



**USP2030**  
UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION

**SPIAC-B**  
Social protection inter-agency  
cooperation board

## USP2030 Working Group on Social Protection and Climate Change **Integrating social protection in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**

*Social protection has a key role to play in achieving climate goals and a just transition through inclusive climate change adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage response. To fully realise this potential, social protection needs to be incorporated into national climate strategies. The upcoming development of new and updated Nationally Determined Contributions is a critical window of opportunity for countries to embed social protection into climate action going forward.*

This brief provides an introduction to the NDCs and the rationale for integrating social protection in them. It also provides practical guidance for ministries and national agencies with a social protection or social security mandate (or those involved in implementing social protection) on how to engage in the process of updating NDCs.

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## 1. What are NDCs?

A Nationally Determined Contribution, or NDC, is a country's self-defined national pledge under the *Paris Agreement* for *climate action* to reduce the rate of climate change (*climate change mitigation*) and adapt to its impacts (*climate change adaptation*) (UNFCCC 2024a; UNDP 2023). This can include addressing *loss and damage* associated with the adverse impacts that are no longer avoidable. NDCs outline how much, and through which actions each country aims to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions; how to reduce *vulnerability* and increase *resilience* to climate impacts; and how to mobilize and align financial flows to reach those aims (UNFCCC 2024a). See more on NDCs [here](#).

Every country is required to review and update their NDC every five years to reflect increased national ambition and evolving capabilities for climate action (ibid.). Most countries submitted their initial commitments in 2015 and updated them by 2021 (UNDP 2023). The first *global stocktake* in 2023 found that the Paris

Agreement has driven near-universal progress on climate action, but that the world is not on track to meet its climate goals. Therefore, the third round of NDCs – NDCs 3.0 – due in early 2025, is an opportunity for countries to scale up their ambitions (UNFCCC 2024b). Crucially, the NDCs 3.0 should be underpinned by the principles of a *just transition* to ensure that climate action is inclusive of all sectors and stakeholders, minimising any harmful social and economic impacts of the climate transition while maximising development gains that leave no one behind.

The drafting of a country's NDC is typically the responsibility of the Ministry of Climate Change or Environment. Many countries take a whole-of-government approach to their drafting, involving various ministries in the development of targets and actions. While some ministries are frequently consulted (e.g., Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Transport), others are only beginning to engage.

## 2. Why integrate social protection in NDCs?

⇒ **Social protection breaks the downward spiral of climate change, vulnerability, and poverty.**

Climate change is already exacerbating poverty, inequality, social exclusion and marginalisation (IPCC 2023). In turn, these factors are themselves major drivers of vulnerability to climate change. This means that (i) social protection cannot achieve its goals without addressing the impacts of climate change; and (ii) social protection is critical for breaking the vicious cycle linking vulnerability, poverty and climate-related risk. A rights-based approach, in which all members of society are entitled to at least a minimum level of social protection, is fundamental for transforming systems to address these structural vulnerabilities to the adverse impacts of climate change.

⇒ **Social protection contributes to the goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change adaptation and mitigation, and response to loss & damage.**

Social protection can build people's capacity to adapt to climate change, provide protection and recovery from shocks and ensure that climate policies do not negatively impact people, but rather promote sustainable investments in human development, livelihoods and employment. Importantly, social protection helps ensure that climate objectives will be achieved in a way that is socially just, respects labour and human rights and reinforces other development objectives, including poverty reduction, decent work, gender equality and social inclusion. Specifically:



#### a) Social protection supports climate change adaptation.

Social protection reduces vulnerability and increases the adaptive capacity and resilience of people to prepare for, cope with, and recover from climate-related shocks and stresses by providing income security and access to health care and other services. For example, child benefits and social assistance helped protect incomes and consumption during droughts in Zambia and floods in Indonesia (Asfaw and Davis 2018; Pfutze 2021).

Social protection programmes can also support the adaptation and diversification of livelihoods by contributing to increased assets, productivity, and savings. These effects are enhanced when programmes are complemented by measures like agricultural extension services, in-kind support (e.g., drought-resistant seeds and tools), agricultural insurance, or education and training for sustainable livelihoods (Tenzing 2020; FAO 2024). Nicaragua's Atención a Crisis Programme combined cash transfers with grants for productive investment and was found to increase livelihood diversification away from activities vulnerable to climate-related shocks such as drought (Macours, Premand, and Vakis 2022).

#### b) Social protection helps avert, minimise and address the consequences of irreversible climate-related impacts (loss and damage).

Social protection systems can be quickly expanded to provide additional support to people who have lost their incomes, assets or livelihoods due to extreme weather events, as in the case of Fiji after Cyclone Winston (Mansur, Doyle, and Ivaschenko 2017). Social health protection can ensure people with injuries or sickness are able to cover their expenses. By linking with early warning systems and coordinating with disaster management and risk financing mechanisms, anticipatory action and shock-responsive social protection systems can allow for more cost-effective, timely, people-

centred support at scale, as is seen in the design of Kenya's Hunger Safety Net Programme that can scale up in advance of imminent hazards to provide emergency cash transfers to pre-identified vulnerable groups (Merttens et al. 2018). Social protection systems with high coverage and robust delivery mechanisms have greater capacity to address losses and damages compared to ad hoc response measures (Huber and Murray 2024).

#### c) Social protection contributes to and enables climate change mitigation.

Social protection can contribute directly to climate change mitigation by combining the provision of income support with activities that help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, capture and store carbon (e.g. in plants or soil), and promote ecosystem regeneration. For example, by increasing tree cover through public employment, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme has achieved 1.5% of the annual greenhouse gas emission reductions pledged in the country's NDC (Hirvonen et al. 2022). Cash transfers that encourage sustainable national resource use (e.g., *payments for ecosystem services (PES)* specifically directed towards vulnerable populations) can achieve similar goals.

Social protection, when embedded at an early stage in climate strategies, can also assist people who are negatively impacted by policies such as carbon taxes, removal of fossil fuel subsidies, or other necessary structural reforms. For example, providing income support together with active labour market and skilling policies can support workers to transition to greener jobs and is important for upholding fundamental labour rights. After a commercial logging ban in China, unemployment protection, early retirement options and job placement services assisted the over 700,000 affected workers. Rice subsidies and cash benefits were introduced to support reforestation and alleviate poverty (Canonge 2022).

## Social Protection in UNFCCC decisions and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports

- [Global Goal on Adaptation Framework](#) – Recognises the role of social protection in reducing the adverse effects of climate change on poverty and livelihoods.
- [Decision on Operationalizing the Loss and Damage Fund](#) – Calls for the scale up of support for social protection mechanisms.
- [Just Transition Work Programme](#) - Advocates for the incorporation of social protection into climate action for a just and equitable transition.
- [IPCC 2023 Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) - Recognises the contribution of social protection to climate change adaptation.

### ⇒ NDCs inform the allocation of climate finance

Social protection is essential to accelerate climate action, but inadequate financing remains a major challenge particularly in countries that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In the twenty most at-risk countries, less than 10 per cent of the population has access to any form of social protection (ILO 2024). Particularly in low-income countries, it will be difficult to close these financing gaps through domestic resources alone even without the adverse social and economic impacts of climate change (Cattaneo et al. 2024). To fully harness the potential of social protection for climate action, international climate finance needs to systematically consider and strengthen social protection systems (see this [Joint Statement](#)).

Countries can signal to climate finance institutions that they see the strategic value of social protection by integrating it in their NDCs and including estimates of respective climate finance needs. A recent example from Mozambique shows that this can be effective: in 2024 the **Green Climate Fund** (GCF) approved a \$28 million project - "Linking climate adaptation and social protection through decentralised planning". The project proposal demonstrated a clear alignment with the country's NDC that includes concrete social protection measures (see section 3).

### ⇒ NDCs provide a foundation for coordinated and multisectoral climate policies

Addressing climate change and achieving a just transition requires a multi-sectoral whole-of-government approach and wider social dialogue. Synergies between social, economic, and environmental policies must be leveraged to avoid pitfalls in the design and implementation of policies that might undermine or run counter to other climate and development objectives.

Incorporating social protection in the NDCs is an important step towards recognising its role for climate action. It also helps ensure that social protection is included in other related multisectoral policy processes, like national green growth policies and strategies, just transition plans, energy transition strategies, disaster management and risk financing strategies, and other sectoral plans and strategies tackling the impacts of climate change, for example on agriculture and food security. Ultimately, this can help social protection actors gain a seat at the table when it comes to policy planning and implementation and enables them to advocate for adequate budget allocation for social protection from both national and international sources.

### 3. What to keep in mind when including social protection in NDCs

#### ⇒ **Raising ambitions: identifying a comprehensive, concrete and strategic role for social protection in climate action**

In the development of NDCs 3.0, countries should:

- Consider social protection's potential contribution to climate change adaptation and mitigation, just transition and loss and damages targets and action.
- Identify concrete measures, actions and approaches that will be taken to enable social protection to deliver on this role, including by adapting existing programmes, developing new programmes and efforts to strengthen the social protection system, guided by internationally agreed principles<sup>1</sup>.

Some countries have made good inroads into identifying a role for social protection within existing NDCs. For example, Mozambique's NDC recognises that social protection is necessary for increasing the adaptive capacity of vulnerable people and identifies four specific measures:

- i. Develop[ing] and implement[ing] approaches for community-based adaptation through Local Adaptation Plans
- ii. Strengthening basic social protection measures in relation to climate change so that it contributes to the resilience of vulnerable populations
- iii. Strengthening the capacity for targeting and orientation of the Productive Social Action programme (i.e., the national public works programme) to increase the resilience of vulnerable groups
- iv. Strengthening links between the social protection system and the natural disaster response system, including linkage with early warning systems

Malawi's NDC also identifies a major role for social protection in adaptation and response to climate shocks through cash transfers, school feeding and public works programmes. It also

highlights potential mitigation benefits from public works programmes through promoting carbon sequestration and ecosystem services.

While these are promising approaches, there is potential for a much more ambitious approach: both in terms of the number of countries that include social protection in their NDCs and the extent to which they assign social protection a concrete, comprehensive and strategic role in climate action going forward.

#### ⇒ **Ensuring adequate coverage of all vulnerable and at-risk populations**

A country's NDC can play an important role in identifying populations affected by the impacts of climate change and climate policies and in setting out strategies for the extension of social protection coverage to populations still uncovered. The choice of social protection instrument should be guided by the type of risk (e.g., unemployment, loss of income/livelihood, health risks, general deprivation, etc.) and population group affected (e.g., older people, people with disabilities, children, workers, migrants and displaced people, Indigenous Peoples, etc). Existing examples include:

- The Commonwealth of Dominica's NDC which includes the introduction of social safety nets as part of the Sustainable Fishing Communities and Livelihoods Strategy, recognising the high risk of fishing communities;
- Pakistan's revised NDC (2021) which identified a key role for social protection instruments like cash transfers and social pensions for disaster-affected communities;
- Kenya's NDC which commits to developing social safety nets for youth and other vulnerable groups;
- Moldova's NDC which identifies a role for social safety nets in increasing the climate resilience of rural livelihoods for vulnerable groups.

<sup>1</sup> To learn more on internationally agreed social protection principles, visit:  
[Home - Social Protection and Human Rights \(socialprotection-humanrights.org\)](https://socialprotection-humanrights.org/)

### ⇒ Promoting coherence between social protection, climate and other development policies

It is crucial to clearly show how strengthening and investing in social protection contributes directly to the overall national climate strategy and promotes synergies with other national development and sectoral policies. For example, in Moldova, the NDC identifies a specific role for social protection in relation to food security and the agricultural sector, as well as disaster risk management. Jordan's NDC acknowledges that national development plans and poverty reduction policies should incorporate a focus on climate resilience and climate adaptation, with improvements to the existing social protection system identified as an important measure to this end.

### ⇒ Identifying financing gaps and investment needs

When incorporating social protection measures into NDCs, it is important to consider how these will be financed, and – where relevant – to identify shortfalls. For example, the NDC from the Commonwealth of Dominica sets out a target of ensuring that 100% of the vulnerable population are in receipt of social protection post-disaster by the year 2025, with a clear indication of the lead ministries responsible and the budget necessary for meeting the target. Malawi's NDC identifies both 'conditional' (requiring additional external financial support) and 'unconditional' (funded through domestic sources or existing co-financing) costs associated with strengthening the social protection system for adaptation and shock response. Such steps can help guide investments from climate finance institutions into social protection policies, to complement domestic resources, as the example of Mozambique above has shown.

## 4. What are the next steps to take?

In 2025, countries are required to submit new NDCs with their 2035 targets. The next few months are therefore a critical window of opportunity for national social protection actors to ensure that social protection is

integrated within their country's NDC 3.0 and its implementation plan. Social protection ministries and agencies can take the following steps to engage with the process:



### Understand the process

- ✓ Check your country's existing NDC in the UNFCCC's [NDC Registry](#).
- ✓ Review the current document and identify potential entry points for social protection – for example, does the existing NDC address the needs of specific vulnerable population groups?
- ✓ Get an understanding of where the process is at - if your country is a member of the NDC Partnership, you can find this information [here](#).
- ✓ Identify the timeline and next steps for your country – for example, are there consultations with sectoral ministries planned to inform the update of the NDC?



## Connect with key partners

- ✓ Reach out to the national ministry or appointed agency leading the update of the NDC to find out more - you can also consult with your national [UNFCCC focal point](#).
- ✓ Identify social partners, civil society organisations, research institutions or other actors with relevant expertise to support the process through consultations and social dialogue.
- ✓ Get in touch with the NDC Partnership and UN partners for additional support in incorporating social protection into the NDC.



## Identify entry points

- ✓ Assess how existing social protection policies, strategies and programmes address climate and identify any gaps or shortcomings.
- ✓ Consider the particular needs of poor and vulnerable population groups - for example, by using resources like the [NDC for every Child Data Platform](#).
- ✓ Review the priority sectors for the NDC revision - for example, energy, transport, agriculture, health, water, infrastructure and social development - and consider how social protection can contribute to climate action in these areas.
- ✓ Check the [NDC 3.0 Navigator](#) for further guidance on how to develop ambitious and implementable NDCs, including for a [Just and Equitable Transition](#).



## Help shape the NDC

- ✓ Bring together social protection colleagues with those leading on the NDC to discuss how national social protection systems can be strengthened to help deliver inclusive climate action by:
  - o Reducing vulnerability and building adaptive capacity and resilience for all.
  - o Supporting national plans to address loss and damage.
  - o Contributing to climate change mitigation goals, addressing adverse impacts of climate policies and supporting transitions to greener jobs and livelihoods.
- ✓ Connect the social protection priorities you have identified for the NDC to national budgeting processes and fiscal allocations - or if funding options are not yet available, include measures like a “national consultation on financing strategies” or “exploring climate funds”.
- ✓ Consider what targets and indicators are needed to measure the climate and sustainable development outcomes - this will generate evidence for even stronger integration of social protection in future NDCs.



Having social protection integrated into your country's NDC 3.0 will help to position social protection as a key element of climate strategies going forward. However, this is just the first step. Equally important will be to engage in the process of planning, financing and implementing the NDC over the next five years as well as feeding into the development of other key climate strategies like National Adaptation Plans.

Whatever steps you can take now will provide the foundation for strengthening and scaling-up the social protection system in support of inclusive climate action in the future. This is essential for addressing the long-term social, economic and environmental challenges that the climate crisis will bring.

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## Glossary

**The Paris Agreement** (2015) is a legally binding international treaty on climate change, adopted by 195 parties. Its main goal is to limit global warming to well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels and for countries to build resilience. Article 4, paragraph 2, requires each country to review and update their NDC every five years.

**Climate action** is a concept captured by SDG 13 which calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impact. It relates to the action needed to implement the Paris Agreement, and thus includes all mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage responses.

**Climate change mitigation** refers to policies and actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., promoting renewable energies, or public transport) and enhance or protect the sinks that reduce their presence in the atmosphere (e.g., forests, oceans, soils). It implies a fundamental transformation of most economic sectors.

**Climate change adaptation** refers to the adjustment to current and expected climate change impacts to reduce harm. This includes actions that help reduce vulnerability to weather extremes and natural disasters, rising temperatures and sea-levels, or desertification. Examples could be building flood defences, using drought-resistant crops or improving water management.

**Climate finance** refers to local, national or transnational financing—drawn from public, private and alternative sources of financing—that seeks to support climate action.

**The Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA)** seeks to identify goals, targets and indicators for enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change. At COP28, countries agreed on a range of targets for the GGA, including expanding adaptive social protection for all to reduce the impact of climate change on livelihoods and poverty.

**Global Stocktake** refers to the Paris Agreement mandated process of periodically assessing the collective progress towards achieving the purpose of the Agreement and its long-term goals. It enables countries and other stakeholders to take inventory, to see where they are collectively making progress toward meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement – and where they are not.

**Green Climate Fund (GCF)** is a fund for climate finance that was established within the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Its objective is to assist developing countries with climate change adaptation and mitigation activities.

**Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** is a body of the United Nations that was set up for assessing the scientific knowledge related to climate change. The IPCC regularly prepares comprehensive reports about climate change impacts, future risks and options for reducing its rate.

**Loss and damage** refers to the harm from (observed) impact and (projected) risks which can be economic or non-economic, and that occur despite, or in the absence of mitigation and adaptation efforts. This can include destruction of infrastructure and the loss of livelihoods and incomes, health, and cultural heritage.

**Loss and Damage Fund aims to assist developing countries** in responding to economic and non-economic loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme weather events and slow onset events. The Loss and Damage Fund was agreed at COP27 in 2022 and operationalised at COP28 in 2023.

**Just transition** involves maximising the social and economic opportunities of climate action, while minimising and carefully managing any negative impacts – including through effective social dialogue among all group impacted, and respect for fundamental labour principles and rights.

## Glossary

### **Payment for ecosystem services (PES) / environmentally conditioned cash transfers**

refer to cash incentives offered to farmers or landowners in exchange for managing their land to provide some sort of ecological service (e.g., the maintenance of forests or afforestation, watershed protection, or biodiversity protection). Many PES are primarily designed to achieve environmental objectives, but they can also be designed to achieve social protection objectives (i.e., preventing or reducing poverty and vulnerability) (Schwarzer, Panhuys, and Diekmann 2016).

**Resilience** is the capacity to withstand a hazardous event or trend, while maintaining the normal function of social and economic systems. This also means that people do not lose their capacity to adapt, learn and transform because of the shock they experienced (e.g., they can continue sending their children to school, take care of their health, nutrition and economic activities, etc).

**Social protection** refers to a set of policies and programmes, provided by governments, to protect people from income shortfalls, vulnerability, or poverty in the face of adverse situations such as job loss, illness or the impact of crises, transitions, and social exclusion throughout the life cycle. Social protection includes instruments such as cash and in-kind transfers, safety nets, social insurance, and public employment and training programmes.

### **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**

stands for an international treaty aimed at addressing and mitigating the effects of climate change through global cooperation and action. UNFCCC also refers to the Secretariat responsible for supporting the operation of the convention.

**Vulnerability** refers to the likelihood that someone is impacted negatively by extreme climate events or gradual changes. Socioeconomic vulnerabilities mean that some people have a lower capacity to cope and adapt. Vulnerability to climate risks tends to be higher for people with less means, those with disabilities, children, women, older people, migrants, and Indigenous Peoples.

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