

Universal Social Protection as a Pillar of Just Societies: Why It Matters and What Can Be Done

Universal social protection is not a luxury—it is a necessity for building just, equitable, and sustainable societies. Designed to guarantee dignity and security for all, regardless of socioeconomic status, universal social protection goes far beyond programs targeted at the poor. It serves as a foundational pillar for human development, economic resilience, and social cohesion, contributing directly to the realization of social justice.

Social protection addresses fundamental human concerns: survival, dignity, and the right to live free from fear and want. It shields individuals from life's risks—such as unemployment, illness, disability, and aging—by ensuring essential services and income security across the life course. In doing so, it not only prevents poverty but facilitates upward mobility, improves health and education outcomes, and reduces inequality. As such, it is indispensable to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Universalism must be the guiding principle. Governments need to move beyond fragmented, means-tested schemes toward comprehensive systems that guarantee basic income security and essential health care for all. This shift requires political will, robust legal frameworks, and sustained investment. Treating social protection as a right—rather than a charitable handout—fosters trust in public institutions and strengthens the social contract.

While targeted assistance can serve immediate needs, it often creates fragmented systems, stigmatizes beneficiaries, and risks reinforcing dependency. By contrast, universal systems—such as those envisioned in the ILO's Social Protection Floors—are rooted in the principles of equal dignity and citizenship, offering inclusive and rights-based coverage to all.

However, the path to universal social protection is fraught with challenges. In many low- and middle-income countries, implementation has lagged due to fragmented delivery systems, weak data infrastructure, and limited inter-agency coordination. In regions like Latin America, hybrid systems combining contributory and non-contributory elements have emerged, yet disparities in access and benefits persist, undermining the goal of universality.

Moreover, overly technocratic or narrowly focused cash transfer programs—often conditioned and externally driven—fail to address the structural causes of poverty and exclusion. Unless framed within a broader agenda of justice, solidarity, and inclusive development, such schemes risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than resolving them.

Digital innovation presents both opportunity and risk. While digital platforms can streamline access and enhance coverage, they require significant investment in interoperable systems, inclusive digital IDs, and unified registries. Without proper safeguards, poor infrastructure and weak data governance can exacerbate exclusion and erode trust. Privacy, transparency, and accessibility must be built into the digital transformation of social protection systems.

National experiences from countries across the globe—from Brazil to South Africa—offer valuable lessons. Strengthening institutional coordination and reducing fragmentation across ministries and agencies are key. National strategies should harmonize contributory and non-contributory schemes and be grounded in inclusive, participatory processes. Engaging civil society is vital for promoting accountability, advocating for rights, and ensuring that services reflect people’s real needs. In this regard, social workers and social development practitioners play a critical role—not only as frontline implementers, but also as key actors in the co-design, delivery, and monitoring of effective social protection systems. Their proximity to communities and their commitment to inclusion and empowerment make them indispensable partners in building systems that are responsive, equitable, and grounded in human rights.

Financing remains a critical barrier, particularly in low-income countries burdened by debt and constrained fiscal space. International cooperation—including concessional finance, debt relief, and technical assistance—is essential. Multilateral institutions must support countries in developing inclusive fiscal frameworks that prioritize social investment over austerity.

Standard-setting and knowledge exchange also play a crucial role. Common definitions, benchmarks, and best practices can help align national efforts with international norms and build shared understanding. Institutions such as the ILO, UNDP, and World Bank should continue to provide technical support and capacity building to countries pursuing universal systems.

In a time of growing inequality and mounting global crises—economic, social, environmental—the call for universal, comprehensive, and rights-based social protection has never been more urgent. It is a cornerstone of a humane society: promoting equity, safeguarding dignity, and building resilience against life’s uncertainties. The vision set forth at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen recognized social protection as a vital component of inclusive development, placing people at the center of policy-making. The Summit emphasized social integration, poverty eradication, and productive employment—all of which are directly reinforced by universal social protection. Achieving this vision requires coordinated, multi-stakeholder action and an unwavering commitment to leaving no one behind.