Case study:

Integration of the Social Protection sector in Cambodia's NDC 3.0

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1. Introduction

Cambodia's third Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC 3.0) marks a global first: the elevation of social protection to a full, independent sector status within a national climate pledge. This case study offers practical insights into how social protection was integrated into Cambodia's NDC 3.0 during 2024–2025, highlighting approaches that could be adapted in other national contexts. It distills lessons for the wider expert community in the social protection and climate sectors, including government ministries and development partners supporting the NDC development process globally.

Following the conclusion of the first Global Stock take in 2023 and a decision at COP28 by parties to increase ambition, action and support to effectively address climate change, it became clear that the update process from NDC 2.0 to NDC 3.0 in Cambodia required multi-sectoral, multi-ministerial efforts, with strong technical assistance from development partners. In October 2024, following initial consultations and webinars on the role of social protection in climate adaptation and mitigation, and strong advocacy by the development partners working on social protection, the Ministry of Environment endorsed Social Protection, Social Services, and Child Protection as a new sector for inclusion in NDC 3.0.

The General Secretariat for the National Social Protection Council (GS-NSPC) was designated as the lead government agency to coordinate the formulation of social protection measures in NDC 3.0, supported by GIZ as the lead technical assistance partner for developing the content, with additional contributions from relevant UN agencies. Regular technical sessions were convened to raise awareness and build understanding of the social protection–climate nexus among government staff, in addition to facilitating coordination meetings among government and development partners to advance NDC 3.0 in line with UNFCCC procedural requirements.

End of July 2025, Cambodia submitted its NDC 3.0 with social protection as a distinct sector, including four social protection measures with targets and indicators, cost estimates and timeframes. Several enabling factors contributed to achieving this milestone: an open and collaborative Ministry of Environment (the key ministry responsible for leading the NDC 3.0 development), technical guidance and overall coordination from UNDP in support of the MOE throughout the overall NDC process, a very competent social protection lead entity (General Secretariat of the National Social Protection Council / GS-NSPC), strong technical and hands-on support from GIZ and other development partners, and time-bound and fixed template guided processes, driven by the UNFCCC's submission deadlines ahead of COP30.

Social Protection measures in Cambodia's NDC 3.0

01

Building climate resilience among poor, vulnerable and at risk population by strenthening routine social protection programmes and service delivery

02

Reducing climate vulnerability among poor, vulnerable, and at-risk population by implementing shock responsive social protection (SRSP) and improving interoperability of social protection systems

03

Enabling a just and inclusive transition by expanding social protection to those whose livelihoods are / will be affected by climate change

04

Establishing the foundations for climate-sensitive housing related support for poor, vulnerable and at-risk population through the social protection system

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NDC workshop in Cambodia © GS-NSPC

The following sections explore these success factors in more detail and highlight Cambodia's journey, from its early beginnings, even before the NDC update formally began in July 2024, through to the finalization of the NDC submission in July 2025.

2. What were some of the pre-existing enabling conditions?

a. **Favourable climate related policies and legislations:** Cambodia's climate change efforts have been strengthened by recently updated policies and frameworks, reflecting strong political commitment and visible appetite for collaboration across sectors, including social protection. The Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan (CCCSP) for 2024-2033 explicitly mentions providing social protection system as one of the activities for strengthening resilience of vulnerable groups and mainstreaming Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion in climate actions and resilience. Cambodia's National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction 2024-2028 also seeks to strengthen preparedness and service capacity of social protection, by developing comprehensive social protection policies to safeguard vulnerable groups from falling into or deeper into poverty, especially from health emergencies caused by disasters and outbreaks.

b. **Recently updated and aligned social protection policies:** Similarly, Cambodia's social protection policies have increasingly been recognizing climate risks as relevant considerations in programme design and operations. The National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) 2024-2035 and the Guidelines on the SRSP Framework (2025) have been drafted and discussed in parallel over the last years, at times building on and complementing one another. Thus, these documents mirror key elements and emphasize the importance of expanding coverage, strengthening systems, and improving the timeliness of support to better protect vulnerable groups from climate risks, in addition to life cycle risks. Having these policies and frameworks in place, many of which have been developed after close consultations across ministries, had prepared the ground for a more comprehensive NDC that can prominently acknowledge the role of social protection in addressing climate change.

c. **Strong social protection agency setup:** The National Social Protection Council (NSPC) was established in March 2017 through a Royal Decree, following the approval of Cambodia's National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) 2016–2025. Next, to provide technical and administrative support to the Council, the General Secretariat of the NSPC (GS-NSPC) was established under the same framework, which has become a competent body for coordinating and promoting the harmonization of social protection system in Cambodia.

d. **Advanced targeting and registration mechanisms:** Cambodia's Ministry of Planning has been at the forefront of establishing and expanding the IDPoor programme, the national system to identify poor households. In 2017, the Ministry of Planning piloted a new digital, on-demand registration mechanism in selected communes, allowing households to request a poverty assessment whenever their circumstances changed, rather than waiting for the regular identification cycle. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, this on-demand IDPoor system was rapidly rolled-out nationally, and enabled real-time updates to household data which was then used for the **Emergency Cash Transfer Programme (ECTP)** implemented to mitigate the negative socio-economic impacts on households (Freeland, 2023). A strong, established on-demand identification system thus allowed for an easier targeting process and swifter payments in times of crisis, while also strengthening the overall resilience of the social protection system.

e. **Experience with shock response:** In addition to the ECTP for the Poor and Vulnerable Households (CT-COVID) during Covid-19, the government launched the Cash Transfer Programme for At-Risk Households affected by Severe Flood and Inflationary Pressure (CT-Flood & Inflation). This programme demonstrated that the social protection system can expand coverage to new target groups called the "at-risk households", using information available in the IDPoor database, collected through the Ministry of Planning's campaign to register households vulnerable to poverty in the event of a shock. The practical experience with shock response through social protection and the intent of collaborating closely with disaster risk management actors and systems, has been beneficial in developing the NDC 3.0 measures, particularly measure 2 on further implementing shock responsive social protection in Cambodia.

f. **Emerging focus on adaptive social protection:** While Covid-19 and the flood response in Cambodia has accelerated the shock responsiveness of social protection systems, there has been a gradual shift in understanding its broader role towards building climate resilience through adaptive social protection approaches. One such example is the current focus on expanding the Graduation Based Social Protection (GBSP) programme in Cambodia. Initially piloted by the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) together with UNDP between 2019-2024, the project combined transfers of productive assets (like livestock, agricultural tools, seeds, or small equipment) with life skills, literacy programmes and technical / vocational training, in addition to providing regular consumption support (monetary cash or food), to ensure improved resilience of those supported. Building on the success of this pilot programme, the GS-NSPC is now aiming to increase GBSP's relevance to climate change by prioritizing climate-adaptive livelihood strategies, including climate-smart agriculture and climate-resilient income sources, along with a stronger emphasis on livelihood diversification as a pathway to building climate resilience.

3. What worked in favour of integrating social protection into NDC 3.0?

a. **Openness of the Ministry of Environment:** The Ministry of Environment (MOE), the designated agency leading the NDC development process in Cambodia, adopted an inclusive, receptive approach that proved instrumental in enabling social protection's inclusion in Cambodia's NDC 3.0. The MOE demonstrated remarkable institutional flexibility by actively welcoming sectors and ministries that expressed interest in contributing to climate action. This openness was particularly significant given that the GS-NSPC is not yet reflected in the official membership list of the Climate Change Technical Working Group (CCTWG), the primary coordinating body for climate policy in Cambodia. Although the Ministry of Environment has already approved GS-NSPC's request for membership, the formal update of the CCTWG member list is still pending. Despite this, the Ministry welcomed GS-NSPC's active participation in the NDC process throughout. The MOE's openness shows its recognition of social protection's rising significance in Cambodia's development landscape, particularly after it gained momentum during the COVID-19 years and became a strong feature of the national system, positioning it as a viable entry point for climate action.

b. **Political willingness and strategic position of GS-NSPC:** Similar to MOE, GS-NSPC displayed openness to understand and expand the role and relevance of social protection in contributing to climate change adaptation and mitigation. Through technical awareness raising sessions on the role of social protection in addressing climate change and opportunities of unlocking climate finance, GS-NSPC gained clarity on the value of social protection being included in the NDC 3.0 and potentially pave the way for climate finance investments. Moreover, GS-NSPC's position within the Ministry of Economy and Finance (instead of sitting within a social protection ministry) lent them significant institutional authority and legitimacy. This positioning was strategically advantageous for NDC integration because it connected social protection directly to national fiscal planning and resource allocation mechanisms. The GS NSPC staff consistently demonstrated outstanding operational capacity throughout the NDC 3.0 process, reinforcing their technical credibility and positioning them as key drivers in implementing the sector-specific measures set out in the final document. They demonstrated openness to navigate complex technical requirements of a new process and initiated collaborative approaches while leading the development of measures.

c. **Alignment with national priorities under NSPPF II:** The integration of social protection into NDC 3.0 built directly upon the National Social Protection Policy Framework 2024–2035 (NSPPF II). The NSPPF II established a comprehensive vision for Cambodia's social protection system that inherently supports climate resilience objectives. Priorities from the NSPPF II as well as the SRSP Guidelines have now been mirrored while developing the social protection measures in NDC 3.0. This significantly eased the political acceptability of the measures for GS NSPC, given that many of the measures were already envisaged within existing plans and strategic priorities. For example, NSPPF's emphasis on reaching populations that are currently not covered and addressing emerging risks aligned well with climate vulnerability assessments and adaptation planning and have been identified as measures within NDC 3.0.

d. **Focused, continued, on-demand technical support:** GIZ, with technical consultants on stand-by, provided rapid on-demand and specialized technical expertise on the climate-social protection nexus as well as UNFCCC processes / templates, which was not readily available online / elsewhere. This consistent availability enabled GS NSPC to meet tight deadlines and maintain momentum across inter-agency consultations. In addition, regular, targeted workshops and knowledge sharing events were arranged, and well-designed co-production workshops were conducted to jointly conceptualize and eventually draft the measures. Other activities, like a study tour on Social Protection and Climate Change to Australia that GIZ co-organised with DFAT in early 2025 clarified and strengthened the relevance of social protection for climate risk management for GS-NSPC and other ministries. The timely study tour enabled GS-NSPC to own the process further and brought them closer with many of the other Ministries who are involved in the NDC drafting and would be instrumental in implementing the planned social protection measures.

Additional resources created by GIZ Cambodia team during the NDC update process:

- ✓ Comprehensive mapping of policies, frameworks and stakeholders in social protection, climate and disaster risk management sectors
- ✓ Presentations on climate finance and opportunities of funding social protection through climate finance in Cambodia
- ✓ Joint training with GS-NSPC for MOE departments on country cases where social protection instruments are contributing to climate adaptation and mitigation

Cambodia's NDC 3.0 - Social protection integration: The when and what?

Phase 1
Preparation
(Mid 2024 - Nov 2024)

Advocacy and awareness raising on social protection - climate nexus through training, consultations and webinars

Phase 2
Integration
(Dec 2024 - Mar 2025)

Drafting social protection measures & indicators, alignment with sectorial priorities, coordination with development partners

Phase 3
Endorsement
(Apr 2025 - July 2025)

Costing social protection measures, adding cross-cutting components on gender, high-level approvals and finalisation

4. What learnings does the Cambodia experience provide for other countries?

While Cambodia's experience with integrating social protection measures into NDC 3.0 was shaped by several favourable factors, it also offers important lessons, insights, and areas for improvement that other countries can draw from. At the global level, social protection actors in recent years have increasingly recognized and promoted the role of social protection in addressing climate change. Globally, climate actors are gradually engaging and beginning to see social protection as a relevant instrument for climate action. However, at the national level, the challenge is not only about convincing climate actors or Ministries of Environment. Equally important is the need to engage social protection actors themselves and explore how their programmes can contribute to climate action. This requires making the case for why social protection systems should address climate risks, even though climate change may seem like a separate sectoral concern. Useful literature like the five potential functions of social protection for climate change, as identified by Costella and McCord (2023) has been valuable for advocacy and awareness-raising in Cambodia, as it highlighted the nexus between social protection and climate change.

Another challenge is that at times, government actors may presume that social protection must rely on entirely new schemes to contribute to climate action. In reality, existing programmes can often be adapted, strengthened, and expanded to address climate risks more effectively. Clarifying this early on helps ease concerns about fiscal space and political feasibility—challenges that typically accompany the creation of new schemes. In addition, NDC measures can be indicated as either 'unconditional,' funded through domestic resources or 'conditional,' dependent on external financial support. This distinction helps address concerns about fiscal capacity during the drafting stage. It is therefore essential to communicate these options clearly at the outset of the NDC process.

The inclusion of social protection as a new sector in Cambodia's NDC 3.0, being unprecedented so far both nationally and globally, created significant uncertainty on what the measures, indicators and costing could look like. Moreover, while the UNFCCC provides templates, timelines, and overarching guidance for the NDC update process, the guidelines remain intentionally generic and non-prescriptive to encourage national ownership and leadership in developing robust, context-specific NDCs. The generic guidance and openness in scope, however, could also result in less coherent/ambitious NDCs, especially for countries that are new to the social protection-climate nexus discourse. In this context, knowledge exchange among countries with similar experience/priorities through workshops/online sessions and knowledge products such as this case study report on learnings from Cambodia's experience could be a valuable reference material for other those undertaking similar processes.

5. What's next for the social protection sector in Cambodia's NDC 3.0?

Cambodia's NDC 3.0 has been submitted in advance of COP30 and can be found here. Representatives from the GS-NSPC have been engaging in several events and dialogues to share their experience and are anticipated to join the COP30 national delegation to showcase the integration of social protection within the NDC process. In July 2025, Cambodia has launched a comprehensive NDC tracking system, which includes a centralized management platform that enables ministries to monitor annual progress and ensure alignment with international reporting requirements.

As next steps, and under the leadership of GS-NSPC with support from line ministries, GIZ and other development partners, the focus will be on identifying financing gaps and the relevant sources to address them. Financing gaps requiring international and climate finance will be prioritised to inform where resources may need to be mobilised from development partners and international climate finance actors.

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