

Strengthening social protection for all

WHO

In Asia and the Pacific, 1 out of 3 (1.64 billion) people live on less than USD 2 a day, often deprived of income security, basic social services and decent work. Children, women and girls, persons with disabilities, and migrants are especially susceptible to these vulnerable conditions.

WHAT

Social protection is a society's set of policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and exclusion, and generate more equitable economic growth. Effective social protection systems build resilience by preventing individuals from falling into poverty, and by protecting them from sudden natural and economic shocks. Social protection is a fundamental pillar of national economic and social development policies.

WHY

Robust social protection systems fulfil basic human rights, and are an investment in sustainable and inclusive development. Despite significant progress being made in enhancing social protection in the Asia-Pacific region, important coverage gaps remain. Aggregate public expenditure remains low, with over 15 countries spending less than 2.5% of GDP on social protection. Moreover, multiple laws and fragmented administrative structures lead to inefficiencies and contribute to perpetuating gaps in the delivery of benefits.

ISSUE: Health Care

FACT: In Asia and the Pacific, nearly 80% of the population has no access to public health care

With limited access to public health care, out-of-pocket health expenditures in the region are among the highest in the world. Health-care costs, either unexpected or recurring, can cause financial catastrophe for households, creating stress on families and communities. A majority of Governments in the ESCAP region spend below the global average of 6% of GDP on health care.

Recognizing that it is a basic right which also enhances human capital, many countries in the region are taking important steps to provide health care to all citizens. Bhutan's Primary Health Care (PHC) system, the Philippine's Philhealth Programme, Thailand's Universal Health Coverage Scheme (UCS), and Turkey's General Health Insurance scheme (GHI) are all good examples of effective public health care in the region.

ISSUE: Children

FACT: In the region, more than 85 million children under the age of 5 are chronically malnourished or stunted

When children have inadequate access to nutrition or education, the long-lasting effects are often irreversible. Failure to meet the basic needs of children can significantly impact overall economic growth and contribute to intergenerational poverty cycles. Social transfer programmes that include nutritional and educational objectives for children are effective in reducing malnutrition and increasing school attendance.

Drawing on the positive experience of Latin America, many countries in the region have launched conditional cash transfer schemes (CCTs) to meet the nutritional and educational needs of poor children. The Stipend for Primary Students (PESP) in Bangladesh, Indonesia's Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH), and the Philippine's Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program ("4Ps") exemplify such initiatives.

ISSUE: Persons of Working Age**FACT: In Asia and the Pacific, over 1 billion people are working in the informal sector**

Despite the region's continued economic growth, large numbers of workers are engaged in informal and vulnerable employment. Informal workers make up as much as 80% of the labour market in some countries in the region and lack protection for unemployment, workplace injury, sickness and disability. Furthermore, these workers are not contributing to their future old age pensions.

Understanding this development gap, significant progress is being made in the region in expanding protection to all people of working age. Armenia's Unemployment Insurance (UI) scheme, the Republic of Korea's Employment Insurance System (EIS), Uzbekistan's National Social Insurance System, and the national Unemployment Insurance (UI) programme in Viet Nam are examples of important initiatives.

ISSUE: Older Persons**FACT: In the region, less than 30% of older persons receive an old-age pension**

By 2050, the number of older persons in Asia and the Pacific will almost triple; one in four will be 60 years or older. With informal family-based support systems breaking down because of urbanization and social change, formal pension schemes are key to income protection for people in old age. Though most countries in the region have pension schemes for formal sector workers, workers employed informally are covered at a very low rate. In developing countries in Asia-Pacific, only 20% of all workers can expect to receive an old-age pension, compared to 90% of those in developed countries.

Some countries in the region are challenging this trend by introducing innovative programmes that aim to promote income security among older persons. The Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF), the Maldives Old-Age Basic Pension (MOABP), the Pension Fund of the Russian Federation (PFRF), and the Samoa Senior Citizens Benefit Scheme (SCBS) are examples of such initiatives.

ESCAP's Work

In May 2011, members and associate members of ESCAP adopted Resolution 67/8 on "Strengthening social protection systems in Asia and the Pacific." This Resolution calls upon member States to "invest in building social protection systems that might form the basis of a 'Social Protection Floor' (SPF)." The SPF framework promotes the implementation of essential health care and income security for all persons along the life-course (children, persons of working age and older persons).

Working within the SPF framework, ESCAP supports policymakers and stakeholders in their endeavours to build broader and more robust social protection systems in the region by promoting mandates and resolutions that establish universal coverage as the norm; functioning as a research platform and a hub for networks of policymakers and practitioners; and enhancing the capacity of member States to strengthen relevant policies and programmes.

The Social Protection Toolbox (www.socialprotection-toolbox.org) is a recent ESCAP initiative. Launched in December 2013, this online advocacy platform aims to cover existing gaps in the promotion and analysis of social protection. The Toolbox utilizes a database of good practices and a network of social protection experts to facilitate South-South cooperation and to build consensus in "moving forward" toward broader and more robust coverage.