The Social Protection Directional Guide provides strategic directions in social protection for the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It is aligned with ADB’s Strategy 2030, which considers social protection as a fundamental area for support for addressing the corporate operational priority of remaining poverty and reducing inequalities in the region. Social protection safeguards against risks across the life cycle. It enables human capital development and can help address gender and other disparities in access to opportunities.
Where We Are

The ADB Social Protection Strategy defines social protection as a set of policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability—by promoting labor market functions, diminishing people’s exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to protect themselves against hazards and the loss of income.¹ ADB’s work in social protection has supported the efforts of developing member countries (DMCs) in strengthening and expanding their social protection programs and systems. However, the region still faces multiple challenges in its efforts to meet several targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to social protection—including the elimination of poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), ensuring decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).²

In early 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic struck the region and the ensuing global crisis not only reversed the region’s steady decline in poverty rates, but also heightened existing inequalities. The region is facing a range of structural changes and disruptions due to climate change and must prepare for future shocks. Many DMCs are undergoing a demographic transition to aging societies, while others have large populations of youth to invest in. Rapid urbanization has made Asia and the Pacific home to some of the world’s most populous megacities, and the region’s secondary cities are growing even faster. Globally, 84 million migrants originate from Asia and the Pacific, more than any other region.³

Where We Are Going

The COVID-19 crisis underscored the critical role that social protection plays in ensuring an inclusive and resilient post-pandemic recovery and future in Asia and the Pacific. The pandemic also demonstrated that DMCs with more mature, shock-responsive social protection systems were better equipped to address challenges brought by the crisis.

Social protection systems will continue to be crucial during the post-pandemic recovery, enabling responses to structural challenges such as technological advances, demographic changes, migration, and climate-related disruptions. ADB has committed to supporting the strengthening of social protection systems in more DMCs.

A key set of challenges for ADB going forward across all DMCs is to build on the expanded social protection engagement that emerged during the pandemic, develop stronger relationships with stakeholders at the country level, and provide targeted technical assistance to identify key areas for further support. As an integral part of the ADB’s corporate strategy to help address poverty reduction, improve human capital, and promote inclusive growth in the region, social protection systems are not only important to support during crisis periods but also need to be built up during noncrisis periods to strengthen capacity, effectiveness, and resilience.

ADB’s Social Protection Vision and Approach

Operational Pillars

Building partnerships

Adaptive and shock-responsive social protection

Supporting integrated intersector initiatives

Strengthening social protection systems

Inclusive and resilient social protection policies and programs

Integrated solutions with amplified development impacts

Scaling up sustainable and catalytic financing

Comprehensive social protection policies and systems

Strategic Objectives

Strengthening social protection systems

Supporting integrated intersector initiatives

Operational Pillars


How to Get There: Vision and Approach

The Social Protection Directional Guide lays out the vision of developing inclusive and resilient social protection policies and programs to be achieved through a focus on three strategic objectives and four operational pillars (ADB’s Social Protection Vision and Approach).

**Strategic Objective 1: Comprehensive Social Protection Policies and Systems**

Given the limited social protection coverage and spending in Asia and the Pacific, comprehensive social protection systems are needed to fill gaps in the design and implementation of existing social protection programs and develop new programs where needed. Moreover, the design features of these programs can be employed to maximize women’s economic empowerment.

Social assistance programs help ensure income security and access to basic services for poor and vulnerable households. Expansion and reform of social insurance programs is necessary to address existing gaps and new challenges such as rapid population aging. The funding and efficacy of labor market programs must be improved. Closer focus is also needed on the development of affordable, accessible, and quality social care services. These programs are important in supporting changing labor markets and strengthening gender equality and economic empowerment.

**Strategic Objective 2: Integrated Solutions with Amplified Development Impacts**

Social protection measures can be used to improve access to basic services. For example, health insurance and social assistance are crucial to ensure universal health coverage, resulting in positive health outcomes. In education, school-feeding programs and student assistance such as scholarships and conditional cash transfers promote enrollment among the poor and disadvantaged groups. Integration can also mean linking active labor market programs, technical and vocational education and training, and integration between skills development and labor market demands. There are also strong connections between youth employment, education, and social protection—including skills training, youth-inclusive measures, and job facilitation to align supply with demand.

While some of these linkages are well understood, the links between social protection and infrastructure are lagging. New infrastructure in energy, transport, water, and sanitation may charge user fees that prevent access for poor and disadvantaged people. Targeting social protection to reduce inequalities in accessing such services becomes easier when a link can be established between existing social protection programs and these new investments, so that support for the poor and vulnerable groups is provided through an already functioning program.

**Strategic Objective 3: Adaptive and Shock-Responsive Social Protection**

Adaptive and shock-responsive social protection systems strengthen resilience to complex crises, which may be triggered by climate change and natural hazards, as well as conflicts and economic downturns. Shock-responsive social protection systems and programs respond to large shocks affecting entire communities. Adaptive social protection improves the resilience of poor and vulnerable households by investing in their capacity to withstand shocks, and protect their wellbeing. Shock-responsive social protection complements disaster response. Social protection programs should be informed by national or regional adaptations and disaster risk management strategies, based on robust climate and disaster risk assessments of targeted systems. Social protection is also vital for a just transition toward a low carbon and green economy.

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Operational Pillars

Implementation of these three strategic objectives requires investment in four operational pillars: strengthening social protection systems, building partnerships, supporting integrated intersector initiatives, and scaling up sustainable and catalytic financing.

Operational Pillar 1: Strengthening Social Protection Systems
Social protection systems include three main elements: policy framework, programs, and administration. Strengthening social protection requires attention to all three. Country-specific assessments are essential because there is so much variation in social protection systems among countries. The key building blocks of social protection delivery systems are the capacity to identify and enroll people, assess needs, and make payments or give support. These are complemented by supporting management information systems, monitoring mechanisms, and grievance and redress systems. There is growing recognition of the opportunities facilitated by digital social protection and a strong push to strengthen them. The main interventions to strengthen administration in social protection systems include investing in social registries and interoperability of administrative databases; upgrading payment systems; building capacity within the relevant ministries and social protection agencies; and building capacity within the social care workforce.

Operational Pillar 2: Building Partnerships
Partnerships occur, within DMCs across national institutions, and with development partners, academic institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations. ADB’s commitment to ensure an Asia and Pacific free of poverty fosters an openness to nongovernmental and civil society organizations that can amplify the voices of poor and vulnerable people and benefit from their role in expanding national capacity to deliver social protection programs. Partnerships involve mutual commitments, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the SDGs. Developing adaptive and shock-responsive social protection systems to support adaptation and resilience in the region and to address the social dimensions of a just transition is critical for this agenda.

Operational Pillar 3: Supporting Integrated Intersector Initiatives
Social protection is an enabler of access to services through integrated intersector initiatives. While these intersector linkages are fairly established in the health and education sector, they are less obvious with other sectors. One of the guiding principles of Strategy 2030 is delivering integrated solutions across sectors and themes based on the country context. The Social Protection Directional Guide also applies a gender lens to social protection design and implementation to ensure that activities strengthen gender equality and empowerment.

Operational Pillar 4: Scaling Up Sustainable and Catalytic Financing
Asia and the Pacific invests a relatively low share of gross domestic product in social protection; financing should be scaled up to promote and sustain social protection systems. This requires ADB to work with ministries of finance, to assess options for domestic resource mobilization including taxation, revenue generation, and subsidy management—and to develop action plans for financing social protection sustainably. ADB’s experience in sustainable financing can help DMCs to (i) build capacities in funding the expansion of social protection, (ii) promote policy dialogue and knowledge development, and (iii) access innovative financing solutions for adaptive and shock-responsive social protection.

The Social Protection Sector Directional Guide is one volume in the collection of Strategy 2030 sector directional guides, designed to be living documents, to be updated as required to remain relevant to the dynamic context of the Asia and Pacific region.

Read the Social Protection Sector Directional Guide in full here.

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On the cover: Social protection for all. ADB’s Strategy 2030 considers support for social protection as fundamental to achieving its goal of reducing regional poverty and inequalities.
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