

Social protection profile: Afghanistan

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Since 2018, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) has partnered with the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and its respective Country Offices to develop a series of comparative papers on social protection (SP) in the region, covering social expenditure, legal frameworks, design of flagship national non-contributory SP programmes—including their child- and gender-sensitive features—the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and the SP responses deployed, and findings from quasi-experimental impact evaluations. All the studies listed, except the last one, were published in 2020. This One Pager highlights key findings for Afghanistan.

After four decades of conflict, Afghanistan has been engaged in a process of state-building. Its institutional landscape has, therefore, been changing rapidly. Many SP features and initiatives registered in the comparative papers have been already replaced. Thus, the takeaways of the comparative studies are highlighted here with findings from the ongoing IPC-IG and UNICEF Afghanistan partnership.

From a legal perspective, constitutional provisions regarding SP are enshrined only as policy principles (i.e. not as enforceable rights), and other rights to support the provision of SP are not directly established by it. The SP legal framework is primarily shaped by obligations stemming from the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and other ratified human rights instruments. Further, the country's Constitution explicitly includes support for certain vulnerable groups, including children, as the State's responsibility. An important landmark to promote the right to SP was the enactment of the Social Protection Law (2018). Given Afghanistan's ongoing process of state-building, this law focuses on the governance of the SP system, rather than creating SP entitlements or regulating programme operationalisation. Other guiding documents that are not statutory legislation play a major role in laying out guidelines for the SP programmes, including the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Frameworks (2017 and 2017–2021) and the Afghanistan Sustainable Development Goals (2015). While a rights-based approach to SP is yet to be fully implemented, an important step in the right direction was the enactment of the Child Rights Protection Law (2019). It systematises children's rights overall and to SP, and prevails over other legislation in case of conflicting provisions.

Regarding social expenditure, Afghanistan has a structural gap between government revenue and expenditure of over 400 per cent and high public expenditure (nearly 60 per cent of its gross domestic product—GDP). The country is also highly dependent on aid, with more than 75 per cent of its expenditure financed by grants. Partly because of this, around a third of civilian expenditure is delivered off-budget (World Bank 2019). Based on Afghanistan's tentative budget for the fiscal year 2020–2021, 1.28 per cent of GDP was dedicated to SP, 0.75 per cent to health, and 3 per cent to education. Note that the 0.75 per cent planned for housing and community amenities may include SP activities (Ministry of Finance 2019).

In terms of the general characteristics of flagship national non-contributory SP programmes, cash-for-work, unconditional cash transfer and sustainable livelihoods interventions are the main programmes. Most initiatives are not solely focused on SP and are often entangled with institutional capacity-building, cutting across sectors such as infrastructure development and food security. Important programmes that operate in this format include

the Citizens' Charter, which combines infrastructure development, capacity-building, public works and the distribution of seeds, and the Women's Economic Empowerment Rural Development Programme (WEE-RDP), which combines capacity-building with training and the distribution of rural assets.

Most initiatives encompassing SP components, including the Citizens' Charter and the WEE-RDP, tend to target communities rather than households. The Martyrs and Disabled Pension Programme (MDPP) is the only flagship non-contributory programme targeting individuals and households, offering cash as a form of non-contributory, inheritable disability and injury pension. Target groups include poor, working-age and elderly people and those with disabilities, using primarily geographical and categorical targeting. Coverage is hard to estimate, given the lack of fully functional administrative registries and integrated information systems for SP. The IPC-IG estimates that the non-contributory components of the three flagship programmes mentioned above cover around 1 per cent of the population. The coverage of the MDPP was expanded during the pandemic by including descendants of public-sector health professionals.

There is a lack of flagship non-contributory programmes specifically targeting children and pregnant and lactating women, although each programme shows some child- and gender-sensitive features. The Citizens' Charter has a food bank component that supports child nutrition, although children are not specifically targeted. The MDPP benefits children and women who inherit pensions. The most gender-sensitive initiative is the WEE-RDP, which primarily supports poor rural women.

Therefore, the following is recommended:

- Expand coverage of non-contributory SP with new initiatives for vulnerable groups, prioritising children, and pregnant and lactating women.
- Streamline SP by disentangling it from other development programmes, ideally rolling out a traditional social assistance programme such as a cash transfer.
- Amend or complement the Social Protection Law to include operational features of SP.
- Increase the amount of SP funding in the state budget.
- Improve data collection through administrative registries and integrated information systems.

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