexts). UNDP has yet to systematically facilitate the conditions under which households use cash transfers to build productive capacities and livelihood choices.

25. Cash-transfer support in crisis contexts has been critical in providing sustenance and promoting livelihoods, but this approach has not yet been integrated with longer-term social protection systems. UNDP has sought to situate cash-for-work initiatives within integrated approaches across themes with limited success. The sustainability of cash-for-work programmes has been challenged by the insecurity of their settings, disruption of public services and political uncertainty. At the local level, livelihood promotion largely stops at localized temporary cash or in-kind handouts, without the creation of an enabling environment for promoting productivity. Crisis contexts lacked financing, legal and policy structures, mechanisms and population or social registries. Community-based approaches and backstopping from local government were necessary to ensure the sustainability of project operating schemes.

26. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the persistent challenges affecting the delivery of social protection measures. UNDP support to cash assistance in its COVID-19 response was critical in promoting livelihoods and short-term employment. It has advocated for a temporary basic income to help women and other vulnerable groups cope with the effects of the pandemic; and developed a simulator that shows the amount of temporary basic income needed to lift vulnerable people out of poverty in 132 countries, with various policy options for doing so. The support to temporary basic income is evolving with a few positive examples.

### **Health and care services**

27. UNDP has provided a wide range of support to strengthen health infrastructures and facilitate access to health services. Its timely support to procurement has accelerated health emergency responses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP provided support for vaccinations and associated medical equipment such as personal protective equipment for many countries and across all regions. In several cases, UNDP redirected financing from existing projects to address the increased demand for health assistance as a result of the pandemic. Given its engagement with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, UNDP was well positioned to support government efforts to provide fast and affordable health-care support. A key issue has been the limited extent to which these immediate short-term response measures are linked to the overall

longer-term effort to support universal health coverage, which is a central component of social protection and part of what UNDP plans to support through its HIV and health strategy 2022-2025.<sup>6</sup>

28. The promotion and strengthening of social care services is an emerging area of UNDP work. This support has yielded initial positive results, particularly in upper-middle-income countries, and became especially important as the weaknesses in care services were exposed during the pandemic. In addition to the support for strengthening national care systems, UNDP has implemented a wide range of effective interventions related to modelling social services and empowerment of the most vulnerable groups, including victims of gender-based violence, children and persons with disabilities. In some cases, the UNDP work has been expanded by the Government.

29. Supporting care services creates an opportunity for UNDP to make improvements in the care economy, much of which is conducted informally by women, with limited recognition, compensation or employment benefits. UNDP has supported some knowledge-generation initiatives highlighting overlooked gender issues. Despite some positive examples, systematic support to strengthening national care economies remains a largely untapped area for UNDP in terms of creation of care service jobs as part of active labour-market interventions. UNDP has yet to fully explore the linkage between care services and the care economy, an area where its interdisciplinary approach could add value.

### **Informal sector, labour-market support and social insurance**

30. UNDP engagement in social protection efforts for informal workers has been too limited to enable substantial national-level outcomes. UNDP has developed initiatives to expand social protection to informal workers, including an integrated offer on informal economy in response to COVID-19 in Africa and a joint global initiative on fostering pathways to formality in collaboration with ILO. Despite these efforts, the focus on informal workers is not sufficient to address the magnitude of the informal sector, and more substantive engagement is needed to promote social insurance models and overcome systemic barriers. New programming and research are pointing to ways forward.

31. Although UNDP has several programmes linked to employment and livelihoods generation, its engagements are often too narrow to be classified as labour-market interventions. While there has been a focus on strengthening the skills of poor and vulnerable workers, the small scale and scope of such initiatives have had little effect on inducing system-level changes, with the exception of some successful pilots and relevant lessons learned that can inform future government active labour-market measures and programmes (for example in the Western Balkans). UNDP has promoted human-centred design of active labour-market interventions by bringing together social welfare centres and employment offices to design integrated measures. Assistance for strengthening the capacity of national labour-market institutions has been important to deliver integrated services to the most vulnerable unemployed groups. UNDP conducted vocational training in several countries and improved employment opportunities for persons with disabilities through the strengthening of public policies. There remain challenges such as limited fiscal and human resource capacities, and a limited understanding of the need to modernize approaches to fit current market demands. UNDP involvement in labour-market programmes has been focused on the supply side, leading to a mismatch between skills-development efforts and actual labour-market needs. UNDP

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<sup>6</sup> UNDP. (2022). Connecting the dots: Towards a more equitable, healthier and sustainable future. UNDP HIV and Health strategy 2022–2025.

interventions in this area have been skewed towards fostering employability through skills development instead of fostering demand for labour including youth employment schemes.

32. UNDP support to social insurance has been limited, focused mostly on pilot initiatives in health insurance and policy support for extending social insurance to informal workers. UNDP piloted climate-related insurance, given its potential to improve the resilience of vulnerable populations but this is a nascent effort that requires more time to scale up. There have been some successful examples but also challenges related to sustainability and financing.

### **Shock-responsive social protection**

33. UNDP has implemented various interventions to increase shock responsiveness, including risk and vulnerability assessments and mapping of crises that affect populations. However, beyond a few initiatives, there has been limited connection to social protection systems and there is a lack of a strategy to work towards protective, promotive, preventive and transformative approaches. UNDP crisis responses are mostly delivered in parallel to country-owned social protection instruments and initiated post-shock. This enables a faster response in countries where the national social protection system is unable to meet needs but has limitations in strengthening the shock responsiveness of institutional mechanisms. In several countries, activities are focused on post-fact emergency response and recovery support, with very limited examples of anticipatory action in terms of providing support to the social protection system prior to a shock to improve its shock responsiveness. Overall, UNDP has yet to leverage its engagement in disaster risk reduction, climate change planning and conflict prevention to improve the responsiveness of social protection systems.

### **Gender-sensitive social protection and universality**

34. The UNDP social protection offer draws attention to the reality of women's socioeconomic position, including their role in unpaid care; the economic and social costs of reproduction and of caring for dependents; and the overrepresentation of women in informal employment. Describing these as essential issues for consideration in social protection, UNDP has taken a step beyond a basic gender-targeting approach for women's participation in labour-market or welfare programmes. During the pandemic, UNDP and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) launched the [COVID-19 global gender response tracker](#), monitoring among other aspects, the social protection measures developed by countries and territories across the globe and analysing them from a gender perspective.

35. In some countries, UNDP has achieved strong integration of gender and vulnerability aspects as bases for development of social services and system-level support. UNDP interventions in the areas of social care and informal economy have meaningfully integrated gender, as have interventions related to domestic violence. At the country level, analysis of the gender markers demonstrated that gender equality has been generally included in programmes as a significant objective in the UNDP social protection portfolio, while interventions that have gender equality and women's empowerment as the primary objective are still lacking. Lack of sustained engagement reduced the contribution to gender-transformative social protection measures.

36. UNDP recognizes that social protection is a human right and should be universal. However, it has not articulated a clear strategy for implementing these principles throughout its support, especially in balancing universality with trades-offs linked to constrained resources and conditionality.

### **Financing social protection**

37. Concerted efforts to systematically address financing for social protection are lacking in the UNDP offer. UNDP support to the development of integrated national financing frameworks is an opportunity to help better align public and private financial flows. The frameworks lay out national strategies for financing and implementing national development plans. They have six priority areas,



including social protection, and 86 countries globally are using them to drive finance towards the Sustainable Development Goals. However, making the frameworks operational to fill the gaps in planning and budget allocations in general and including for social protection remain a challenge.

38. UNDP is exploring innovative financing mechanisms to enable the extension of social protection, such as blended financing mechanisms and engaging the diaspora. UNDP support to studies and data has contributed to improved analysis of social protection efforts and financing.

### **Digitalization of social protection systems**

39. Support to digital registries and data platforms is an area where UNDP has strengthened social protection delivery. These initiatives have promoted interoperability and efficiency of services across social protection areas and actors. Digitalizing the delivery and/or the monitoring of the payment systems has contributed to the improved transparency of social protection services.

40. Supporting the development of e-registries is one of the main ways in which UNDP has helped to expand social protection and has enabled more effective targeting of social assistance, such as cash-transfer programmes. Digitalization of social protection data is a significant improvement, enabling programmes to keep accurate and up-to-date beneficiary records. The components of UNDP support in this area include the development of digital identity and registration mechanisms, e-registries, digital money transfers, cross-sectoral electronic databases and e-governance systems that enable efficient service delivery. In countries where UNDP has promoted wider digital enhancements to address the interoperability of public systems, integrating social protection has been easier, resulting in stronger and more effective social protection mechanisms.

### **Data as an enabler**

41. Data collection and analysis has been an important area of UNDP intervention in social protection, adding value across the regions. The Human Development Report and its associated indices, the data platform on a report on the state of social assistance in Africa<sup>7</sup> and the COVID-19 global gender-response tracker are noteworthy examples. UNDP took the technical lead in the development of the socioeconomic impact assessments, providing a basis for the development of response plans to the COVID-19 pandemic, including social protection measures.

42. A key aspect of UNDP work on social protection is the support that it provides in the development and implementation of diverse indices and measurements for public policies, including social protection policies. UNDP has been successfully promoting the Multidimensional Poverty Index, although the rate of adoption and use varies among countries and regions, and efforts to broaden its use need to continue. UNDP has also drawn on its expertise in crisis contexts and on its country-level presence across regions to compile knowledge products in the form of thematic and regional reports as well as blogs and articles.

### **Programme management and other cross-cutting issues**

43. UNDP is part of several relevant partnerships, such as the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board, created at the request of the G20 Development Working Group to improve inter-agency coordination in support of country-led social protection measures. Within the United Nations system, the ILO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme and World Health Organization (WHO) are the more prominent players in the arena of social protection, and in a number of countries, UNDP has formed effective partnerships with them. The broader

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<sup>7</sup> UNDP (2019). The State of Social Assistance in Africa. New York. 2019.

mandate of UNDP is an advantage that allows the organization to form alliances to tackle social protection as a solution to, or component of, other development issues, but this has not been articulated in a clear offer that would support resource mobilization. Overall, the UNDP multisectoral approach, which goes beyond specific technical capabilities of specialized agencies, brings a more comprehensive human development vision but has yet to gain traction internally or externally. There remain limitations in facilitating the humanitarian-development nexus in social protection, despite the wide range of partnerships that UNDP has forged.

44. UNDP is well positioned to facilitate greater private sector participation, but the pace of this engagement needs acceleration. Through its Istanbul International Centre for Private Sector in Development, UNDP has explored engagement with the private sector in the design and delivery of skills-development programmes. Partnerships with the private sector to expand insurance cover against disaster and climate shocks have been pursued, particularly under the umbrella of UNDP environmental activities. Social protection financing is an area with great potential for contributions from the private sector. Further engagement with the private sector could leverage significant new funding and UNDP will need to assess these opportunities against their financial and reputational risks, including risks related to inclusion and concerns about leaving no one behind.

45. Staff capacity to tailor and implement a UNDP social protection offer has only recently increased and is concentrated in small teams at the regional bureau level. Recent improvements in the UNDP regional social protection capacity have added coherence and impetus to the organization's multi-country initiatives. Improvements to the teams in the regional bureaux for Asia and the Pacific and for the Arab States have catalysed greater interest in social protection from the country offices, resulting in an increased number of requests from country offices for support in social protection. Overall, improvements in regional social protection capacity have not been matched by equivalent capacity or focus in country offices. Social protection is often woven into one or more country programme areas, and it is not always clear which parts are considered social protection.

## V. Conclusions

**Conclusion 1. The UNDP comparative advantages in social protection assistance are rooted in its multisectoral approach and its potential to link social protection to key development programmes, which goes beyond the specific technical capabilities of the specialized agencies. The UNDP offer described a more comprehensive human development vision, anchored in its support to employment and livelihoods promotion, crisis response, governance and resilience – areas that are critical for advancing social protection. This positioning, however, is not fully evident in UNDP social protection programming at the country level, where, notwithstanding some successful initiatives, most UNDP support remains fragmented and at small scale.**

46. The UNDP approach to social protection is increasingly relevant and of growing significance in both development and crisis contexts. By responding to government demand, it has made significant contributions to strengthening national policies and enhancing the institutional capacities of national social protection programmes, especially in the identification and targeting of beneficiaries. Social protection policies supported by UNDP have increased the possibility of budget allocation to social protection and reduced ad hoc government responses to disasters. Social policies and institutional measures to strengthen national cash-transfer programmes have enabled the effective reach of vulnerable communities. UNDP has made important contributions in crisis contexts to enable much needed social protection support for communities in vulnerable situations to cope with economic reverses.

47. The positioning and comparative advantage of UNDP are not fully evident in its social protection programming. The absence of well-conceptualized, programmatic solutions for social protection that can be integrated into UNDP programmes in other key development areas and

operationalized at the country-office level for synergetic effects has reduced the UNDP contribution. With the exception of several successful and transformative initiatives, most UNDP support to core social protection components (social assistance, social insurance and active labour-market interventions) remains fragmented and at small scale, limiting the UNDP role and contribution. Inconsistencies exist between the high-level approaches, principles and enablers in the strategic documents and the integrated programmatic solutions and models that are available for different country contexts, reducing the focus and depth of UNDP support. Furthermore, the innovative examples of UNDP support for social protection have rarely been shared and used to further develop UNDP approaches in other countries.

**Conclusion 2. UNDP has provided more support to social protection in middle- and upper-middle-income countries than to low-income and least developed countries, mainly because of the availability of funding from host Governments. UNDP has not articulated a clear strategy for balancing universality with country realities.**

48. The majority of expenditure in the UNDP social protection portfolio is in middle- and upper-middle- income countries, mainly because of the availability of funding from host Governments. UNDP had limited success in diversifying financing for social protection-related support in low-income and least developed countries. While UNDP is developing investment instruments and modalities with the private sector, it has yet to engage the private sector in social protection assistance, thus significantly reducing the potential of its contribution in both mature and nascent financial sectors.

49. UNDP recognizes that social protection is a human right, and its support should be universal in its coverage while also promoting the social safety net approach with a strong focus on the poorest and the most vulnerable in some countries. Although important, targeting the poorest and those at the risk of being left behind has not resulted in systems that provide universal social protection as a human right. UNDP has not presented viable options to enable Governments to navigate resource constraints and look into the cost benefits of universal social protection floors, which are affordable even in low-income countries when fiscal space can be created. This is an area in which UNDP is well positioned to engage.

**Conclusion 3. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed critical social protection gaps in all countries. The socioeconomic impact assessments that UNDP facilitated have the potential to enable streamlined government responses. While UNDP responded to some key social protection gaps, overall support to social insurance and active labour-market interventions is evolving and insufficient for strengthening policy and the enabling environment. Despite the impetus generated by COVID-19 responses, overall efforts to strengthen labour-market policies and programmes are losing momentum, requiring concerted efforts by Governments and international cooperation, particularly given the continuity of the crises and the overall challenging context in which social protection systems operate.**

50. The pandemic highlighted that effective social protection systems and tools are crucial to safeguarding the poor and vulnerable during emergencies. Assessment of the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on households, communities and businesses was critical for context-specific responses. These assessments have helped to identify vulnerable groups that needed assistance, as well as institutional and systemic gaps that needed to be addressed to achieve an inclusive and better recovery. More concerted engagement is needed for integration of active labour-market policies, social insurance and related assistance within income support schemes. Social protection still operates in a context of high, and growing, levels of informality and inequality, marked by institutional fragmentation and limited fiscal space given the current crises. Competing priorities have contributed to loss of momentum by Governments and development partners.

51. Limited engagement in social insurance and active labour-market areas has represented a missed opportunity for UNDP. Across regions, there is a huge informal sector where the firms and workers are often outside of legal regulations and the diverse and fragmented labour-market structures call for context-specific responses. Going beyond the discourse on informality, targeted responses or universality, UNDP has yet to leverage its current inclusive growth portfolio to enable concrete solutions in the areas of social care, labour markets and the informal sector to improve social safety nets and resilient livelihoods.

**Conclusion 4. In fragile and crisis contexts, UNDP cash-based interventions targeting vulnerable groups have yielded positive dividends. In the absence of institutionalization of social safety net measures and linkages with medium- to longer-term planning, UNDP short-term support was limited in its ability to link cash assistance to development policy processes and enable sustainable national mechanisms.**

52. UNDP support to cash transfers and cash for work was critical to fulfilling basic needs during crisis responses. Informal workers and wage labourers are more vulnerable to economic shocks and crises; hence, UNDP prioritized targeting such groups. Its support was more successful when measures were taken to institutionalize cash for work, particularly establishing linkages with social and economic policies. Strategies that simultaneously addressed strengthening local capacities enabled more efficient cash transfers. At the same time, having too many procedures for accountability purposes slowed implementation and increased the cost of delivery.

53. Programme models such as the “3x6”<sup>8</sup> approach focus on immediate income for affected populations, injecting capital into the local economy but also providing options for achieving longer-term income security through measures that enhance livelihood and employment. However, the integration of social protection instruments is limited. UNDP support has consisted of mostly fragmented recovery efforts following a crisis or shock (including climatic shock), normally in the form of short-term livelihoods support and provision of community assets and infrastructure, and lacking anticipatory actions. UNDP shock responses are mostly delivered in parallel to country-owned social protection instruments, which enables a faster response in countries where the national social protection system is unable to meet the needs, but without improving national instruments.

54. Given the complexity of multiple crises, the synergies and linkages between the humanitarian and development responses are necessary for sustainable practices. While there were successful partnerships with the United Nations and with the international financial institutions to enable this, overall, there remain significant gaps in the nexus approach to social protection.

**Conclusion 5. In several countries, UNDP use of digital tools and its knowledge products have greatly strengthened social protection processes. Data systems and platforms have been a key enabler in faster and better targeting of social protection measures.**

55. Digital systems improved inclusiveness and efficiency in identifying social protection programme beneficiaries and enhancing their access to receiving public services and entitlements. Supporting digital social registries has been an area of added value of UNDP to social protection which improved the interoperability of systems among social protection sector entities. An important outcome of this work is strengthened coverage and delivery of national social protection programmes. Moreover, digital social data systems have also helped better monitor the social

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<sup>8</sup> See for example, UNDP, 2016. UNDP Global Toolkit on the 3x6 approach: Building resilience through jobs and livelihoods, New York, 2016.

protection benefits being delivered, and thus increased transparency of social protection programmes.

56. In addition to digitalization, there is also a strong potential for UNDP to strengthen its contribution to social protection work through its engagement in the generation of data and evidence. UNDP has made important contributions to fostering policy debates through its knowledge products and discussion papers, particularly on social assistance, social care and informal economy. The indices developed by UNDP such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index can be used to track both the incidence and intensity of poverty and can be a potentially powerful tool for targeting social protection benefits effectively.

**Conclusion 6. Social protection systems and mechanisms in general are often gender-blind or do not adequately reach women, who are underrepresented in the formal sector and hindered by other factors in accessing services. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by data from the COVID-19 global gender-response tracker. The UNDP contribution to gender-inclusive social protection systems is too limited in scale to enable transformative national practices and processes to expand adequate social protection to women.**

57. Despite the disproportionate impact of crises on women, social protection and social safety nets have yet to pay sufficient attention to this imbalance. Gender-sensitive social protection measures and social safety nets are too few to address the current gaps in country policies and programmes. The social protection programmes at the country level underscore the importance of understanding the context in which programmes are implemented, for example, cultural norms that pose constraints on women's work, women's multiple social roles and gender power dynamics. UNDP promoted gender-responsive social protection and paid attention to the reality of women's socioeconomic position, including their role in unpaid care, the economic and social costs of reproduction and of caring for dependents, and the overrepresentation of women in informal employment. Outside of some prominent positive examples, the limited scope of UNDP engagement did not enable change processes sufficient to address different social and economic risks that women face and improve the inclusiveness of social protection measures.

**Conclusion 7. UNDP has recognized the emerging global context which has significantly impacted the demand for effective national social protection systems. This recognition has not yet translated into specific programmatic guidance for better positioning country offices in their social protection offer.**

58. The UNDP social protection offer recognizes the emerging global challenges related to the cost-of-living crisis, a climate emergency and the new economic paradigm called for by these crises including a green and just transition out of crises, within the context of an evolving technological revolution. However, beyond this formal recognition, the renewed UNDP offer for reskilling and upskilling has been limited in its support to the workforce, particularly in the informal sector, for dealing effectively with the anticipated job-displacing impact of the fourth industrial revolution, for an effective transition to sustainable economic practices. The linkage between social protection and environmental and green transition initiatives is still nascent, although this is an area where UNDP is well placed to contribute.

## VI. Recommendations

**Recommendation 1. UNDP should leverage its comparative advantage to identify its niche in supporting social protection. UNDP should prioritize support to social protection systems, while making greater efforts to explore the convergence between social protection and programmes in other areas such as governance, inclusive growth, economic empowerment, health, resilience and environment.**

59. There has been an increasing recognition of the importance of addressing social protection gaps since the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic challenges. This is an opportunity for UNDP to build on its multisectoral approach and strategically contribute to social protection systems and tools. UNDP should prioritize longer-term engagement in select areas through well-tested social protection solutions. For example, UNDP may have a niche in supporting the governance of social protection systems including supporting reforms; development of policies and strategies; and institutional capacity strengthening including coordination mechanisms for social protection programming.

60. UNDP should improve synergies among the programme areas at the regional and country levels to identify potential entry points that can enable longer-term and sustainable social protection signature solutions. UNDP programmes in the areas of governance, inclusive growth, economic empowerment, environment, health and resilience need to be leveraged for enabling a holistic and interlinked approach that can effectively address social protection needs and priorities. UNDP should also consider the linkage between social protection and structural transformation including digitalization, energy and green transition.

61. UNDP engagement with the Global Fund and its experience in supporting Governments to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic should be leveraged to improve national health-care systems. Similarly, its engagement with the Global Environment Facility and the Green Climate Fund should be leveraged to link environmental initiatives with social protection schemes.

**Recommendation 2. UNDP should detail its programmatic approach for social protection and provide practical guidance for strategic positioning in different country contexts. UNDP country offices should select and focus on a limited number of high-payoff solutions from the range of areas covered in the social protection offer, based on careful analysis of the specific context. UNDP should strengthen its social protection support to low-income and least developed countries.**

62. UNDP should translate the global offer into clearly defined programmatic solutions. At the country level, UNDP should undertake careful analysis of gaps that a country office can realistically aim to address and select the solutions that are likely to attract government commitments, partnerships and resources. UNDP should capacitate country offices to specialize in their selected solutions and be in a position to facilitate development financing for social protection, particularly in low-income and least developed countries.

63. UNDP should clarify how it will address universal and targeted efforts as well as life-cycle (seeking to address social protection over the life cycle) versus productive approaches to social protection (linking working-age adults into labour markets). While these strategies are not incompatible, they do require strategic direction and practical programme models.

**Recommendation 3. UNDP should strive to strengthen the nexus of social protection schemes with a green, just transition. In this regard, it should strengthen its support to active labour-market programmes, going beyond its supply-side, skills-development projects and making them relevant to current technological and environmental trends.**

64. UNDP should advocate for future-looking and proactive social protection interventions and facilitate national policy dialogue, to promote better labour-market participation and thus improve social protection coverage and resilience to livelihood risks. This includes promoting the integration of skills development, including reskilling and upskilling vis-à-vis the trends in labour-market demands, into national social protection policies and programmes. The need is particularly prominent in the context of technological development and the potential to link interventions aiming at bridging the digital divide with more advanced skills development for vulnerable groups. This support is particularly relevant for a just transition out of crises, in the context of economic restructuring, increased energy costs and the need for enterprises to adapt to climate change. UNDP

should seek cooperation with other actors, especially ILO, in such activities. Engagement with the private sector is important to ensure matching the skills-development efforts with actual market needs and improve employability.

65. UNDP should develop well-tested programme models to strengthen its active labour market support, with distinct approaches for crisis and normal development contexts.

**Recommendation 4. UNDP should strengthen the linkages between humanitarian assistance and national social protection systems at the country level, and better link short-term and long-term approaches in the context of an adaptive and shock-responsive approach to social protection.**

66. The distinction between stable and humanitarian contexts is gradually disappearing, especially as climate-related shocks become more commonplace. For adaptive social protection, it is critical that UNDP actively engage in bridging humanitarian social assistance with institutionalized social safety net systems and measures. Within the United Nations system, UNDP should work with the humanitarian agencies to promote practices that seamlessly link humanitarian social assistance with longer-term labour-market solutions. In crisis contexts, UNDP should further support development programme models such as the “3x6” approach for enabling more comprehensive options to link short-term social assistance with longer-term labour-market options. UNDP should support efforts to strengthen the linkage between humanitarian social assistance and national social protection systems at country level.

67. UNDP should strive to strengthen the nexus of social protection schemes and disaster risk management and further prioritize longer-term risk mitigation. This means a greater focus on anticipatory actions and forecast-based financing strategies. Insurance schemes for catastrophic events have the potential for transforming disaster risk management and financing and should be explored further. UNDP should also help countries to strike a better balance between targeted social protection approaches, such as social safety nets, and universal social protection approaches that enhance overall protection and resilience to life-cycle risks.

68. To develop effective shock-responsive social protection systems, in addition to strong social registries and good delivery systems, solid partnerships across national institutions from disaster management to finance and social protection are critical. UNDP should leverage its ability to convene across sectors to strengthen its support in this area.

**Recommendation 5. UNDP support to national identification systems highlights that the use of technology has the potential to streamline social safety net assistance at the country level. Building on its ongoing work, UNDP should strengthen further its support to digitalization for social protection while striving to bridge the digital divide.**

69. UNDP should leverage the current work on digitalization of social protection mechanisms to strengthen and enhance the transparency and inclusiveness of delivery mechanisms. UNDP should scale its work on digital identification systems and processes, including data registries to streamline national social protection assistance.

70. Already marginalized groups are often more represented among those with limited access to digital services and modalities. In line with the Secretary-General’s [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#), UNDP should engage in and facilitate advocacy efforts to advance policy and programmes to alleviate the digital divide. Building on its support of digital platforms for trade and e-commerce, UNDP should strengthen income-generating opportunities for those at the risk of being left behind.

**Recommendation 6. Partnerships should be explored to allow a more holistic and integrated approach in supporting national social protection systems. UNDP should enable private sector**

**engagement in the delivery of social protection services and in approaches for social protection financing.**

71. UNDP should further strengthen its partnerships with the specialized agencies with related mandates and technical expertise on core topics of social protection, and with other development partners to provide more integrated support and avoid duplication and fragmented interventions. For example, the extensive UNDP portfolio on livelihoods, inclusive growth and the green economy could be further leveraged for labour-market support through expanded partnerships with ILO. Similarly, partnership with WHO is crucial for UNDP in its support to national health-care systems.

72. UNDP should systematically facilitate private sector engagement in government-led social protection measures, particularly linking social protection and business development while paying attention to risks related to inclusion and concerns about leaving no one behind. It should enable private sector and government interface for reinforced complementarities in developing social safety net measures. Leveraging its presence in climate change and community-level support, UNDP should promote climate insurance models in collaboration with the private sector. It should also strive to enable private sector engagement in social protection financing. The Istanbul International Centre for Private Sector in Development should support country offices in developing programme models and tools for harnessing private sector engagement.

**Recommendation 7. UNDP should strengthen its contribution to gender-responsive social protection, particularly through its support to social care and informal sector workers.**

73. Given the significant engagement of women in care activities and informal work, this is an area where UNDP should strive to enable change processes towards more gender-responsive social protection. UNDP should continue working on gender-sensitive data on vulnerability and access to social protection systems, informality in labour markets and the care economy. It should explore new avenues to improve access to social protection for women by identifying and addressing factors beyond employment and income that may affect the accessibility of care and social protection such as time and mobility.

74. Building on the human development and multidimensional poverty indices that UNDP publishes, the gender-response tracker and data on social protection, UNDP should support advocacy for gender-sensitive social protection mechanisms and processes engaging key stakeholders.

75. To enhance social protection outcomes, UNDP should strategically collaborate with United Nations agencies (ILO, the United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF, UN-Women) and other agencies in these efforts.

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