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# Enhancing Food Security and Nutrition and Managing Risks and Shocks in Asia and the Pacific Through Support to Social Protection Systems

Regional Synthesis

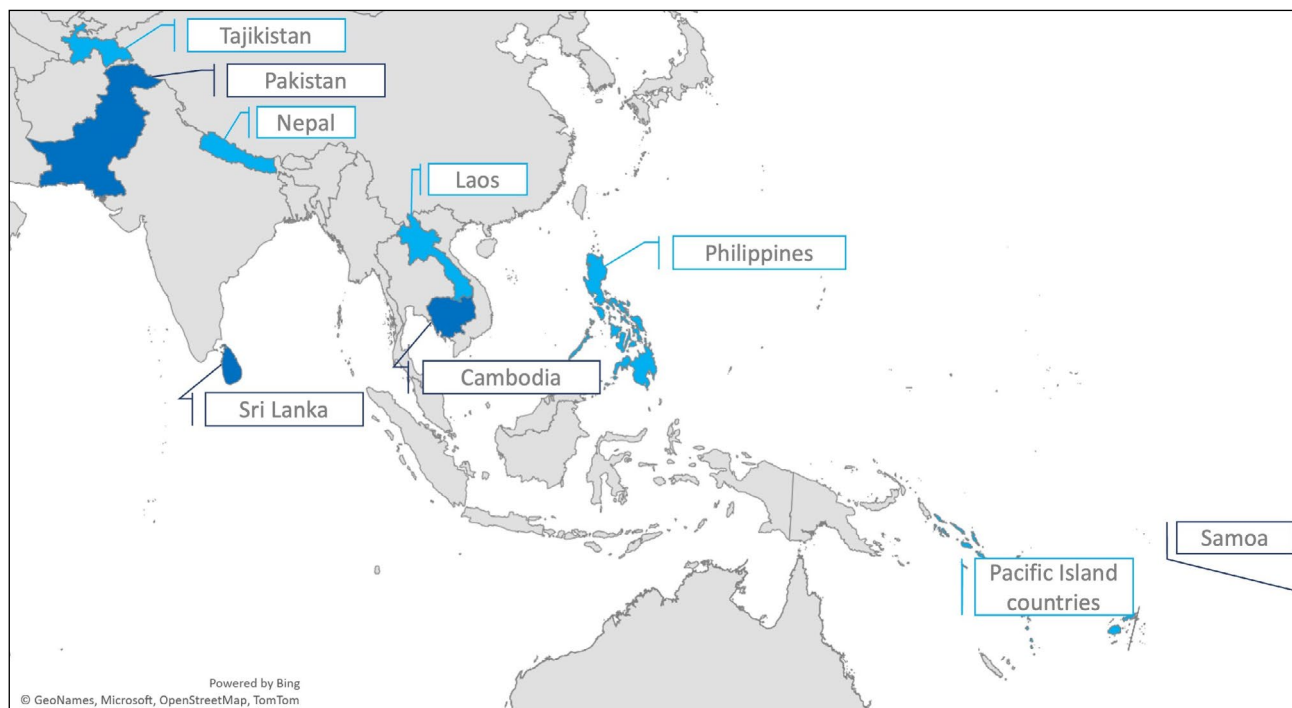


June 2023





**Figure 1: Scoping study countries**



- Countries focused on in the multi-country scoping study.
- Countries from other studies completed by or for WFP Regional Bureau Bangkok.

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# Abbreviations, acronyms and other terms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (Philippines)
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme (Pakistan)
CARD	Council of Agriculture and Rural Development (Cambodia)
CBO	Community-based organization
CBT	Cash-based transfer
CSP	Country strategic plan
CT-PWYC	Cash Transfer for Pregnant Women and Children (Cambodia)
DRM	Disaster risk management
DSD	Department for Samurdi Development (Sri Lanka)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FBO	Faith-based organization
FSN	Food security and nutrition
4Ps	Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (Philippines)
HEF	Health Equity Fund (Cambodia)
HGSF	Home-grown school feeding
IDP	Internationally displaced people
ISPA	Inter-Agency Social Protection Assessments
KML	Knowledge management and learning
Listahanan	National registry (Philippines)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSMP	National School Meals Programme (Sri Lanka)
NSPC	National Social Protection Council (Cambodia)
NSPP	National Social Protection Policy (Samoa)
NSSF	National Social Security Fund (Cambodia)
RBB	WFP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific
Samhurdi	Samhurdi Programme (Sri Lanka)
SAP	Social Amelioration Program (Philippines)
SBCC	Social and behaviour change communication
SDG	Sustainable development goal
SLP	Sustainable Livelihood Programme (Philippines)
SOP	Standard operating procedure
SRSP	Shock-responsive social protection
SSA	Social Security Allowance (Nepal)
UCT	Unconditional cash transfer
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

# Executive Summary

Social protection has a role to play in improving food security, addressing the root causes of malnutrition, and providing support to prevent and protect people from shocks and risks. Over the past decade, social protection systems in most countries across the Asia Pacific region have witnessed a substantial expansion, representing an important contribution to the region's social development and economic growth.

WFP has devoted increasing attention to capacity strengthening of government agencies and working as an enabler of national hunger and nutrition solutions, which includes social protection. To better understand the social protection landscapes across the Asia Pacific region, WFP commissioned four country scoping studies to explore challenges and opportunities to address food security and nutrition (FSN) goals through social protection and to help households deal with shocks and stresses. The countries are Cambodia, Pakistan, Samoa and Sri Lanka. This synthesis report summarizes these country studies and other analyses carried out by WFP in four further countries and one region (Lao PDR, Nepal, Philippines, Tajikistan and a regional report on Pacific Island Countries). The report places most attention on one element of social protection: social assistance.

Notwithstanding the significant diversity in social protection policies and programmes across the region, social assistance has grown substantially over the past two decades. The social assistance landscape is predominantly cash-based, focused on tackling chronic poverty and covariant shocks. Many countries emphasize human capital development, especially regarding health and education, but there is less attention on explicitly tackling nutrition. Many countries have also attempted, with varying levels of success, to incorporate mechanisms for helping households in shocks – including climate change-induced disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several shared challenges emerge across the region, including coverage – especially for specific vulnerable groups such as those in remote areas, excluded groups and those depending on livelihoods in the informal sector. Coverage for older persons is far ahead of that for pregnant and lactating women, children, people with disabilities and the unemployed. Financing limitations drive a focus on building productivity in the short to medium term that can be at odds with meeting basic needs. In both Islamic and Pacific Island Countries, the intersections between government social assistance and other so-called traditional or informal support systems are poorly understood. Capacity and coordination

challenges are omnipresent, particularly in countries with some level of devolution of responsibility for either the design or implementation of social assistance programmes and around how various actors working towards improving food and nutrition security engage with each other.

The scoping studies generate findings that signpost how WFP might prioritize its support to social protection in the Asia and Pacific region. The details of these priorities matter, and readers are directed to the country scoping reports for a more granular explanation of what actions WFP country offices might focus on in respective contexts. Nevertheless, there are lessons that are relevant to those working in the social protection and nutrition and the shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) policy and programming spaces in the region.

The findings can be organized by strategic priority:

**For social protection that helps people to manage risks and shocks**, there is a range of varied actions to strengthen systems architecture that could be undertaken by WFP, governments and other partners, including strengthening the policy or strategic framework for SRSP. Even where SRSP frameworks exist and set policy direction, moving to implementation will require clarity on governance arrangements, mandates and improved coordination mechanisms among social protection and disaster management actors. Even in countries with the most established social protection systems, there are limitations to address, especially the low data coverage, recency of personal information and lack of system integration to allow data sharing. In many countries, a preliminary step towards SRSP is establishing or revising platforms and MIS infrastructure. International actors, including WFP specifically, can provide substantial expertise and technical support to achieve platform improvements, but peer-to-peer learning will also be critical to establishing systems that are not heavily dependent on sustained external support. Regarding capacities, learning from various social protection and emergency cash transfer programmes highlights capacity constraints among sub-national level actors. Some limitations lead to access and exclusion issues and only nascent preparedness capabilities.

In some countries recent developments within the cash-based social assistance system have enhanced programme designs and the utility of social assistance to deliver support in a shock. In multiple countries, there are few or no guiding principles for setting

benefit size or duration nor procedures for targeting or triggering launch. The governance and coordination of some schemes limit the scope for design changes. The recognized expertise of WFP in targeting and needs assessments, transfer-value setting and minimum expenditure basket diagnosis, and logistics and food management may provide a useful entry point.

**For social protection that helps people to meet their food security, nutrition (FSN) and associated essential needs,**

there are also entry points at a policy and a legislative level. Many national policy and strategy documents contain limited reference to FSN, and where they do, there is limited progress in practice. In several countries, especially Pakistan, Nepal and Cambodia, new governance arrangements resulting from decentralization and devolution create opportunities for more focus on sub-national actors and actions to drive FSN efforts across multiple sectors. Realizing these opportunities requires support to institutional capacity building and strengthening. Social assistance programmes have the potential to enhance FSN but require evidence-informed design. This design, in turn, requires more monitoring and evaluation, especially to support transfer value setting and more effective cash plus nutrition messaging. The response to evaluations and assessments, such as the 'fill the nutrient gap' and 'cost of diet' studies, suggests there is openness to learning in many countries, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of the dialogue on social protection remains relatively tightly focused on income poverty and shock responses, and so speak predominantly to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 (No Poverty). There are specific programmes focused on FSN but systemically tackling FSN is important. Communications explicitly focused on maximizing social protection's contribution to achieving SDG2 (Zero Hunger) would be timely. WFP could leverage from the diagnostic work leading to the establishment of these programmes, which would add significant FSN value in the wider social protection policy space. In some countries, notably Samoa and Pakistan, there is a strong rationale to build a more strategic, high-level dialogue and commitment to tackling stunting and other nutrition challenges through social protection. Influencing and supporting a high-level dialogue requires solid evidence (through assessment and analyses) about the current social protection portfolio and associated nutrition interventions and how they support FSN. A further tool that could support this is social behaviour change communication (SBCC). While many international actors are engaging with SBCC processes, few focus specifically on messages around healthy diet/food practices.

In many countries, existing programmes do not have any FSN-sensitive objectives or designs. Even those that target priority groups for nutritional support are yet to incorporate FSN considerations into their design adequately, resulting in shortcomings around transfer adequacy, and limited effectiveness of nutritional support. WFP and other actors can use their expertise to better integrate nutrition into targeting criteria, transfer type and frequency and complementary programmes. As with SRSP, the recognized expertise of WFP in nutrition assessments (for example fill the nutrient gap analyses), transfer-value setting and minimum expenditure basket diagnosis, and food and fortification management may provide a practical entry point.

Finally, while many programmes target women and girls, often concerning nutritional deficits, it is important to distinguish between *gender-targeted and gender-sensitive* programmes – something that is not currently clearly articulated, either by WFP, governments, or other international actors. Understanding how to strengthen gendered nutrition outcomes through programme design elements across programmes is key to achieving nutrition goals. Tackling exclusion from social protection is also a priority in many countries and an area where WFP has substantial expertise. Significant actions include providing technical support to strengthen beneficiary communication and feedback mechanisms in emerging social protection programmes.

Beyond the WFP strategic priorities for work on social protection, a broader set of messages from the work are important:

**More focus on climate-related and other risks is critical for improving social protection.** This focus means recognizing that climate shocks and stresses will only increase in the coming decades, so social protection must be (re) designed and delivered with this in mind. It means rebuilding social protection systems designed for both covariant shocks and lifecycle risks and recognizing that social protection and shock response are inextricably linked. Any advantage gained from making social protection systems more shock responsive will be undermined or indeed neutralized if the underlying stressors that drive vulnerability and the numbers of those in chronic need continue to grow in frequency and severity.

**Move beyond operational models for shock response predicated on short-term solutions.**

The predominantly short-term perspective of many humanitarian-focused actors works neither for advancing SRSP (because enhancing SRSP means carefully considering ex-ante actions) nor for nutrition-sensitive social protection. Humanitarian actors, and



WFP specifically, can play a stronger role in medium- and long-term solutions, including providing orientation and information on healthy diets, sanitation and hygiene, especially through behaviour change communications as part of social protection and other programmes. WFP can also take a wider perspective on SRSP by providing technical assistance for climate and disaster risk financing solutions, including anticipatory action and risk insurance mechanisms.

**Deploy WFP expertise from outside the social protection sector.** The social protection staff of WFP can be a helpful conduit to improve cross-sectoral programming by opening WFP's wider expertise (especially on nutrition and inclusion/protection) to other social protection actors in government and other agencies. WFP can substantially contribute and add significant value by bringing in its broader food security, nutrition, inclusion, protection, logistics, supply chain management, fortification, MIS, targeting and other experience to social protection.

**Work with government bodies beyond those directly responsible for social protection, especially for SRSP.** Substantial progress has been made to strengthen government capacities to deliver SRSP. Working through disaster risk management (DRM) ministries or departments is just as important as working directly with social protection lead ministries and building broader institutional SRSP linkages matters for improved SRSP programming.

**Recognize the importance of working in multiple ways across the social protection sector's strategic and operational domains and find effective ways to demonstrate outcomes.** WFP routinely works on social protection in the region as technical advisor and/or service provider and/or complementary actor. However, at present, WFP systems are poorly adapted to robustly measure the outcomes of these different ways of working and so cannot demonstrate the added value of a substantial share of its investments.

**Think regional, act local.** Sub-national variations matter, and so, the sub-national reach and presence of WFP matters if it is to effectively support sub-national capacities and operations. For example, in some countries, provincial and district-level initiatives highlight the importance of strengthening capacities in provinces and areas with the most vulnerable and food-insecure households and where capacities to deliver social protection may be at their lowest. In these locations, the need for social protection is either greatest or growing rapidly and this should be a priority for WFP.

# 1. Introduction

Although the Asia and Pacific region has made significant strides in economic growth and social development in recent decades, many countries continue to struggle with high levels of acute food insecurity, poor nutrition and multidimensional poverty and inequality, aggravated by various shocks, such as climate and weather-induced disasters, conflict, economic and health crises.

Food insecurity and malnutrition remain significant challenges. FAO (2021) estimates that in 2019, 945 million people in the region experienced either moderate or severe food insecurity (22 percent of the population), of whom 397 million people faced severe food insecurity (9.2 percent of the population). About 350.6 million people were undernourished (51 percent of the global total) in 2019, of which an estimated 74.5 million children under five years were stunted and 31.5 million were wasted (FAO 2021). Most of these children live in Southern Asia. An estimated 1.9 billion people in Asia Pacific could not afford a healthy diet in 2019. Research has also shown that food and nutrition insecurity disproportionately impacts marginalized and discriminated communities, including persons with disabilities, women, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples (among others of diversity).

According to the 2019 Asia-Pacific Disaster Report, the region is also the most disaster-prone (earthquake, flood, drought and tropical cyclone) in the world. The average number of disaster-affected people was 142 million per year between 1970–2018 (UNESCAP, 2019). Almost half of the 281 worldwide natural disaster events occurred in the Asia Pacific region in 2018. The more recent Asia-Pacific Disaster Report (UNESCAP, 2021) identifies some progress, with average annual numbers of disaster-affected people falling to an average of 122 million annually by 2021. While recurrent disasters are significant drivers of persistent hunger, poverty, vulnerability and inequality, in recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures implemented by various countries across the region have exacerbated existing food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty trends driving economic downturns and sharp drops in labour demand and income.

Social protection has a role to play in improving food security, addressing the root causes of malnutrition, and providing support to prevent and protect people from shocks and risks. Over the past decade, social protection systems across the Asia Pacific region have

witnessed a substantial expansion in most countries, representing an important contribution to the region's social development and economic growth.

In line with the previous and current WFP Corporate Strategic Plans (WFP 2022a and WFP 2017a), WFP has devoted increasing attention to capacity strengthening of government agencies and working as an enabler of national hunger and nutrition solutions, which include social protection. This shift is happening gradually and at a different pace across the region, depending on each country's context, capacity, needs and strategic opportunities for engagement with government counterparts and other relevant partners and stakeholders. Increasing recognition of social protection as an important avenue for addressing the challenges of food insecurity, malnutrition, poverty and vulnerability is also emphasised in the 2021 WFP Strategy for Support to Social Protection (WFP, 2021). Furthermore, WFP's operational response plan to the global food, fuel and fertiliser crisis has social protection as one of three central priorities (WFP, 2022b).

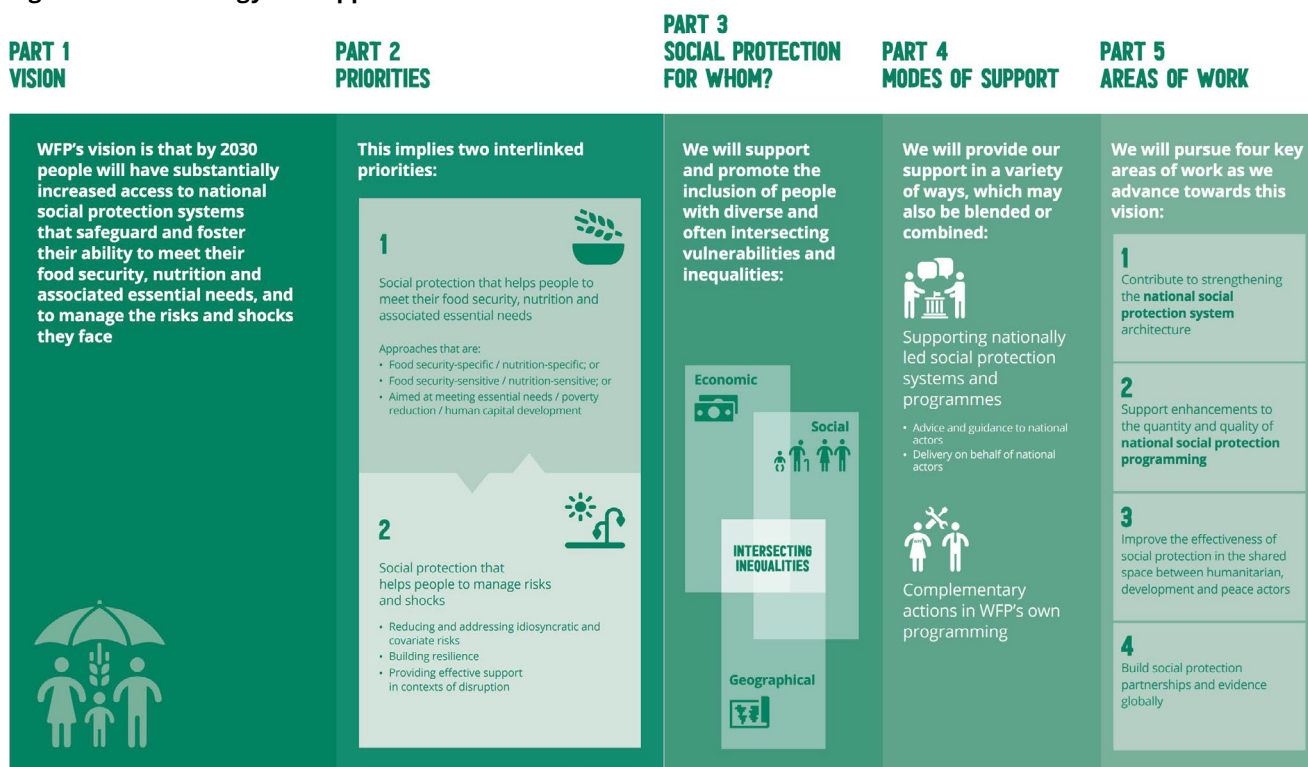
Regionally, the WFP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific<sup>1</sup> (RBB) is increasing its provision of support to national social protection systems. Engagement in social protection also features in most country strategic plans (CSPs) in the region. However, several gaps remain, particularly to ensure the operationalization of priorities, modes of support, areas of work and building blocks outlined in the strategy (WFP, 2021). Gaps stem from insufficient funding, limited staff capacity and nascent partnerships and relationships with key actors, and insufficient knowledge of the national social protection landscape and challenges and opportunities to address food security and nutrition goals through social protection. These gaps, at times, hinder the ability of WFP to define its specific role and strategic niche in social protection.

To address these gaps, RBB commissioned a series of country scoping studies in the Asia Pacific region and this synthesis summary. The scoping studies focused on Cambodia, Pakistan, Samoa and Sri Lanka (Figure 1) and sought to:

- Enable a deeper understanding of existing national social protection policies, programmes and related instruments focusing on food security, nutrition and shocks, including conflict (and any other policy

1. WFP RBB works through 17 country offices across a number of sub-regions and 1 multicountry office across Asia and the Pacific: Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan); Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Philippines and Timor Leste); and South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka). A Pacific multicountry office covers 14 Pacific states as well as Papua New Guinea. WFP also operates in DPRK (East Asia).

**Figure 2: WFP Strategy for Support to Social Protection – Framework**



Source: WFP

challenges that the country might be facing); and the main national and international social protection actors in-country or regionally, their priorities, roles and activities.

- Provide an overview of the challenges and opportunities of social protection in the country to better address multi-dimensional vulnerability, help people better manage risks and shocks, and contribute to zero hunger.
- Provide strategic and programmatic recommendations to WFP country offices that can feed into the formulation of the new generation of CSPs in the four country offices to better define and improve their strategic direction, policy, programmatic and partnership engagement in support of national social protection systems and goals.

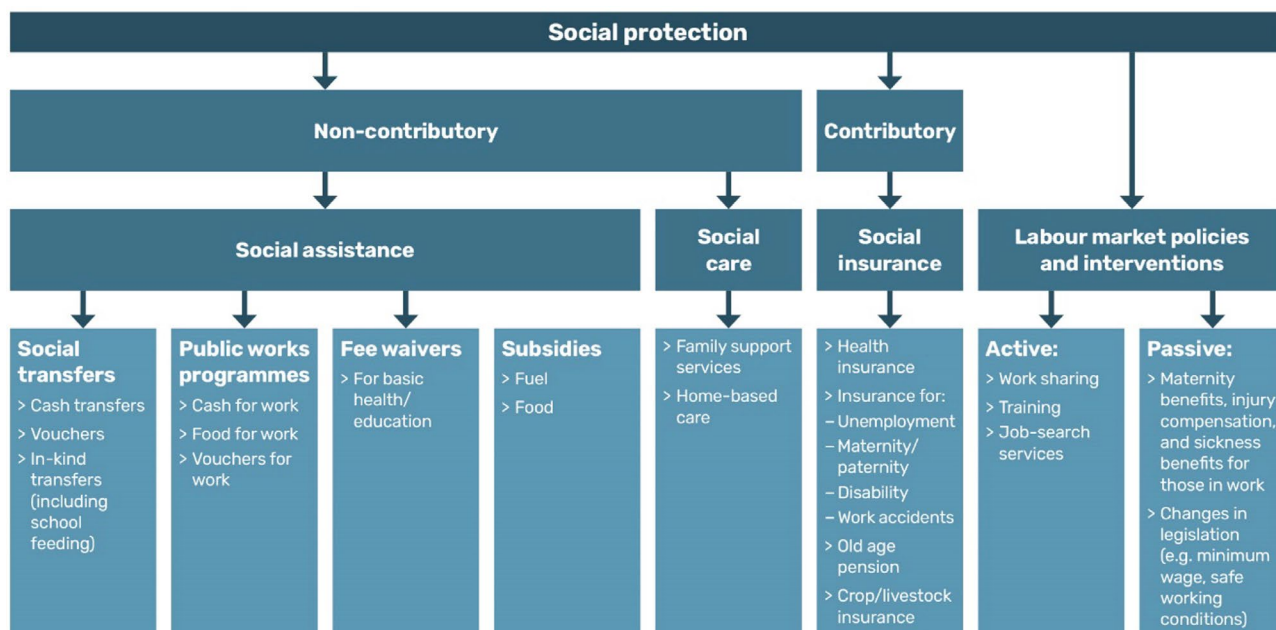
The country scoping studies have the overall objective of ensuring that WFPs' country offices' engagement in social protection is well-defined with clear objectives, outputs and activities, including capacity building actions to support the design and delivery of social protection. Other country scoping reports have been produced internally within WFP, for Lao PDR, Philippines, Pacific

Island Countries and Tajikistan (Figure 1) and the findings from these are incorporated into this summary report<sup>2</sup>. This report summarizes the findings and reflections from across the four 'core' country scoping studies and draws from other similar scoping exercises being run individually by WFP country offices.

This synthesis report aims to provide a 'key learnings' document to support the advocacy and positioning of WFP around social protection in the Asia Pacific region. It also provides an updated analysis of the social protection landscape for all actors working on social protection in the scoping study countries and across the region. The report begins with a brief description of the social protection landscapes across the region. Because there is substantial diversity of all these features, the report focuses on identifying patterns or experiences where one country might usefully learn from another. The report's next section explores the implications of these varied contexts and social protection landscapes for WFP's future work on social protection focusing on elements of WFP's strategy (WFP, 2021). This focus means considering appropriate initiatives for WFP related to its social protection priorities, modes of support, areas of work and building blocks (Figure 2).

2. References for the report are: Cambodia (Smith, 2023), Laos (2021b), Nepal (Pavanello, 2022), Pakistan (Slater, 2023), Philippines (Pavanello, 2021a), Samoa (Holmes et al., 2023), Sri Lanka (McCord, 2023), Tajikistan (Stinson, 2022), Pacific Island Countries (Gourlay, 2022)

**Figure 3: Taxonomy of social protection**



Source: Carter et al. 2019, adapted and broadened from O'Brien et al. 2018



## 2. The social protection landscape in the Asia Pacific region

A multi-agency definition of social protection is the *'policies and programmes aimed at preventing and protecting people against, poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life placing a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups'* (SPIAC-B, 2019). While this definition provides a helpful starting point, in practice, the definition and composition of social protection is defined nationally and the subject of considerable debate, so a more comprehensive taxonomy of its components is useful (Figure 3). While any individual taxonomy may perfectly align with definitions of the scope of social protection across all countries, this one also captures the main types of programmes considered as social protection across the region. The taxonomy incorporates social assistance, social insurance, social care and labour market policies and interventions. For the country scoping studies, a greater emphasis was placed on exploring social assistance because this aligns more closely with the programming and experiences of WFP. However, the country papers consider other areas in some detail, including for example insurance and food reserves.

While most countries tend to have a combination of programmes, the emphasis in different countries reflects the region's diversity – from an emphasis on social insurance/pensions and social care-focused systems of former Soviet countries in Central Asia (for example, Tajikistan), to greater emphasis on social assistance mechanisms (including public works programmes) in South and South-East Asia, to the provident funds of the Pacific. Section 3.7 explores the substantial expansions to social protection, especially social assistance.

### Social assistance

Table 1 summarizes social assistance programming in the focus countries studied. The social assistance landscape overall is predominantly cash-based, focused on tackling chronic poverty and covariant shocks. Many countries emphasize human capital development, especially around health and education, but there is somewhat less attention on explicitly tackling nutrition. Common across the region is the dominance of a flagship social assistance programme, Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) in Pakistan, Samurdhi in Sri Lanka, Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) in the Philippines, or the slightly broader Social Security Allowances (SSA) in Nepal. Depending on the stage of development of social

protection, flagship programmes can be a springboard to systems building, or can dominate and thereby undermine the evolution of other programmes and parts of the system.

As an example, in Cambodia, there have been significant efforts in the last decade to extend social assistance programmes, including cash and food-based programmes, the Health Equity Fund and vocational training. Notable in Cambodia is that, while the goal of social assistance is to ensure decent living standards for poor and vulnerable citizens while strengthening the capacity of every citizen to retain their jobs and employment, the emphasis is very much on support to human capital development, especially in health and education. Far more progress has been made at this stage with the first two priorities, compared to the third, especially through the Health Equity Fund, scholarships and the new Family Package.

Nepal's pathway is somewhat different. Social assistance has focused on lifecycle-related risks, and its expansion has been a significant element of the post-conflict political settlement since the 1990s. Historically, public works programmes have been important in specific parts of the country and have received new emphasis under a prime ministerial initiative that has sought to provide employment opportunities and tackle rehabilitation work following shocks (earthquake, floods).

### School feeding programmes

School feeding programmes are a form of social assistance. However, as school-based rather than household-based programmes, they are often categorized as part of the education rather than the social protection sector. For this reason, they are discussed separately to social assistance.

In Sri Lanka, WFP's nutrition work focuses on supporting home-grown school feeding (HGFS). WFP successfully transitioned its school meals programme to a fully government-run programme and continued with technical assistance to the National School Meals Programme (NSMP). Since 2017, the programme has been fully funded by the Government and covers approximately 1.1 million schoolchildren. WFP has also worked with the Government on improving the nutritional quality of school meals, supporting a pilot project to include fortified rice (with iron and folic acid)

**Table 1: Main social assistance programmes in focus countries**

<p>In <b>Cambodia</b>, the Health Equity Fund, which began in 2000, is the largest social protection scheme. Operating nationally, it provides access to free healthcare while covering certain out-of-pocket expenses for households registered under the IDPoor system and for some working in the informal sector. In 2018, it reportedly reached around 4 million people, including 3 million registered in the IDPoor system. Enhancing the access of poor households, including nutritionally vulnerable groups, to medical treatment when needed is expected to reduce the health-related drivers of malnutrition. Meanwhile, reimbursing non-medical expenses is intended to reduce the impact of health-seeking on household income and food insecurity.</p>	<p><b>Nepal's</b> Social Security Allowances (SSA) is the largest social assistance programme and is focused on tackling lifecycle/idiosyncratic risks based on individual characteristics. Recipients receive cash transfers four times each year. At the federal level, the Ministry of Home Affairs provides overarching policy and programme design. SSA delivery is conducted through bank transfers to beneficiaries' SSA bank account from municipalities' account. The number of SSA beneficiaries has more than doubled from 2010 to 2020, from 1.5 million beneficiaries to 3.1 million beneficiaries. Similarly, real expenditure on SSA has more than quadrupled, from NPR 8 billion to NPR 36 billion.</p>
<p><b>Pakistan's</b> Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) remains Pakistan's flagship social protection programme. BISP is an unconditional cash transfer (UCT) programme providing monthly cash stipends of PKR 2,000. It is delivered through bank accounts to 7 million recipients and (based on an average of 6 people per household nationally) reaches around 42 million people. (Government of Pakistan, 2021).</p>	<p>The <b>Philippines</b> provides a good example of a social protection portfolio dominated by a flagship programme. Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) was launched in the Philippines in 2008 and is a nationwide conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme for poor eligible households. The 4Ps goal is improving the health, nutrition, and education outcomes of children (0–18 years). 4Ps coverage reached 4 million people in 2018 – the fourth largest CCT globally.</p>
<p>In <b>Sri Lanka</b>, the Samurdhi Subsidy Programme<sup>3</sup>, the largest national social protection programme, is the central government instrument for social protection provision. Samurdhi seeks to reduce poverty through twin strategies: in the short term reducing vulnerabilities through income transfers and social security, and in the long term, through livelihood development and empowerment. The Samurdhi programme has three main areas of activity: providing social assistance, rural development initiatives and income generation programmes. It implements four large cash transfer programmes, under the social assistance work programme.</p>	<p><b>Tajikistan's</b> social protection system is primarily focused on social pension programs. However, it also has a poverty mitigation instrument in the Targeted Social Assistance program (TSA) which has also been used for shock response. The main elements of Tajikistan's social protection system have transitioned over time from a non-contributory, pension-based system with separate cash transfers for education and energy focused on poor individuals to a system that includes both contributory and non-contributory elements and unconditional cash transfers for eligible vulnerable households.</p>
<p>In <b>Samoa</b>, the provision of national social protection is nascent. The Government provides a non-contributory monthly pension to older persons adapted in response to COVID-19 and a contributory provident fund. Concerted progress towards developing a social protection system began in 2018 by establishing a Joint Programme for Social Protection, led by UNDP. A draft national social protection policy is being discussed with the Government. The policy sets out various institutional arrangement options for the management and coordination of a long-term inclusive social protection system, and the prioritization of social protection programmes to be rolled out in the short term (for example, a disability grant). The policy aims to provide a framework for an inclusive and SRSP system for Samoa.</p>	<p><b>Pacific Island Countries (Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu)</b> follow a similar approach to Samoa, with variations in the scope and growth of specific programmes. Most countries have some form of social insurance – usually through provident funds – concentrated among formal employment, especially public sector workers. Beyond this, are small safety net programmes – for example cash transfers for older persons or specific vulnerable groups. Mutual reciprocity arrangements at the community level, organized around kin groups, are a central source of informal social protection, and remittance systems also provide important income to support households to ride out shocks and stresses.</p>

3. Samurdhi means 'prosperity' in Sinhala. The term 'subsidy' is somewhat misleading as it provides cash transfers rather than reducing the price of specific goods or services.

in the NSMP in selected locations, working as a technical service provider for an HGSF modality, and supporting the initiation of an HGSF pilot.

In Samoa, where social protection is nascent, WFP, in partnership with FAO, has supported the Government in developing the national *Samoa Food Systems Pathway 2030*. This pathway identifies a specific role for social protection in increasing household resilience to climate-related shocks and reducing malnutrition through specific interventions, including locally produced school feeding.

In Cambodia, school feeding is under the social assistance pillar in the national policy, but the mandate for delivery lies with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. The transition to government leadership has been slower for school feeding than other social assistance elements. While the Government has directly implemented the cash-based social assistance schemes since 2015, a process supported by WFP has been underway to transition the responsibility for implementing and managing school feeding to the Government.

## Social insurance

Social insurance for households outside government contributory pension schemes is relatively rare among the countries explored in the scoping studies, except in the Pacific, where health insurance and provident funds tend to be the main components of nascent social protection systems. Many countries do have social pensions (which may be contributory, non-contributory or a combination of the two).

For example, in Tajikistan, the social protection system is primarily based on a pension system managed by the Agency for Social Insurance and Pensions (ASIP) focused on older persons and other groups eligible for payments, including those with disabilities that render them unable to work and those defined as survivors. The pension system supports an estimated 5 million people, with around 1 million contributing to the system. There are challenges identifying overlapping programmes within households and ensuring complementary support.

In Cambodia, the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) manages social security and provides employment injury, social health insurance, maternity, and sickness benefits. Coverage was recently expanded to include the private sector, although workers in large portions of the economy, including informal sector workers, which comprise 80 percent of the economy, remain excluded.

In Pakistan, social insurance covers only public servants or those in larger formal-sector enterprises. Not enough workers are covered, or coverage is inadequate because of i) wage ceilings for eligibility, ii) comprehensive scope but inadequate levels of benefits, iii) poor access for contract workers, and iv) inadequate benefits for pensioners (ILO, 2021). A planned labourer's initiative for a contributory social insurance scheme for workers in the informal economy and the launch of a welfare and pension scheme for the informal sector are emerging.

In Samoa, the Senior Citizens Benefit Fund (SCBF) and Samoa National Provident Fund (SNPF) are social insurance programmes. For the former, the Government delivers an unconditional cash transfer of approximately USD 59 per month from age 65. For the latter, people are eligible to withdraw funds upon retirement, after being unemployed for five years over 50, suffering a serious illness or becoming physically or mentally incapacitated.

In Sri Lanka, there is a non-contributory senior citizen's allowance (SCA) programme classified nationally as social assistance; however, the remainder of insurance programmes cover a small share of those working in the formal sector who are relatively well off. The vision of social protection set out in the draft National Social Protection Policy emphasises the expansion of insurance-based approaches and social security.

Across the Asia Pacific region, the primary challenge for social insurance is incorporating casual and informal sector workers and those in small and micro-enterprises into insurance systems. This challenge is explored further in the next section on coverage and inclusion.

Other sources of insurance are also important, including crop and weather-based risk insurance, but these programmes are generally fledgling or small.

# 3. Social protection in the Asia Pacific region: challenges

The Asia Pacific region is geographically vast and socially, economically and politically diverse. As a result, multiple variants of social protection systems have emerged, derived from different contexts and drivers. Despite these differences in social protection, the scoping studies identified common challenges that hamper the effective design and delivery of social protection across the region: coverage and inclusion, commitment, community and participation, complementarity, capacity and coordination.

## 3.1 Coverage and inclusion

The coverage of social protection programmes continues to lag other comparable regions, despite progress in recent decades. While 64.3 percent of the population has access to at least one social protection benefit in the Americas (a comparable region in terms of economic development), in Asia and the Pacific, the figure is 44.1 percent (ILO, 2021, p. 15). Furthermore, there are geographical variations in coverage. While across the Asia Pacific region (as defined by ILO), 44.1 percent of the population is covered by at least one social protection benefit, this figure falls to 22.8 percent in Southern Asia and 33.2 percent in South-Eastern Asia. Pacific Islands show substantial variation, from the Cook Islands (86.3 percent) to Micronesia (19.4 percent). Across the scoping study countries, there is also variation. At country level, coverage is also variable (Table 2).

Beyond the number of people or share of the population receiving some form of social protection, coverage is also limited regarding access by different vulnerable groups. The dynamics and dimensions of exclusion across the region are varied but omnipresent. Women, men, girls and boys experience shocks and stressors differently and have differential access to information and resources that could help them respond. Food security and nutrition are driven by intersecting economic, social and geographical inequalities.

Figure 4 shows the coverage of social protection across different social and demographic categories at regional level. The progress made in coverage among older persons is positive, but coverage and adequacy challenges for this group remain (ILO, 2021). Gender experiences of work leave women in lower-paid and precarious jobs, with knock-on effects for entitlements to support. Some countries have made limited progress with a lifecycle approach to social protection, and some identify specific social and demographic categories for receipt of social protection.

Samoa provides older persons with a non-contributory monthly pension, but beyond this national social protection coverage is currently limited. In Cambodia, although the numerical coverage of cash transfers remains low, there is a clear prioritization of early childhood and the first 1000 days of life, children at school-age; and people with disabilities/older persons.

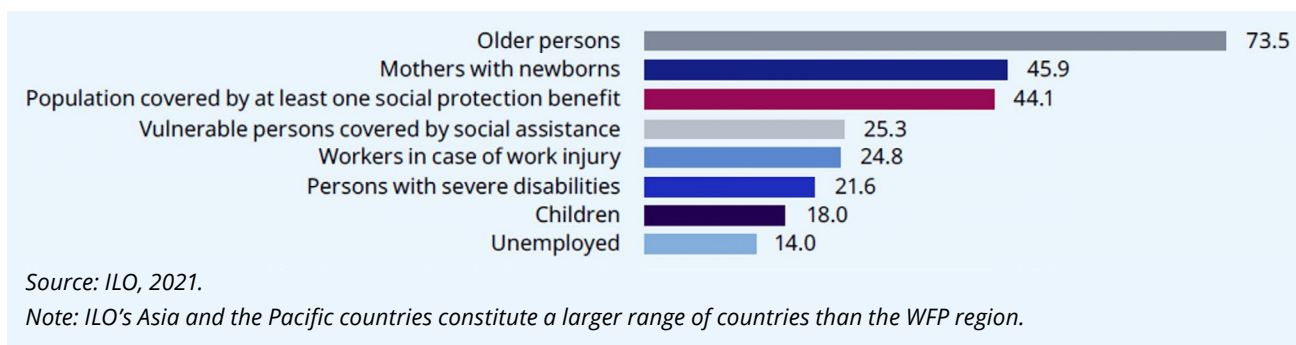
**Table 2: Social protection coverage, by country, excluding health. Source: ILO (2020) World Social Protection Data Dashboards**

Country	Percentage of population coverage (latest available year, excluding health)
Philippines	36.7
Sri Lanka	36.4
Tajikistan	26.6
Samoa	21.1
Nepal	17.0
Lao PDR	12.1
Pakistan	9.2
Cambodia <sup>4</sup>	6.2

4. The Cambodia coverage figures appear to not take account of the largest social protection programme, the Health Equity Fund (HEF), because this table excludes support for health expenditures. It is a good example of how different definitions about indicators can provide a confusing figure. A basic calculation by the authors suggests that including the HEF would lift Cambodia to around at least 25 percent.



**Figure 4: Effective social protection coverage in the Asia Pacific region by population group**



Although social protection eligibility might be inclusive, there are other reasons why coverage among specific groups is low. The Nepal scoping study highlights analysis by Holmes et al. (2019) showing a gender discrepancy of 3 percent in coverage rates of the disability allowance. Holmes et al. (2019) identify three drivers of higher levels of exclusion from existing schemes women (and girls) face: barriers in terms of awareness of the schemes, which are more acute for women from marginalized communities and women with disability; challenges in obtaining correct citizenship or marriage documentation, especially given lower birth registration for girls; and more acute mobility constraints to enrol in the schemes.

Beyond these social and demographic categories, analysing social protection eligibility across livelihood categories highlights a serious coverage gap for informal sector workers. ILO (2021) finds that the region is home to 1.3 billion informal workers, constituting around two-thirds of the workforce. Vulnerable forms of work (such as seasonal and casual labour, self-employment and work within family businesses and farms) and the predominance of micro and small enterprises lead to the informality of labour, something that existing social protection models are poorly equipped to absorb.

In Nepal, more than two-thirds of the economically active population works in the informal economy, compounding the population's vulnerability as these workers face multiple challenges and constraint and exploitation and deprivation of fundamental rights at work (Pavanello, 2022).

In Lao PDR, informal workers are identified at a policy level, with the 2016 National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme merging various social health protection schemes for civil servants, formal and informal economy workers, and people living in poverty under a single umbrella (WFP 2017b; NSPS, 2020). Sri Lanka articulates a national vision for social protection that incorporates a twin emphasis on support to the poorest and most vulnerable groups, but also emphasis and intent on livelihoods assistance

programming, and graduation, as on welfare. However, as with other countries, social insurance for informal sector workers is limited.

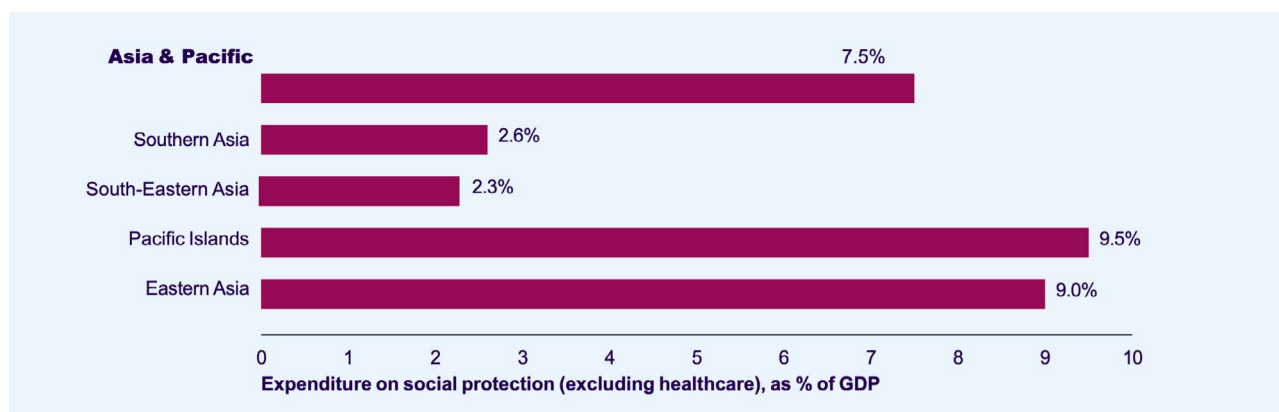
These multiple coverage deficits affect the impact and effectiveness of social protection in the region. For example, in Pakistan, low coverage, coupled with low transfer levels, is found to impede the impact of BISP's impact on poverty (Durr-E-Nayab and Farooq, 2014, Cheema et al., 2016, Saeed and Hayat, 2020).

### 3.2 Commitment – financial, administrative and political

Concerns about affordability and the perceived importance of linkages to productive activity in some countries are drivers of low levels of public expenditure on social protection across the region. Despite compelling evidence to the contrary (for example, Bastagli et al., 2016), cash transfers to households are often perceived as an unproductive expenditure in many countries rather than an investment. On average, countries in the region spend 7.5 percent of GDP annually, with half of countries spending 2.6 percent or less on social protection. This spend is below the global average (12.9 percent) and the Americas (ILO, 2021, p.15) (Figure 5).

In some countries, financial commitments to social protection are under substantial pressure. Wening Handayani (2018) argued that to achieve SDG 1.3 (Social Protection Systems for all, including and Floors), most countries in the region should be able to adapt their social protection systems to facilitate often difficult economic and social transitions, even with tight budgetary purse strings. However, a series of subsequent crises (COVID-19, the global crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and various climate-related shocks) have narrowed the fiscal space for expenditures on social protection considerably and exacerbated competition for government resources.

**Figure 5: Expenditure on social protection, percentage of GDP (excluding healthcare), 2020 or latest year available**



Source: Adapted from ILO (2021). ILO's definition of Asia and the Pacific does not overlap neatly with that of WFP.

In Sri Lanka, for example, at the time of the research, the majority of Samurdhi financing was allocated to assistance. However, in 2022 the Government signalled its interest in shifting the focus increasingly to the promotion of productive livelihoods development. Allocations to the Samurdhi Ministry, having increased since 2014, were reduced significantly in the 2022 budget by a reported LKR 10 billion (ICRA Lanka, 2022). This reduction reflected a need for fiscal tightening to reduce the budget deficit in late 2021, even before the 2022 deterioration of the domestic macro-economic and broader global context.

Concerns about productivity have implications for expenditures and also the design of social protection programmes, especially the need to ensure exit strategies. Governments tend to take a twin approach – focused both on building livelihoods capabilities in the short term and building human capital through investments in health and education in the longer term. These approaches often result in the design of ‘cash plus’ and graduation programme or conditional cash transfers linking to uptake of basic services. These are discussed more in Section 3.4.

### 3.3 Community and participation

Many countries in the region are ‘latecomers’ to developing social protection systems, with systems that depend on families, communities and religious organizations. In Samoa and other Pacific Island Countries, informal and traditional forms of social protection are the most common forms of support to those vulnerable to poverty, social risks, and disasters in times of need. However, changes in the Samoan economy and society, environmental degradation, and

high risks to climate- and health-related shocks are increasingly putting pressure on informal and traditional community-level support systems (Holmes et al., 2023). Samoan people’s well-being is deteriorating, malnutrition rates are increasing, and gender gaps are widening, contributing to high levels of gender-based violence and limited economic opportunities for women and girls.

Experiences with traditional, informal and remittance systems reflect different ways of categorizing social protection instruments across the region. Although WFP has taken the position in its strategy (WFP, 2021) to focus specifically on social protection delivered through government actors, it is still important to be cognizant of the implications of existing traditional and informal systems for government-led programme design and implementation. With Samoa, in common with other parts of the Pacific (ESCAP, 2021) it is necessary to distinguish between *traditional and informal* social protection. Traditional social protection includes three mechanisms: the nu’u (village), aiga (family) and tuao’i (neighbour). These three mechanisms protect vulnerable groups, identified as women and youth, persons with disabilities, jobseekers and school dropouts, and individuals and households recovering from disasters (during and after shocks). In some parts of the Pacific, traditional mechanisms are viewed as universal reciprocity systems; however, these depend on local networks and social capital and can potentially be exclusionary. Informal support systems are distinct from the traditional mechanisms described above, comprising the church, community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs). Remittances remain the backbone of many Pacific Island economies, in Samoa supporting the livelihoods of 80 percent of the rural population and accounting for approximately 16-20 percent of GDP (Government of Samoa, 2021, Gourlay, 2022).

Identifying the most appropriate steps to navigate from community-level mutual support to more official government-led systems is challenging for some countries, especially in Pacific Island Countries. In some cases, the first steps require engagement from communities themselves. In Tonga, Gourlay (2022) found that public perceptions of the role of government in social care were a barrier to social assistance programmes because care for the vulnerable was seen as the responsibility of the family and the wider community. She argues that an ADB, Ma'a Fafine Moe Famili (MFF – a local NGO) and Government of Tonga pilot providing care to vulnerable older persons and children with disabilities was pivotal in building community support, and the resulting attitude change was a significant factor leading the Government to finance the programme's continuation. Extensive community outreach and close, caring interactions in homes, villages, and communities across Tonga's main island of Tongatapu transformed community opinions and led to the pilot's acceptance and enthusiastic support from the community. Subsequent steps include articulating a process of institutional bricolage where informal and community-based systems (such as the wantok mutual support systems of Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea) and formal contributory social insurance schemes (such as provident funds) are increasingly intertwined.

Remittances are sometimes viewed as an informal form of social protection. The importance of remittances to household income is not disputed in numerous countries, although the impact on household well-being is not straightforward or automatic. For example, households that send labour to the Middle East can face a heavy debt burden and take many years to break even (Hagen-Zanker, 2015) and those that migrate can find themselves trapped in indentured labour arrangements. International experience suggests that remittances and social protection might benefit from mutual payment and transfer technologies and systems or from topping up remittances using government funds to support those left behind (Taylor, 2005). In some countries, for example, where there are high numbers of refugees or internally displaced people (IDPs), exploring how existing remittance systems might support the portability of social protection is an area for exploration and potential development.

Long-term, structural changes in the region, such as displacement or migration, population ageing, pandemics, and urbanization, all have implications at community level, changing household composition and redistribution, and traditional local mutual support systems, with knock-on effects for social protection challenges and opportunities (ILO, 2021). Community

and kin-based social protection are under stress and increasingly unable to help households withstand idiosyncratic and covariant risks and shocks. However, they are part of formal and informal initiatives that must be considered in social protection policy and design.

### 3.4 Complementarity

In some countries, financial pressures and coverage gaps mean that governments are frequently concerned with exit strategies for social protection – often achieved through complementary support to two types of other programmes. In the short term, governments invest in graduation or livelihoods programmes to build the financial and physical capital of poor and food insecure households. In the longer term, investments in health or education are intended to build human capital, particularly to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

**For livelihoods strengthening and graduation**, in Sri Lanka, the 2022 budget proposed reforms within the Samurdhi programme, including its transformation into a rural development movement to contribute to economic revival and food security and a reduction in the allocations to social assistance (Sunday Observer, 2021). These reforms reflect challenges with Samurdhi. There is widespread concern in government, that there are few incentives for graduation into improved livelihoods and exiting the programme, despite the introduction of complementary elements achieved through compulsory deductions.

In the Philippines, the Sustainable Livelihood Programme (SLP) seeks to reduce poverty and inequality by generating employment among poor households and supporting highly vulnerable households' engagement in sustainable livelihoods (Acosta and Avalos, 2018). Activities under the SLP include micro-enterprise development and employment facilitation and technical skills training and/or vocational skills training. Livelihood assets, such as boats or fish nets, are also provided or enhanced to sustain micro-enterprises (FAO, 2019). Complementarity with other social protection programmes is achieved by overlapping eligibility criteria such that SLP participants include, among other groups, families identified by *Listahanan* (national registry) and 4Ps recipients. There is a target for the SLP caseload to be 80 percent 4Ps beneficiaries (FAO, 2019).

**For human capital development**, in Cambodia, there is recognition that, alongside the three main programmes, there needs to be other complementary investments to support human capital development. Food-based social assistance, through school feeding programming, further

extends the focus on building human capital of children in Cambodia. The Royal Government of Cambodia is transitioning all school feeding activity under a coherent national HGSF programme, with support from WFP. In 2014, an HGSF programme design was piloted where local farmers and suppliers sold their produce to nearby schools as an adaptation of the broader school feeding programme. By 2017, WFP implemented the model in 84 schools in four provinces. An ISPA review of the programme confirmed it as relevant, effective and well-managed (FAO and GIZ, 2018). The regular and systematic cash transfer to schools plays a significant role in ensuring food availability to students. As part of the programme, schools previously covered by WFP operations have transitioned across the overall government responsibility.

WFP is substantially involved in delivering or supporting complementary actions. A good example is Cambodia. While debates will inevitably continue globally about whether food reserves are social protection, in Cambodia, an Emergency Food Reserve has been identified as a social assistance instrument to use in an emergency. The reserve is planned but still needs to be designed and implemented as an effective instrument to address FSN or manage shocks. The goal is to ensure food availability to meet the needs and access of poor and vulnerable citizens affected by food price rises during a crisis. Some 16,000 tons of food, 3,000 tons of rice seeds and 50 tons of crop seeds will be reserved to draw on in a national emergency. WFP has the potential to provide support to the design, planning and operation of the reserve, drawing on its social assistance capacity to help the Government agree the size and targeting of food transfers and its logistics, storage and transportation capacities and experience. In this way, WFP's broader goals and expertise beyond social protection can be applied to support the Government's SRSP plan.

For livelihoods and human capital development, data management is one of the main challenges to complementary action. Without the capacity to know who gets what, where, and how, it is difficult to effectively layer support to specific households or remove it where there is duplication. Data management is an area for WFP to target its technical support – to enable governments to achieve efficiency and effectiveness gains in their existing programmes, particularly in a fiscally-constrained environment.

## 3.5 Capacity

Capacity constraints exist at multiple levels – individual, organizational and institutional – and cover a range of technical and functional elements.

Countries with the most nascent social protection systems often lack a policy framework and so policy and strategy work are a common first step towards progressing the sector. In Samoa, in 2018, a process to draft an NSPP began and is currently under discussion with the Government of Samoa. The policy sets out various institutional arrangement options for managing and coordinating a long-term inclusive social protection system and prioritizes social protection programmes to be rolled out in the short term (such as a disability grant).

Once a policy framework is established, capacity deficits can prevent policies and strategies being implemented. In Lao PDR, low technical and implementation capacity of relevant ministries and the limited government experience in social protection, particularly for non-contributory programming, are challenges surrounding the implementation of the National Social Protection Strategy. In Cambodia, more systemic elements followed the establishment of a national strategy. Social protection first reached the policy agenda around 2010, followed by pilot programmes and a National Social Protection Policy Framework established for 2016–2025. The framework brought various disparate elements together under a single policy, promoted a lifecycle approach to social protection system building, and set out a portfolio of instruments under two pillars (social insurance and social assistance). Beyond these instruments, the focus has been on building system architecture by formalizing various frameworks: legal and regulatory, institutional, financial and human resourcing. By the end of 2021, a policy document for the social assistance 'Family Package' was endorsed. More recently, WFP supported the Government in developing an SRSP framework, to provide the foundations for improving capacity to deliver social protection support in anticipation of and response to shocks.

Of the four main scoping study countries, Pakistan has the most established social protection in terms of longevity and coverage. Pakistan has followed a sequence where schemes and programmes have emerged first (with the earliest policy statements, such as the National Social Protection Strategy (2007), focused on supporting the establishment of the flagship BISP. Serious investments in policies and systems have followed with investments in an overarching system and a wider coordinated programmatic approach. Despite this progress, administrative and governance capacity challenges remain, including concerns about the accuracy of beneficiary data, targeting database updates, public trust/accountability and the functioning of grievance mechanisms. Since the establishment of the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety, significant investments have been made in the survey



process to establish and update the national registry. Social protection in Pakistan also faces deeper structural challenges, notably geographical disparities in the need for and capacity to deliver social protection.

## 3.6 Coordination

In most countries, a plethora of government ministries or departments contribute to social protection and there can be confusion and sometimes competition over roles.

In Cambodia, while the Council of Agriculture and Rural Development (CARD) was originally mandated to coordinate social protection and retains the mandate to coordinate agricultural and rural development, plus multisectoral FSN activities (of which social protection is one), the National Social Protection Council (NSPC) is now mandated to coordinate social protection. The precise roles and responsibilities of these respective bodies still need to be defined, and there does not appear to have been any joint work to define strategic direction or operationalize the high-level commitments made. The situation is further complicated by the institutional history between these bodies, which saw CARD relinquish oversight of social assistance with the creation of NSPC.

Given the vast number of stakeholders, a common feature across the scoping study countries is poor, limited or fledgling coordination across actors working in the space where social protection, FSN, and DRM overlap. In Samoa, no government ministry has responsibility for social protection, and stakeholders are discussing whether the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development should take the role or whether a new agency is needed. Despite advocating for a sector-wide approach, institutional coordination remains a challenge to delivering an integrated approach towards achieving its national priorities and development goals.

The same reflections regarding leadership and coordination of government actors apply to non-state actors such as civil society, NGOs and international actors. Bringing the two sets of state and non-state actors together creates further challenges and complications. In Lao PDR, stakeholders highlighted that the range of strategic and technical support (to advocacy, policy dialogue, capacity building support and technical assistance) needed to strengthen social protection must be part of a coordinated approach with multiple government and non-government agencies working together and bringing their specific comparative advantage and technical expertise. In Lao PDR, there is strong appetite for this inter-agency collaboration and coordination.

However, state and non-state actors are not always neatly and invariably aligned in their overarching vision for social protection. In Sri Lanka, the vision underlying the draft National Social Protection Policy is based on more targeted provision and graduation. This vision contrasts with the calls for programme expansion, progressive realization of universal provision, or lifecycle approaches that development partners promote. The 2022 budget has reduced allocations to Samurdhi, and the Government is explicitly calling for the concentration of resources and DSD activity on livelihoods development rather than unconditional, non-contributory social assistance.

Landscapes change rapidly. In Pakistan, regime change in 2022 resulted in halting some initiatives undertaken by the previous government. After working to align with the previous government's priorities, international actors, including WFP, need to reflect on how their investments and initiatives align with the new government. In some cases, a change in government results in only superficial changes, but in other cases, there can be substantial shifts in the ideologies and values that underpin social protection policies and operations. For example, while the overall name of Pakistan's social protection initiatives has changed, the core programmes remain in place at the time of writing. In contrast, in Nepal, the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015 resulted in some programmes, such as the Karnali Employment Programme and the Rural Connectivity Improvement Projects, being wound up with a long delay before public works were refashioned under a new prime ministerial initiative. Furthermore, development partners may also pull in different directions, guided by different mandates and objectives.

Vertical coordination is also critical, and decentralization processes matter in several countries, especially Cambodia, Nepal, Philippines and Pakistan. Models of decentralization in the region vary substantially, from largely administrative decentralization in Cambodia to more fully devolved approaches in Pakistan and Nepal. Different models have implications for sub-national actors' workloads and capacities.

In Nepal, the 2015 Constitution stipulates social protection as a concurrent function across federal, provincial and local level governments. In principle, the federal government is responsible for ensuring minimum standards with sub-national governments complementing programmes with their own resources. Municipality offices manage funding and data flow and make decisions regarding beneficiary selection based on recommendations by the wards and doctors for disability-related assistance. Ward offices identify,

register, and enrol recipients. In practice, this requires significant reforms and investments to fully equip all government levels with the tools, resources, and skills to manage and implement social protection programmes.

In the Philippines, several processes are providing impetus towards decentralization. The Mandanas-Garcia ruling of 2018 devolved several social services, including social protection, to Local Government Units. In terms of operations, the existing national registry, *Listahanan*, is expected to be replaced in the future by the Community-Base Monitoring System as the national targeting mechanism.

### 3.7 Contexts: social protection in the ‘riskscape’

The countries of the Asia Pacific region are among the most disaster-prone globally, with seven countries in the top ten places in the World Risk Index ranking located in the Asia Pacific (Table 3). Countries share high levels of exposure to earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, drought and sea-level rise; susceptibility resulting from socio-economic development, social disparities and deprivations and subject to violence, disasters and diseases; a lack of coping capacities related to social shocks, political stability, health care, infrastructure and material security; and lack of adaptive capacities related to developments in education and research, reduction of disparities, investments, and disaster-preparedness.

**Table 3: World Risk Index**

Rank	Country	Risk
1	Philippines	46.82
2	India	42.31
3	Indonesia	41.46
4	Colombia	38.37
5	Mexico	37.55
6	Myanmar	35.49
7	Mozambique	34.37
8	China <sup>5</sup>	28.70
9	Bangladesh	27.90
10	Pakistan	26.75

The remainder of this section considers the implications of these varied ‘riskscape’ (UNESCAP, 2019) for the design and delivery of social protection. It divides the contexts into three groups – climate and environment, COVID-19, and conflict/governance – while recognizing that these contexts overlap and compound in specific countries and localities.

### 3.7.1 CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT

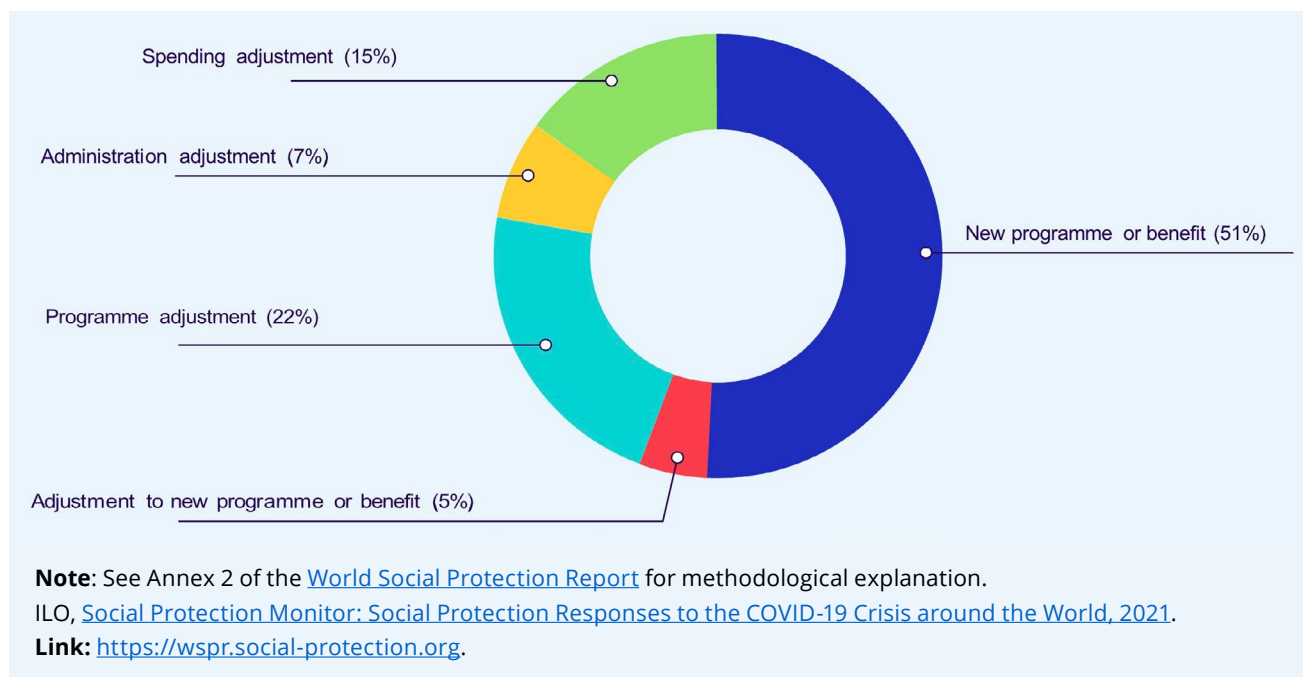
The scoping studies identified many examples of SRSP initiatives delivered, with varying success, across the Asia Pacific region in the last decade. This variation can be explained by considering several challenges when seeking to use social protection to respond to shocks. Firstly, existing social assistance programmes are often not designed to be systematically scaled up in response to shocks as they are primarily designed to address lifecycle risks based on individual vulnerability characteristics. They are also generally operating without risk financing options, such as contingency funds linked to existing programmes to enable a scale up. In Nepal, for example, social protection interventions in response to shocks to date have been limited to horizontal and vertical expansion of SSA cash transfers supported by international organizations to complement responses by DRM actors, food assistance through public food distribution systems, and distribution of take-home rations through schools. Secondly, shocks and stresses are increasing in prevalence and severity, and in some cases, overwhelming existing systems. In Pacific Island Countries, informal mutual support systems at the community level are increasingly unable to cope with the scale of the challenges, especially in the case of covariate shocks that affect whole communities and limit their ability to support extended family or other community members. Thirdly, coordination, design and operational issues in each country affect the capacity to respond to shocks – the following examples describe these issues in more detail.

For social protection systems to address immediate food insecurity risks and mitigate negative coping mechanisms effectively and efficiently in response to shocks, several gaps need to be addressed. In Nepal, the scoping report suggests four priority actions: the draft SRSP Guideline must be finalized and endorsed by the Cabinet to inform and operationalize SRSP; local capacity and coordination mechanisms and arrangements must be ensured for relevant actors to deliver in times of crisis; adequate data preparedness – registration of excluded vulnerable households, data protection measures, interoperability, data quality, unique identifier, household information – must be in place to avoid inclusion and exclusion errors and duplication of assistance; and finally, there must be sufficient financing which can be mobilized rapidly for a timely response.

The Philippines scoping study suggests that the national registry, *Listahanan*, lacks features that could significantly enhance its relevance and use in disaster preparedness and response. While Cabinet advantageously authorizes

5. China is commonly viewed as part of the Asia Pacific region but is not covered by WFP’s RBB.

**Figure 6: Distribution of measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific, by type of adjustment**



*Listahanan* for use during shocks, it currently has three particular deficiencies: it contains outdated household data which is not regularly revised to capture poverty and vulnerability dynamics; it has limited information on household characteristics, such as disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, IDPs, workers in the informal sector, which could be used as proxies to predict vulnerability in advance of a shock; and it is not geo-referenced to hazard-prone areas, and its PMT formula does not collect data on climatic vulnerability (Pavanello, 2021a, Hobson, 2018).

### 3.7.2 COVID-19

In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified recognition of the importance of social protection as a vehicle for shock response and for building resilience and supporting recovery. ILO<sup>6</sup> records 425 measures across forty countries of the Asia Pacific region, broadly defined by the following categories (in Figure 6) that governments between 2020 and 2021 announced.

- Analysis and diagnosis to help to understand additional needs and vulnerabilities arising from the pandemic;
- Adaptation of existing safety nets to increase the value or coverage of in-kind or cash-based social assistance and/or change the modalities and delivery arrangements;
- Establish new schemes to reach populations not covered by existing safety nets; and

- Strengthen national social protection and emergency response systems and their coordination.

(Source: WFP, 2020)

In Cambodia, the Government created a new, temporary social protection programme through the COVID-19 cash transfer (CT-COVID). The programme adapted existing systems and processes for cash-based social assistance developed for the Cash Transfer for Pregnant Women and Children (CT-PWYC).

In Sri Lanka, the Government utilized both vertical and horizontal expansion. It used existing social assistance and social insurance programmes and personnel and provided emergency benefits to existing recipients and those on waiting lists and incorporated almost 2 million self-employed people. These interventions were estimated to have reached 60 percent of the population during lockdown, with coverage being particularly high for the poorest decile (97 percent) (Premaratna et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, the Government rapidly enacted legislation to provide, among other things, two instalments of unconditional cash assistance ranging between PHP 5,000 to 8,000 (USD 100 to 160), depending on the minimum workers' wage and households' subsistence expenditure in each region, for an initial target of 18 million families, around 75 percent of the total population (Navarro et al., 2021).

6. <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowWiki.action?id=3426>

The lessons and outstanding questions about social protection that emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic response in the region are numerous. However, some stand out as strategically and operationally significant for WFP as it considers its forward portfolio of social protection work in the region. These include:

**Not all countries have social protection systems sufficiently established to incorporate SRSP but going forward, all can design, revise and strengthen their systems with SRSP in mind.** The scoping study on Lao PDR stresses that in situations with social protection in the early stages of development, it may not be sufficiently mature to respond to shocks (Pavanello, 2021b). The cautions flagged by Pritchett et al. (2010) of premature loadbearing – or ‘asking too much too soon of too little too often’ – are especially relevant in situations of new or fledgling systems. Even where social protection systems and programmes are not shock-ready, it is important to draw on other sectors, and indeed other actors, that are ready.

**Many social protection systems are ill-prepared for deployment for shocks other than COVID-19, such as drought, flood, and earthquake, and those related to conflict and insecurity (such as displacement), especially those systems and programmes that are not nationwide.** In Pakistan, for example, the use of BISP systems to provide both ‘vertical’ top-ups to existing beneficiaries and ‘horizontal’ expansion to new beneficiaries was internationally lauded. However, analysis suggests that while the existing policy framework provides for addressing catastrophic shocks, there is less clarity on lower level, more localized responses.

**The appropriate timescales over which pandemic and other shock responses might continue is poorly understood.** In Cambodia, CT-COVID was initially intended to run for six months from June 2020 but continued into 2022 as poor households and those in the informal sector continued to face difficulties securing sufficient income to meet basic needs. This timescale is in stark contrast to rapid-onset, climate-related emergencies where shock response frequently covers immediate short-term needs but is lacking when resourcing recovery and rehabilitation or longer-term stresses.

**It is unclear whether the COVID-19 experience can be used to leverage sustained financing of social protection.** The social protection response led to unprecedented expenditure levels. For example, in Cambodia, the annual cost of CT-COVID (1.3 percent of GDP) was more than four times the total expenditure on social assistance and NSSF benefits for private sector

workers. There are signals that the investment by the Royal Government of Cambodia in social assistance during the pandemic may result in a sustained increase in social protection budgeting given the recognition that social protection is crucial for maintaining development gains and stimulating economic recovery post-COVID-19.

**Registries must be regularly updated to be deployed more effectively to support SRSP.** In the Philippines, the outdated *Listahanan* contributed to delaying the Social Amelioration Program cash (SAP) response in 2020 for non-4Ps beneficiaries. Pavanello (2021a) argues that in 2020 the *Listahanan* could have been used to identify eligible non-4Ps SAP beneficiaries quickly. However, the lack of up-to-date information meant that the Department of Welfare and Social Development had to implement a new, time-consuming targeting process to ensure greater accuracy of COVID-19 response targeting.

**Design tweaks proved significant to maintaining benefit delivery during COVID-19, but the pathways to institutionalizing these tweaks into programmes and standard operating procedures (SOPs) are not well defined.** During the pandemic, school feeding was adapted to provide take-home rations in many countries, thereby enabling continuity of support during COVID-19 restrictions. Institutionalizing this ‘design tweak’ into the national school feeding plan is a priority action in the SRSP Framework for Cambodia; however, it is unclear how far design tweaks are translated into SOPs in other countries.

### 3.7.3 CONFLICT

Lessons from conflict-affected countries or localities are less comprehensive than those from COVID-19 and recent climate-related shocks. Conflict and displacement are features of the ‘riskscape’ in many countries in the region. Cambodia has the second highest ranking of ASEAN member states in the Fragile States Index and, according to the World Bank’s political stability indicator, still suffers from political instability. While the administration of justice has been improving, the independence and impartiality of the judiciary and the limited separation of powers and transparency in public affairs remain areas of concern. In the Philippines, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has experienced decades of unrest, conflict, displacement and economic stagnation resulting in the country’s highest poverty rate. Many years of peace talks between the Government and several autonomist groups led to the establishment of the autonomous Bangsamoro Government. Development goals include improving access to and delivery of services for human capital development focusing on social protection. There is limited attention yet to the contribution social protection



can make to peacebuilding and ensuring a conflict-sensitive approach to social protection in BARMM within the regional development plan (Pavanello, 2021a).

Regarding the implications for social protection, the challenges identified above (coverage, commitment, community, capacity, coordination and complementarity) are reinforced in situations of conflict, displacement and fragility. Access to communities is more complicated, and needs are likely to be greater due to high levels of poverty and food insecurity. Data to support programme design or determine eligibility is less likely to be available and more likely to become outdated.

## OVERALL LESSONS ABOUT SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SHOCKS

The different country pathways towards enhanced social protection are dynamic and not static. In all countries, shifting government priorities affect how development partners strategize their own social protection priorities and how far they align these with governments. So, for international actors such as WFP, there is no playbook to identify the most appropriate pathways; rather the changing political, economic and social landscape and shifting 'riskscape' (UNESCAP, 2019) must always be considered.

There are explicit lessons for the design and delivery of SRSP systems that emerge from these experiences. Unsurprisingly, the findings across the eight scoping papers show that the extent to which social protection can provide a shock response function corresponds directly to the underlying social protection system's size, capacity and longevity. In countries with only nascent social protection, such as Samoa, experiences drawing on social protection programmes to respond to climate and weather-induced disasters or climate risks are curtailed.

Beyond this, a starting point is the existence (or development) of a national policy and organizing framework for SRSP (as in Cambodia). Practical experiences are also important, for example, in Pakistan, specific activities include supporting revising targeting criteria – shifting criteria towards vulnerability and intersectionality - resulting in improved targeting.

National social protection strategies and policies do not always explicitly link to DRM policies at international, regional or national levels, for example, in Samoa and Sri Lanka. This lack of connection results in shock response through social protection operating at a programme or scheme level, rather than a system level. In some circumstances, lack of explicit connections may enable an effective and timely top up but also brings risks of coverage gaps – especially for vulnerable

groups currently not eligible or not covered by existing programmes. Where the connections between DRM and social protection are weak, there are lessons for agencies such as WFP in providing complementary responses.

Making social protection effective for responding to shocks will require, concurrently, a substantive discussion and agreement regarding the appropriate values needed, type of benefits, specific coverage or coordination with the disaster response sector, which may be needed to enhance the role of social protection in the context of preparedness, resilience-building and shock-response.

Investments in digital and e-payment systems matter for shock response but also allow SRSP to build social protection systems in the longer term. In Samoa, while earlier humanitarian responses had mainly focused on providing in-kind and food support, in response to Cyclone Evan in 2013, the World Bank supported a recovery intervention through e-vouchers. E-vouchers were considered appropriate for several reasons, including as a response to government reluctance to distribute cash to affected households as this was perceived as being prone to misuse by the recipients and the high level of mobile phone coverage in Samoa.

## 3.8 Consumption: ensuring food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection

Assessment of the FSN challenges across the region (summarized in Annex 1) identifies commonalities across countries. First, food availability is undermined by low productivity and environmental degradation, leaving some countries heavily dependent on food imports, especially beyond the main staple foods. This dependency leaves countries highly susceptible to food prices inflation or volatility. Second, in numerous countries, households in the poorest quintiles cannot afford a basic but diverse and nutritious diet. Stunting is a protracted problem. Third, many countries experience either a double or triple burden of malnutrition. Progress in reducing stunting and wasting has significantly slowed just as challenges associated with overweight and obesity emerge. Problems with micronutrients leading to conditions such as anaemia present simultaneously. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened food availability, access, utilization and stability in all countries. Climate-related shocks are an ever-present threat. More recently, war in Ukraine has seriously affected global food prices. These challenges relate to social protection in different ways.

Across all the scoping studies, gender, disability and age are strongly interconnected with poverty rates, vulnerability and food and nutrition insecurity. Households headed by women are disadvantaged due to their lack of productive assets. Social, cultural and religious norms also result in gender inequalities in the household contributing to women's disproportionate time spent on care and domestic work, limiting women's income-generating opportunities. Gender issues are intersectoral. Due to their specific nutritional requirements, the cost of a healthy diet for adolescent girls in Cambodia is greater than for children and adults. Women living with disabilities are more likely to be poor and struggle to maintain a healthy diet.

In many countries, the conceptualization of social protection focuses primarily on reducing poverty, often narrowly defined as income poverty, rather than improving nutrition. Objectives for social protection commonly focus on achieving income poverty reduction and consumption smoothing efforts. Objectives related to stunting, wasting and nutrition are, at best, indirect. While social protection initiatives can still achieve improved food security outcomes, unless nutrition is stated explicitly in objectives and subsequent design and implementation features, its potential to improve nutrition is likely to be limited (WFP, 2021; Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2018).

Across the region, there are good examples of the challenges to enhancing consumption. In countries where existing social protection programmes are limited in scope and coverage, for example, Samoa, social protection programmes that explicitly focus on advancing FSN are rare. Lao PDR is an exception where FSN is an explicit focus. Despite the food security challenges in Samoa and specific nutrition-related risks that population groups face across the life course, no social protection programmes aim to address these gaps. For example, there are no school-feeding programmes nor any proposed programme linkages to support nutrition outcomes (for example, provision of supplementary food or nutrients or awareness raising on diets). In Tajikistan, the social protection system is not nutrition-sensitive in terms of formal programmes and policies linking nutrition priorities to social protection objectives. It does not include policies or programmes that specifically link nutrition priorities and practices to the type of social assistance received or beneficiary criteria, nor does it include nutrition-specific programmes such as food vouchers to subsidize the cost of a nutritious food basket for vulnerable people. Although the Government has clearly stated priorities for nutrition in the National Development Strategy, these are not currently linked

to social protection as inter-dependent or cross-sectoral objectives and priorities to reduce poverty and encourage a more productive and healthy population.

In contrast, other countries explicitly have food and nutrition-related social protection programmes. In the Philippines, there is a strong commitment to addressing persistent malnutrition challenges. Recent policy and legislation advances include the 2019 National Feeding Law, which institutionalized the National Feeding Programme for undernourished children in pre-primary and primary level schools. In 2020, Executive Order 1010 established an Inter-Agency Task Force on Zero Hunger and formulated a National Food Policy. However, this commitment to end malnutrition has yet to translate into nutrition-sensitive or nutrition-specific approaches in the flagship 4Ps. In 2018, a WFP Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis (WFP, 2018a) found that a 4Ps transfer would provide households with a maximum of PHP 1,400 per month – enough to provide less than one-third of the cost of an energy-only diet for a modelled five-person household. This analysis suggests that further interventions would be needed to ensure access to a nutritious diet for vulnerable households. There is increasing advocacy from international actors to ensure that the flagship social protection programme (the 4Ps) is designed and implemented to enhance its contribution to addressing malnutrition at scale.

Stakeholders agree on the importance of tackling stunting through social protection, even where national social protection priorities and systems focus predominantly on SDG1 (End Poverty). In Pakistan, social protection is viewed as contributing directly by making a diverse range of foods more accessible to the poor and indirectly through complementary initiatives such as education on the health consequences of poor diets and dietary guidelines; supplementation and fortification; and interventions on price, food safety, market infrastructure and supply. At the heart of WFP's most recent initiatives in Pakistan is the Nashonuma programme focused on health and nutrition. It aims to address stunting in children under 24 months through cash stipends, nutritional food, medical examination, and training.

There are explicit mechanisms by which FSN objectives can be translated into practice. In Cambodia, the national social protection policy framework explicitly articulates addressing FSN, envisaged through the rollout of particular social assistance schemes. The Cash Transfer for Pregnant Women and Children (CT-PWYC) aims to reduce undernutrition by making healthy diets and healthcare more affordable for poor households

during the first 1000 days. The commitment to expand the national school-feeding programme aims to improve food security and education attainment. The Government has outlined various strategies and plans to improve food security and nutrition with a cross-government approach, and these consistently make links between social protection and FSN.

Policies and roadmaps are one element, but there are also important challenges at a programme or scheme level. In Cambodia, obstacles to the realization of FSN-sensitive outcomes in the CT-PWYC include the level of technical understanding of FSN issues across government, the fledgling status of the social protection system, the competing priorities of COVID-19 response, challenges in cross-government coordination and monitoring gaps. The discourse and associated monitoring of social protection remain poverty focused.

Complementary programmes are important for achieving nutrition outcomes. In Nepal, it is argued that the impact of social protection programmes on nutrition can be further increased by providing complementary services, such as screening, and using them as a platform to provide nutrition-specific interventions targeting the

most nutritionally vulnerable individuals. The lack of awareness and knowledge on nutrition and health is one of the most significant challenges to FSN in Nepal, so social behavioural change communication through social protection can greatly impact the vulnerable population's nutrition and health. Complementary services through social protection can promote dietary diversity to improve intake of nutrients, promote health-seeking behaviours, and increase investment in nutrition.

The capacity to diagnose poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity and directly address them is highly varied across and within countries so investments in data and analysis are vital. In Pakistan, many activities to support the social protection system need to take place both at an aggregate, national level and at provincial level and below. For example, mapping food and nutrition-specific and -sensitive social protection is important not just at federal level but at provincial and *tehsil* (administrative sub-district) -level. Without the more local level analysis, it is not possible to understand the obstacles to nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive social protection nor to overcome them.

# 4. Recommendations for support to social protection in the Asia Pacific region

This section considers the findings from the country scoping studies and draws out lessons for future actions and initiatives to support social protection at country and regional levels. It is intended to be helpful to a range of stakeholders, both within the social protection sector and beyond. It does, though, focus on social protection in response to shocks and stresses and on support protection that tackles FSN challenges. Given this focus, the analysis and findings are presented following the elements of the WFP (2021) Strategy for Support to Social Protection: vision; priorities; recipients/participants; modes of support; areas of work; and building blocks.

## 4.1 Vision

WFP's global vision that *by 2020, people will have substantially increased access to national social protection systems that safeguard and foster their ability to meet their food security, nutrition and associated essential needs, and to manage the risks and shocks they face* is highly relevant in the Asia Pacific region. The emphasis is on social protection's contribution to tackling FSN challenges and utilizing social protection in shocks and stresses. The approach of WFP, which places greater emphasis on its potential contribution to government capacity-strengthening beyond the handover of its 'own' programmes, is also a marker for how various agencies might approach their support to social protection in the region.

In countries with more limited social protection systems and programmes, actions to identify and reach those most vulnerable to hunger and other forms of deprivation are a priority. WFP has some experience here and can draw on its data analytics and assessment expertise. It also can play a role in addressing coverage gaps that governments are not able to fill. In difficult-to-reach areas, WFP can contribute to identifying practical solutions to delivery bottlenecks and obstacles. Its experience can help countries design, set up and run their own effective systems and programmes, especially those related to food and cash assistance and the use of new technologies.

In the scoping study countries, FSN was often a secondary or tertiary concern for social protection policies and programmes. The specific dimensions of FSN were highly varied. WFP has long experience in designing and implementing programmes contributing to FSN. This experience will allow WFP to support governments as they

incorporate FSN objectives into national social protection policies and strategies and to support tailored designs of programmes for greater impacts related to SDG2.

Even in countries with more established systems, there may be significant gaps or systemic weaknesses (for example, in Pakistan and the Philippines) that WFP can support, for example, reaching vulnerable cohorts or localities or delivering vulnerability analysis and supporting improved targeting. Nevertheless, in countries with greater capabilities, it is important that WFP's activities – for example, in data collection and analytics – do not crowd out other national organizations. It may also be appropriate for WFP to focus on the broader enabling (or disabling) environment – that is, the actions that might not be delivering social protection but are 'social protecting' in that they reduce vulnerability by securing food availability and access. Examples include work in other parts of WFP beyond social protection, such as logistics and transportation, that combine to reduce exposure to shocks among vulnerable populations by securing food availability and access, thereby reducing the need for social protection.

## 4.2 Strategic priorities

WFP's two priorities for social protection work (Figure 2) are interlinked and reinforcing. There is a fundamental link between people's primary food security needs during an emergency and working in the longer term to address FSN through reductions in vulnerability, enhancements in productive capacity and human capital, and economic inclusion. Sections 2.4 and 2.5 describe experiences with these priorities across the scoping study countries.

At a country level, the work of WFP on social protection is already strongly aligned with the priorities in all countries with an established programme. In Pakistan WFP focuses on its social protection work to integrate a greater prioritization of FSN. It has also supported government to deliver SRSP multiple times. In countries where social protection is nascent or only recently reaching the policy agenda, for example, in Samoa and Lao PDR, while it is important for WFP to prioritize FSN, social protection may require more general support. This support could be to diagnostic processes to identify those needing support or to programme design drawing on WFP tools and data analytics capacity.



In all countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of both SRSP and social protection for building the resilience of poor and vulnerable households or groups. Pakistan and the Philippines provide globally recognized exemplars of SRSP with scale-ups to existing programmes in response to typhoons, earthquakes and recent floods. Other countries have all used social protection as part of shock response, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, how each country office (or sub-regional office) engages depends on context and the maturity, size and longevity of the social protection system and programmes in place.

## 4.3 Social protection for whom?

There is scope for WFP to contribute to ensuring that social protection policies, strategies, systems and programmes are inclusive – both by being sensitive to the drivers of structural exclusion and deprivation for vulnerable groups and by designing specific programmes to address such drivers directly. Governments across the region make consistent and repeated policy commitments to reducing inequalities and enhancing inclusion through social protection but there is considerable scope to improve effectiveness. Many countries take a lifecycle approach to social protection, but institutional and financial capacities often mean there are programming gaps or blind spots.

Policies consistently recognize wealth inequalities and lifecycle vulnerabilities facing women, infants, children, people with disabilities and older persons, but the FSN dimensions are often less explicit. Policy commitments to collect sex-disaggregated data do not always translate into programme designs. In some countries, the narrative around social protection for women stagnates around views of women as solely passive victims of gender bias and there is little vision for how social protection can be transformative in tackling structural gender inequalities. Infants and young children receive substantial attention in programmes, but adolescents and youth tend to fall off the agenda. The role of women as potential agents of change – through promoting understanding of food systems and healthy diets – is increasingly recognized but only rarely linked to SBCC within social protection delivery.

Thinking about geography also matters in ensuring inclusive social protection. There are stark disparities between sub-national regions and districts around the demand side for social protection (levels of need, of

FSN, of poverty and vulnerability) and the supply side (local level capacities – both human and organizational resources and financing). In many countries in the region, WFP has a considerable frontline presence. This presence is in stable, low and middle-income contexts, but also situations of extreme remoteness and of conflict and protracted crisis.

## 4.4 Modes of support

**Blended and combined support** varies depending on the country context and the development level of the social protection system. In countries with the most developed systems, most support is delivered by supporting nationally led social protection systems and programmes.

Across multiple countries with established systems, WFP provides advisory support and guidance to governments regarding targeting and registration systems, nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific programme design, accountability and grievance redress mechanism designs, and various other social protection system and programme elements.

WFP can also contribute technically to enhancing core social protection systems and programmes, particularly in countries where these are nascent. This contribution might include strengthening the design and delivery of programmes by introducing digital tools and innovations; making systems more 'risk-informed' to address covariate shocks; identifying climate insurance mechanisms where governments subsidize or pay premiums on behalf of vulnerable households; or finding other types of anticipatory actions that can be integrated within existing social protection programmes.

There are also examples of WFP implementing programmes on behalf of government. The Nashonuma programme in Pakistan is fully government-funded, and WFP implements specific components on its behalf. Delivering on behalf of government, akin to a private sector partner, may (counter-intuitively) become more common, as social protection systems become more established and their financing mechanisms embedded in domestic revenue systems rather than overseas development assistance.

Working to provide complementary actions in WFP's own programming is appropriate in various situations. These include specific, unprecedented emergencies that exceed governments' capacities to respond through existing social protection and disaster management systems and where WFP's expertise can contribute to complementary activities, some of which may be outside but linked to

**Figure 7: From social assistance to social protection to socially protecting**



social protection. WFP can also help test, trial and pilot new programmes and help de-risk new government developments.

WFP takes many actions in countries that, while not defined as social protection, could reasonably be described as ‘socially protecting’ (Figure 7). This perspective has much in common with WFP’s approach to resilient food systems – where it seeks to organize activities supporting a specific goal into a range of initiatives that directly and indirectly contribute to goals. These activities support the functioning of supply chains, storage and staple food markets to keep prices stable and affordable or ensure the quality and safety of food. These actions, rather than responding to a shock when it happens, help reduce shocks and mitigate their impact. One of the good ways in which WFP can support poor and vulnerable people in multiple countries is by focusing on the ends (reducing risk and vulnerability) rather than solely on the means (social protection). Doing things that are ‘social protecting’, that is, reducing vulnerability, are as crucial as social protection itself. This blended support means bringing the broader expertise of WFP to challenges with multiple drivers and causes and getting these wider actions working with social protection. Similarly, except for cash and food-for-assets instruments, social protection programmes and those that seek to build climate resilience and livelihoods programmes are rarely interlinked. This is a notable gap where WFP seeks to mainstream climate finance and adaptation into both types of programmes.

## 4.5 Areas of work

Areas of Work 1 (contribute to strengthening the national social protection system architecture) and 2 (support enhancements to the quantity and quality of national social protection programming) comprise WFP’s assistance support to national system-strengthening. These cover the overall systems architecture (for example, the targeting and MIS systems that enable operations to take place) and the programmes that deliver social protection itself. WFP has conceptualized the elements of these two areas of work as ‘building blocks’ (Figure 8).

Area of Work 3 focuses on improving the effectiveness of social protection in the shared space between humanitarian, development and peace actors.

The 2021 Strategy commits WFP to working on social protection across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and notes that WFP is committed to positively contributing to resilience and peace while achieving core development and humanitarian outcomes. In the Asia Pacific region, the importance of working across the nexus and the experience of WFP in doing so are well demonstrated. Three of the four scoping study countries can be classified as facing protracted crises due to conflict or political and economic instability. However, the challenges faced in Cambodia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have significant differences.

In these contexts, WFP has a role to play across various activities in the region, all of which are relevant to supporting improvements to national social protection:

- emergency preparedness and resilience;
- designing agile programmes that can scale up or down and adapt according to need;
- programming and system investments in support of the transition from crisis to post-crisis contexts;
- delivering accountability and protection; and
- enhancing intersectoral coordination.

Specific examples include BARMM in the Philippines, where WFP could support applying a conflict-sensitive lens to social protection programming. It could do this by unpacking the relationship between social protection and peacebuilding and helping the Government to adopt a conflict-sensitive approach to social protection in BARMM.

Similarly, WFP's contribution to peace in BARMM under the Food Security and Peacebuilding project, the work on iron-fortified rice, and the BARMM School Feeding Programme all have elements of great relevance for social protection. These elements could be leveraged and used to inform improvements in social protection in situations where conflict, fragility and other shocks compound.

Area of Work 4 has a global lens and is concerned with building partnerships and evidence. WFP is exploring how this might translate to a highly diverse region with multiple and varied experiences and priorities in social protection.

## 4.6 Building blocks

As part of WFP's five-year social protection implementation plans being developed for both global and regional levels, social protection is operationalized through activities under three sets of building blocks (Figure 8).

### 4.6.1 BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SHOCK-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

#### System architecture

In the case of SRSP, there are various potential actions to strengthen systems architecture that WFP, governments and other partners could take. There are opportunities to **strengthen the policy or strategic framework for SRSP Frameworks** and set policy direction, actions and entry points for actors to mobilize around; moving to

implementation will require **agreement on governance** arrangements. In many countries (including Cambodia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), strengthening systems architecture includes **clarifying the roles and mandates** of social protection versus DRM institutions.

For specific instruments, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a **rethinking of legislation** regarding programme operations (for example, whether there are legal impediments to translating school meals to take-home rations during lockdowns). However, work is still to be done to **clarify the legal frameworks** for SRSP.

Addressing governance and legal challenges can also help in **unblocking bottlenecks regarding integration and coordination** between DRM and social protection systems. Even in countries with the most established social protection systems, there are limitations to address, especially the low data coverage, recency of personal information and lack of system integration to allow data sharing. In many countries, a preliminary step towards SRSP is establishing or revising **platforms and MIS infrastructure**. International actors, including WFP specifically, can provide substantial expertise and technical support to achieve platform improvements, but peer-to-peer learning will also be helpful in establishing systems that are not heavily dependent on sustained external support.

In terms of **capacities**, learning from various social protection and emergency cash transfer programmes highlights capacity constraints among sub-national level actors. Some limitations lead to access and exclusion issues and only nascent preparedness capabilities.

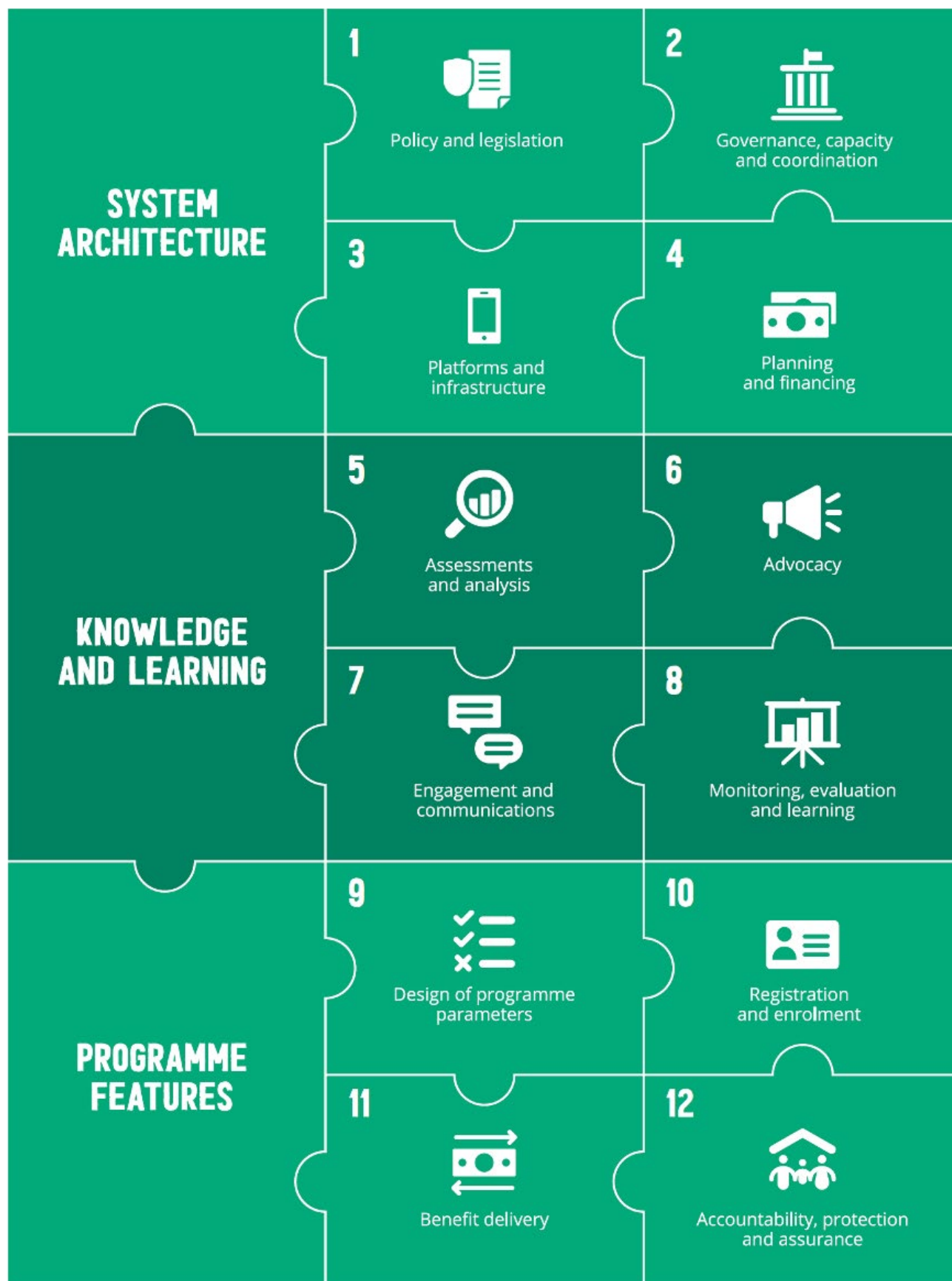
#### Knowledge and learning

Improving registries depends on data, and agencies such as WFP can contribute substantially to assessments and analysis, particularly to ensure that data collection includes variables or factors that contribute to people's exposure and vulnerability to shocks and stresses.

A significant challenge is balancing the quality of data and analysis and government **capacity** to use and act on learning to make changes and improvements to programming and operations. WFP's substantial subnational presence is beneficial for ensuring that **advocacy for changes to systems and programmes** is imbued with a healthy dose of pragmatic realism, reflecting local-level operational capacities and resources.

An openness to **real-time and ex-post monitoring, evaluation and learning** from COVID-19 interventions are providing a useful entry point for **research and dialogue to identify SRSP priorities** and inform future preparedness actions.

Figure 8: Social protection building blocks Source: WFP, 2021, Strategy for Support to social Protection.





### Programme features

In several countries, recent developments within the cash-based social assistance system have enhanced **programme designs** and the utility of social assistance to deliver support in a shock.

In multiple countries, there are few or no **guiding principles for setting benefit size or duration nor procedures for targeting or triggering launch**. The governance and coordination of some schemes (for example, the food reserve in Cambodia or school feeding programmes in Pakistan and the Philippines) limit the scope for design changes. The recognized expertise of WFP in targeting and needs assessments, transfer-value setting and minimum expenditure basket diagnosis, and logistics and food management may provide a useful entry point.

## 4.6.2 BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION TO SUPPORT FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

### System architecture

In many countries, at both a **policy and a legislative level**, there are only patchy linkages between social protection and FSN. Many national policy and strategy documents contain limited reference to FSN, and where they do, there is limited progress in practice. School feeding is generally an exception, with timelines and strategic road maps in place in most countries to support a transition to national ownership, with accompanying investments in **building government capacity to implement, manage and monitor**.

In some countries, especially Pakistan, Nepal and Cambodia, new governance arrangements resulting from decentralization and devolution create opportunities for more **focus on sub-national actors and actions to drive FSN efforts** across multiple sectors. Realizing these opportunities requires **support to institutional capacity building and strengthening**.

In 2017 in Pakistan, WFP began **working more multilaterally**, working across the disaster risk management, humanitarian, and social protection sectors to identify which **coordination mechanisms and institutional arrangements** to establish to accelerate the move to SRSP systems. The existing policy framework provides for addressing catastrophic shocks, but more clarity is required for the **design of lower-level, more localized responses**. WFP could support in several areas: providing support on how to **adapt targeting systems** to capture better or indicate those households likely to be most exposed to shocks; **sharing experience in data**

**analytics and vulnerability monitoring** (in ways that ensure that WFP does not crowd out or compete with existing national data analytics capacity); **identifying alternatives or complements to social assistance** such as insurance or anticipatory action.

### Knowledge and learning

Social assistance programmes have the potential to enhance FSN but require better **evidence-informed design**. This type of design, in turn, requires more **monitoring and evaluation**, especially to support transfer value setting and more effective cash plus nutrition messaging. The response to evaluations and assessments, such as the 'fill the nutrient gap' and 'cost of diet' studies, suggests there is openness to learning in many countries, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of the dialogue on social protection remains relatively tightly focused on income poverty and shock responses, and so speaks predominantly to SDG1. There are certainly specific programmes focused on FSN, but systemically tackling food security and nutrition is important. Communications explicitly focused on **maximizing social protection's contribution to achieving SDG2** would be timely. Where countries have programmes that focus specifically on FSN, WFP could **leverage from the diagnostic work** that led to establishing these programmes. This action would add significant FSN value in the broader social protection policy space.

In some countries, notably Samoa and Pakistan, there is a solid rationale to **build a more strategic, high-level dialogue and commitment** to tackling stunting and other nutrition challenges through social protection. Influencing and supporting a high-level dialogue requires solid evidence (through **assessment and analyses**) about the current social protection portfolio and associated nutrition interventions and how they support FSN.

Supporting a high-level dialogue also requires **cross-sectoral coordination**, which is important and challenging. A complex set of institutional mandates and activities remain to navigate, with a high potential for particular vulnerabilities or groups to fall through the gaps. WFP can play a substantial role in, for example, enabling the availability of and access to high-quality and nutritious food. However, it needs to **coordinate** with other development and humanitarian partners to **capture other expertise**, such as UNICEF's technical experience delivering water and sanitation (WASH) initiatives.

A further communications tool that could be utilized to a greater extent and across many more countries is **sensitization and behaviour change communications (SBCC)**. While many international actors are engaging with SBCC processes, only some focus specifically on messages around healthy diet/food practices. Further **communications and advocacy** are required to ensure an appropriate balance between prioritizing specific groups with a focus on their specific FSN needs, and expanding social protection and coverage to further groups, without the FSN focus.

As with SRSP, capacities to diagnose FSN challenges and directly address them highly vary between countries and within them. There is a strong rationale for WFP to work to **strengthen local-level capacities** – both to deliver programmes and to ensure accurate and useable data collection, diagnosis, and MIS systems. In these locations, the need for social protection is either greatest or growing rapidly. WFP is well placed to **support programmes in difficult-to-reach parts** of many countries in the Asia Pacific region.

#### **Programme features**

In many countries, existing programmes often do not have any **FSN-sensitive objectives or designs**. Even those targeting priority groups for nutritional support (for example, programmes targeting the first 1000 days of life in Cambodia) have yet to adequately **incorporate**

**FSN considerations into their design**. This absence results in shortcomings in transfer adequacy and limited effectiveness of nutritional support. WFP and other actors can use their expertise to better integrate nutrition into targeting criteria, transfer type and frequency and complementary programmes.

As with SRSP, the recognized expertise of WFP in nutrition assessments (for example, fill the nutrient gap analyses), transfer-value setting and minimum expenditure basket diagnosis, and food and fortification management may provide a useful entry point.

While many programmes (for example, Nashonuma in Pakistan) target women and girls, often concerning nutritional deficits, it is important to distinguish between *gender-targeted and gender-sensitive* programmes – something that is not currently clearly articulated, either by WFP, government, or other international actors.

**Developing an understanding of how to strengthen gendered nutrition outcomes through programme design elements** across programmes is key to ensuring nutrition goals can be achieved.

Tackling exclusion from social protection is also a priority in many countries and an area where WFP has substantial expertise. Key actions include **providing technical support to strengthen beneficiary communication and feedback mechanisms** in emerging social protection programmes.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The scoping studies generate findings that signpost how WFP might prioritize its support to social protection in the Asia Pacific region. The details of these priorities matter, and readers are directed to the country scoping reports for a more granular explanation of what actions WFP country offices might focus on in respective contexts. Nevertheless, there are relevant lessons for those working in the social protection and nutrition areas, and it is therefore helpful to highlight some overarching messages.

### **The 'riskscape' as a forethought, not afterthought.**

The scoping studies confirm wider evidence that an existing social protection system needs to be reasonably mature with adequate coverage levels to proceed with shock response. However, the Tajikistan scoping study flags that, in the absence of these conditions, WFP may be well placed to advocate for and technically enable the development of risk-informed social protection building blocks that can flex in times of shocks. In the (rare) situations where social protection systems are being built from scratch or at low level, there are opportunities to build them so that they have capacity to flex and adapt. In practice, few countries have no social protection system at all, and many existing programmes are used for shock response even if they have not been originally designed to do so. In the future, it will be beneficial when social protection systems and programmes are overhauled, revised or redesigned, this is done with the 'riskscape' in mind. Climate shocks and stresses will only increase in the coming decades, so social protection needs to be (re) designed and delivered to acknowledge this. Recognizing this 'riskscape' means rebuilding social protection systems that are designed for covariant shocks and lifecycle risks and accepting that social protection and shock response are inextricably linked – any advantage gained from making social protection systems more shock responsive will be undermined or indeed neutralized if the underlying stressors that drive vulnerability and the numbers of those in chronic need continue to grow in frequency and severity.

**Identify short-, medium- and long-term solutions to overcome challenges in social protection.** Historically, humanitarian agencies, like WFP, have had operational models predicated on short-term solutions. This is the case even where humanitarian actors provide support in situations of protracted crisis. However, a solely short-term perspective works neither for advancing SRSP (because enhancing SRSP means carefully considering ex-ante actions) nor for nutrition-sensitive

social protection. Humanitarian actors, and WFP specifically, can play a stronger role in medium- and long-term solutions, including providing orientation and information on healthy diets, sanitation and hygiene, especially through behaviour change communications as part of social protection and other programmes. WFP can also take a broader perspective on SRSP by providing technical assistance for climate and disaster risk financing solutions, including anticipatory action and risk insurance mechanisms. Taking a longer-term view is predicated on having longer-term, multi-year financing to allow organizations to attract and retain the right staff, to set up multi-year projects and processes with governments and other partners, and to develop more coherent delivery of strategic priorities and objectives (rather than reacting to funding trends and requests or preoccupations of governments and donors). Such shifts imply a substantial structural change, a rebalancing of saving lives versus changing lives in operational portfolios and the appetite for this is yet not fully tested.

**Deploy WFP expertise from outside the social protection sector.** WFP working to strengthen FSN outcomes through social protection programming should not be presumed to mean the social protection staff of WFP working with the social protection staff of government and other agencies. Instead, WFP might contribute to social protection activities through cross-sectoral coordination where WFP's nutrition and/or protection or vulnerability analysis mapping or cash-based transfer staff work with government staff and other development partner staff working on social protection.

WFP's social protection staff can be a helpful conduit to improve cross-sectoral programming by opening WFP's wider expertise (especially on nutrition and inclusion/protection) to other social protection actors in government and other agencies. WFP can substantially contribute and add significant value by bringing its broader food security, nutrition, inclusion, protection, logistics, supply chain management, fortification, MIS, targeting and other experience to social protection.

Another dimension of using WFP expertise is knowledge management and learning (KML). WFP could deploy its existing KML systems to ensure that WFP is adept at demonstrating (with high quality, robust and diverse evidence) the outcomes of its cross-functional work covering social protection, livelihoods, supply chain management, nutrition, RAM. Enhancing evidence of these cross-functional outcomes will require staff time

and capacity and senior management acknowledgement that this is required for WFP to be recognized as a credible social protection actor and more effective in raising social protection funding.

Working this way, the social protection work of WFP in the region would be both strategic and practical. It would create entry points for and facilitate dialogues; identify capacity gaps in the social protection sector that WFP can plug through broader technical assistance; and create coherence in its engagement on social protection. This contribution has the potential to be as important as the direct social protection technical assistance of WFP.

**Work with government bodies beyond those directly responsible for social protection, especially for SRSP.**

There has been substantial progress in strengthening government capacities to deliver SRSP. WFP should avoid viewing institutional SRSP linkages only in relation to social protection ministries or departments and work also through its relationships with DRM ministries or departments. There will be many circumstances where expanding existing social protection programmes provides an adequate social protection response. However, evidence from Nepal demonstrates that horizontal or vertical expansions of existing programmes may not always be the most appropriate pathway for a timely and inclusive response. Just as social protection experts in government might work effectively with WFP's nutrition, inclusion and protection expertise, so might WFP's social protection experts usefully provide technical assistance to non-social protection ministries and departments. In Sri Lanka, for example, a temporary horizontal expansion to those on social protection waiting lists and new beneficiaries through the Samurdhi Department (DSD) was anomalous, given that the mandate for delivering crisis response lies beyond the DSD. In practice, this will require WFP staff outside the social protection practice area to become more conversant with challenges and debates on social protection and understand how they can contribute to that process. There are many pockets of relevant expertise in WFP – especially among specialists in cash-based transfers, cash and food-for-assets, emergency preparedness and response, and protection – but, in many countries, these staffs do not work with government counterparts to consider how social protection might be delivered through other ministries.

**Adopt multiple ways of working across the strategic and operational domains.** WFP routinely plays three distinct roles in relation to social protection in the Asia Pacific region (WFP 2020):

- Technical advisor: In this 'enabling' role, WFP strengthens social protection capacities by deploying the technical strengths derived from its analytical and operational capacities.
- Service provider: WFP provides services to governments in implementing their own social protection programmes and strategies.
- Complementary actor: WFP delivers assistance using its own resources and own systems in a way that contributes to the strengthening and augmentation of governments' social protection responses.

Dissecting this role tripartite means further acknowledging that technical advice can be carried out through multiple associations (deploying multiple types of WFP expertise beyond social protection as noted above); and that service provision might be directly resourced by governments themselves, rather than WFP providing resources to deliver on behalf of government. A good, although unusual, example is the Pakistan Nashonuma programme delivered by WFP with the three-year budget of PKR 8.52 billion, fully funded by the Government of Pakistan.

Think regional, act local. Sub-national variations matter. As a result, the sub-national reach and presence of WFP matter if it is to support sub-national capacities and operations effectively. For example, in some countries, provincial and district-level initiatives highlight the importance of strengthening capacities in provinces and areas with the most vulnerable and food-insecure households and where capacities to deliver social protection may be at their lowest. In these locations, the need for social protection is either greatest or growing rapidly. There is a strong rationale for WFP to work to strengthen local level capacities – to deliver programmes, to ensure accurate and useable data collection, diagnosis, and MIS systems, and to introduce targeting data and eligibility that better capture local exposure to shocks and stresses.



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# Annex: Food and nutrition security challenges in selected Asia Pacific countries

	Availability	Access	Utilization	Stability
<b>Cambodia</b>	Availability achieved for major staples but not for other foods. Vulnerability to disasters and climate change threatens agricultural productivity and domestic availability. >50% of farmers have <1ha of land.	Access to an adequate nutritious diet remains problematic. Significant inequalities in access associated with geography, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender and inclusion. Food access is lower for bottom income quintiles, >20% of the population unable to afford the least expensive adequate nutritious diet in 2017.	Households lack information/ understanding of nutrition. Gender inequalities affect women's economic opportunities and overlap with lifecycle vulnerabilities mean women struggle more with access to a nutritious diet. People living with disabilities are more likely to be poor and adolescent girls struggle have healthy diet. 2000–2016 saw a three-fold increase in prevalence of overweight among children and adolescents.	Food access is regularly affected by shocks and disasters. Close association between access and vulnerability to shocks triggers an inter-generational poverty trap. Malnourished populations are among the first to suffer during shocks. The health system is ill-equipped to treat wasting and related complications. Natural disasters contribute to perpetuating poverty, hunger, and inequality.
<b>Pakistan</b>	Import-dependence for specific items and price variation is a factor determining food security. Limited focus on local production of minor crops and livestock produce, which contribute >1/2 dietary energy and contribute to nutritional food security.	More than 2/3 of households unable to afford staple-adjusted nutritious food diet, based on a per capita requirement of 2,350Kcal/day.	Dietary diversity is limited with a predominantly wheat-based (hence energy-dense but low-nutrition) diet due to poverty, subsidies or lack of knowledge. In 2018, studies found that wasting among children under five was +/18 More than 40% of children under five were stunted.	Food security is threatened by low resilience to climate-related shocks and susceptibility to other threats that have emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic, including economic slowdowns, reduced agricultural production and food price inflation.
<b>Samoa (plus Pacific sub-region)</b>	Lack of arable land and agricultural resources is a problem. Climate/weather-induced disasters and environmental degradation are primary challenges to availability combined with environmental degradation. Around 82% of Samoans live in rural areas but only 11.5% of the land area is arable.	Increase in imported foods enables to high caloric consumption but poor nutrient quality. From 1961 to 2007, a surge of imported foods made 900 extra calories available per person per day. Nearly 2/3 of home food consumption is purchased, only 1/3 of the top 30 food items are locally produced.	Poor-quality diet also leads to high malnutrition rates. Dietary fat availability rose by 73% from 1961 to 2007. Caloric intake of traditionally consumed and locally produced food like coconuts, starchy vegetables and fruits rose negligibly and remains low. Overconsumption of calories and high-fat foods is linked to chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease, all of which are rising.	Food access and availability heavily influenced by global financial fluctuations, environmental change and climate instability. The 2009 earthquake and tsunami reduced arable land to 2.8% of the land area with continued decrease since. Prices influence consumption, and lower costs and convenience driving preference for modern (mostly imported) foods over traditional foods.



Sri Lanka			
<p>Food availability substantially undermined by several factors, notably: reduction in domestic food production due to the (now rescinded) 2021 fertiliser import policy; and reduced food imports due to forex constraints and fiscal crisis.</p>	<p>2018 study found that 20% of households were unable to purchase a minimum cost nutritious diet, with higher percentages reported in the estate sectors (WFP 2018b), and a World Bank analysis in the same year calculated the cost of a diet in line with Sri Lanka's national food-based dietary guidelines as being unaffordable to 40-60% of households (WFP 2018b).</p>	<p>Faces a nutritional 'triple burden': i) undernutrition rates unchanged for over a decade, stunting rates remained around 17% since 2006, wasting broadly unchanged over the last 20 years; ii) rising rates of overweight and obesity, and iii) micronutrient deficiencies, with over 50% of households unable to afford healthy diets in 2017.</p>	<p>Compounded jobs losses and reduced incomes due to COVID-19, now further exacerbated by the deteriorating macroeconomic context. The pandemic had a major negative impact on spending on food and the quality of food consumed (UNICEF, 2020), and it is likely that the current fiscal crisis, reduction in domestic food production due to the (now rescinded) 2021 fertiliser import policy, and reduction in food imports due to forex constraints will have a further adverse effect on nutrition.</p>

Source: all data is from country scoping reports: *Smith (2023), Slater (2023), Holmes et al. (2023) and McCord (2023)*

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