

# Policy coherence between social protection and climate action:

Initial findings from  
global studies and projects



Policy Brief

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In this brief, we seek to establish the shared objectives of social protection and climate action and explore how including social protection in climate documents and acknowledging climate risks in social protection documents at the national level can provide a significant boost to the recognition of social protection as a relevant climate risk management tool. The brief is intended for policy-makers as well as practitioners, informing policy in these sectors, and is expected to foster a synergistic approach to address climate challenges and social vulnerabilities.

## **Part 1:**

# **Why is strengthening policy coherence between social protection and climate change sectors crucial?**

Social Protection plays a key role in enhancing the well-being and resilience of individuals and communities by providing assistance and safeguarding against social risks and vulnerabilities. It aims to alleviate poverty, reduce inequality, and promote social justice by implementing policies and programmes such as social insurance, social assistance, and labour market interventions. By fostering social cohesion and inclusivity, social protection contributes to sustainable development, poverty reduction, and the enhancement of individuals' and societies' overall welfare.

Climate change is leading to widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and humans. It is resulting in an increase in the number of extreme events, altered ecosystems, severe water scarcity, food insecurity, and displacement (IPCC, 2023). Climate change disproportionately impacts those living in poverty and vulnerability. Poor people tend to lose more when affected by climate shocks, relative to their income or wealth (Hallegatte *et al.*, 2016). This exacerbates inequalities, in particular gender inequalities (UN, 2022), since women and girls have lower capacities and opportunities to adapt (IPCC 2022).

To secure a livable and sustainable future for all, climate resilient development needs to increase the portfolio of adaptation and mitigation options available for all (IPCC, 2023). The 2015-2030 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the new Strategic Framework 2018–2030 of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification emphasizes the importance of social protection tools against climate related disasters and encourages the inclusion of social protection into national climate risk management strategies (Aleksandrova, 2019). social protection can play a key role in ensuring a climate resilient development (IPCC, 2023), it contributes to sustainable development (Hussain *et al.*, 2023), helps vulnerable groups to strengthen their coping and adaptive capacities, and contributes to their long-term resilience (Sengupta and Costella, 2023).

There is a concrete convergence between social protection and climate risk, as the countries with the lowest social protection coverage are generally the ones most vulnerable to climate change (Lambeau and Urban, 2022). Evidence shows that strategies that include social protection are effective adaptation and mitigation responses, both in terms of managing climate risks and enhancing adaptive capacities, including in the agriculture sector (Sitko *et al.*, 2023), one of the main emitters of greenhouse gases. Nonetheless, coherence between social protection and climate policies remains weak.

Integrating climate action objectives into social protection policies and incorporating social protection as a tool within climate risk management strategies offers an entry point for synergizing efforts within and among social protection and climate change sectors. This recognition can empower authorities to allocate resources more efficiently, enable governments to reach larger caseloads and strengthen a country's commitment to international agreements. In practical terms, this would mean including social protection in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) or any other form of national climate action plans. This could also mean legal acknowledgement of climate risks as a priority within social protection legislation and the laws of a country and adapting the design of social protection programmes to address climate risks. In the latter case, this programmatic modification will still need to be reflected in the operating manual, policy document or any other national plans or legal document that the social protection programme is situated within. For example, Paraguay's National Social Protection Strategy includes a reference to climate-related sectors and risks both as objectives to be addressed and areas to be monitored (Gabinete Social, 2021).

**In summary, fostering coherence at the policy level in these two sectors can support in:**

1. Increasing domestic funding for social protection to increasingly cover climate vulnerability
2. Increasing access to international climate finance
3. Promoting anticipatory action by earmarking contingency budgets
4. Improving core social protection systems to continue routine delivery, while becoming flexible and scalable

## Part 2: Initial findings from global studies and projects

In this section, we provide examples of how policy coherence in the social protection and climate change sectors is being achieved and supported in various countries by different projects and agencies.

- NDCs constitute countries' reference plans to reduce emission and adapt to the impacts of climate change, reflecting the priority policy areas of each country to achieve mitigation and adaptation goals. However, in a recent study on mapping social protection in submitted NDCs, the FAO found that across all 162 NDCs analyzed, only 51 mention social protection at least once. Of those, social protection is included as an instrument to facilitate adaptation efforts in 39 plans, and as contributing to mitigation actions in 12 plans.<sup>1</sup>
- On the other hand, some promising efforts at the regional level are worth highlighting. In early 2023, a UNICEF-commissioned study was conducted to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the existing linkages between social protection and climate change across 12 countries and territories in the eastern Caribbean, which is highly vulnerable to climate shocks. The study findings show that ten out of 12 countries have incorporated social protection keywords in national climate documents, and climate keywords into social protection policies. Moreover, vulnerable communities dependent on precarious livelihoods like fishers and farmers have been identified in the legal documents as priority groups requiring social protection support, as they are highly exposed to impacts from a changing climate. It is also worth noting that newly submitted NDCs and NAPs tend to contain more mentions of social protection, pointing to the fact that social protection has lately been gaining popularity in its role for climate action (Sengupta, 2023).
- Good practices are also emerging from various parts of the world that can inform policy efforts. Sierra Leone, a country regularly affected by floods and landslides, has been taking steps to develop a shock-responsive social protection system, supported by the World Bank's Global Risk Financing Facility (GRiF). The Sierra Leone government, with support from the Climate Centre and Tetra Tech, has recently drafted the upcoming national social protection bill, which recognizes 'climate vulnerable' groups affected by disasters as potential future beneficiaries of social protection. The bill also includes clarity on the roles, functions and coordination mechanisms among the Ministry of Social Welfare, the National Commission for Social Action, and the National Disaster Management Authority. The bill is expected to be passed by parliament before the end of 2023 and will enable social protection to be used as a legally mandated tool for responding to climate disasters (Diro and Sengupta, forthcoming).

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<sup>1</sup> The final numbers may change as the NDCs in Chinese, Russian and Arabic were still being reviewed at the time of writing. Refer to the main document for final numbers expected in November 2023.

- There are also instances where social protection programmes at the national level include climate considerations, and are thereby enhancing linkages between social protection and climate adaptation and mitigation at programme level in the agriculture sector, including Paraguay's Pobreza, Reforestación, Energía y Cambio Climático, Malawi's Social Action Fund, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme, and India's Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Generation Act. As a common feature of these programmes, social protection systems are being leveraged to support small scale producers in adapting to climate change, with spill-over effects in terms of food security and nutrition and economic inclusion (FAO, 2022; Frank Otchere & Sudhanshu Handa, 2022).

Despite some progress, important challenges remain to effectively achieve policy coherence between climate and social protection sectors. First, in the context of climate change, social protection is still mainly regarded as a tool to address shocks, and not long-term adaptation needs. Second, there is a lack of institutional coordination at both central and decentralized levels, between relevant ministries: for example, most of NDCs are submitted by environment ministries, without contributions from those coordinating social policies, including social protection. Third, when social protection is included in climate plans, they generally lack specific targets, measures or resources: this lack of both institutional and financial incentives undermines accountability and a definition of a clear mandate for implementation to responsible institutions.

## Part 3:

# How can countries start achieving policy coherence in social protection and climate action?

We identify two main action areas that can be crucial in guiding policy-makers' efforts to strengthen and leverage social protection systems and programmes to support climate adaptation and mitigation. In the long term, each of the recommendations listed below will need to be intentionally included and reflected at the policy level to ensure sustainability of efforts.

### 1. *Strengthening core social protection systems through programmatic changes*

When core social protection systems are strengthened, for example by improving accuracy of beneficiary data used or by switching to digital wallets, it enhances the resilience of the systems and enables it to continue routine functioning even in the face of climate risks. Some ways by which core social protection systems can be improved and support in climate action are:

- **Expanding social protection coverage to newer risks and geographies:** Climate risks are affecting new geographies, for example heatwaves and urban heat islands are affecting the urban poor, increasing the need for extending social protection coverage. Expanding beneficiary lists to cover new areas or creating additional lists of people who find themselves increasingly vulnerable can be made part of programme design.
- **Ensuring adequacy of transfer levels:** Even if seeking to prevent the vulnerable poor from falling into poverty, social protection transfer levels are often low, rarely covering the most basic needs. For the same social protection programmes to build climate resilience, an increase in transfer levels will be needed. In many countries, transfer levels are inflation adjusted and an automatic increase is included in the social protection policy governing the programme. Similarly, social protection programmes for climate risks will need to review their financing models for the next decades and make adjustments, with corresponding updates reflected in the legislation.
- **Strengthening social protection systems to be climate sensitive:** Climate information like seasonal forecasts should be incorporated into the design of the social protection programmes. For example, social protection payment cycles can be timed according to the onset of a region's main climate hazards, and such adjustments can be reflected in the policy document.
- **Using social protection systems to deliver climate services:** Social protection system components, like messaging and public information systems can be used to deliver early warning information and awareness messages on climate risks and coping/adaptation strategies. In addition, social registries can ensure climate services and responses target the most vulnerable population groups, including women and children. For this, coordination between national met agencies, social welfare agencies, finance and environment ministries, and others will be necessary.

## 2. **Raising ambition through national and global commitments**

Nationally, ambitious climate action through social protection demonstrates leadership, protects citizens, and accelerates the transition to sustainable economies. Globally, heightened ambition fosters collective responsibility, enhances cooperation, and reinforces the Paris Agreement's goals. Some ways of increasing countries' resolve to prioritize social protection while addressing climate challenges are:

- **Repurposing national resources to increase fiscal space:** It is now clear that the cost of doing nothing today will have ballooning effects in the near future (IFRC, 2019). Efforts to repurpose national resources that damage the environment, for example reassessing fuel subsidies (Van Trotsenburg, 2023) could support more impactful and sustainable investments in social protection and other key policies that ensure climate action is inclusive and effective.
- **Inclusion on social protection in next NDC updates:** Each party to the Paris Agreement is required to update the NDCs every five years, after the first round of submissions in 2020. In the upcoming NDC Updates, countries could be encouraged to include social protection to support communities affected by a transition to net zero economy.
- **Inclusion of social protection in national climate plans:** NAPs, disaster management plans and climate action strategies at the national and sub-national levels, could increasingly include social protection programmes as means to achieve climate objectives, enhance disaster preparedness and recovery. This could be initiated by conducting feasibility studies that explore ways to use, leverage and align with existing social protection systems.
- **Embedding social protection in climate funding:** Climate finance, including carbon market, green bonds and climate funds (Costella *et al.*, 2021) such as the GEF and GCF should be leveraged (Aleksandrova, 2021) to support the expansion of social protection programmes in their project portfolios, including for small-scale producers who receive only 1.7 per cent of tracked global finance. (CPI & IFAD, 2020)



## Conclusion

In conclusion, this brief highlights the critical importance of policy coherence between social protection and climate action sectors. By integrating social protection in climate documents and acknowledging climate risks in social protection documents at the national level, we can enhance the recognition of social protection as a valuable climate risk management tool. This approach will foster a synergistic approach to address climate challenges and social vulnerabilities, leading to sustainable development, poverty reduction, and enhanced well-being for individuals and communities. To achieve this, policy makers and practitioners must collaborate to secure domestic funding, access international climate finance, promote anticipatory action, and improve core social protection systems. These efforts will empower countries to build climate resilience and support vulnerable populations, driving us closer to a liveable and sustainable future for all. This brief attempts to contribute to these efforts by indicating policy-makers and key global and local stakeholders of both the climate and social protection communities' potential pathways to strengthen the policy coherence between the two agendas.

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