

# A systems perspective on Universal Social Protection

Towards life-long equitable access to comprehensive social protection for all

A publication in the German Health Practice Collection

## Why Universal Social Protection (USP) matters

In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promised comprehensive social protection for each human being: ‘a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.’ Seventy years later, this pledge is far from fulfilled: An estimated 71% of the world’s population – some 5.2 billion people – lack adequate social protection, while 55% have no coverage at all (ILO, 2017). Coverage gaps are highest in sub-Saharan Africa, in Asia and in the Middle East and North Africa (ILO 2016). By a tragic paradox, it is those with the greatest need who have the least access to social protection.

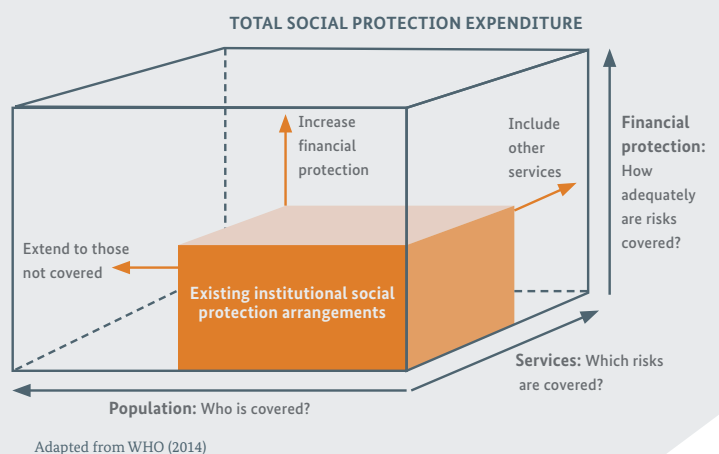
With its pledge to ‘leave no one behind’, the world’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development tackles this challenge through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 1.3: ‘Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all [...] and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.’ Jointly initiated by the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILO), the [Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection \(USP2030\)](#) was launched in September 2016 together with other development agencies and NGOs, the African Union, the European Union and individual countries including Germany.

Universal Social Protection (USP) aims to cover all people against all risks, and thus contribute to individual, social and economic development. German development cooperation promotes social protection as an overarching, universal system in partner countries, supporting the integration of different interventions such as social assistance, social insurance and labour market instruments in view of ensuring comprehensive, life-long protection for the entire population.



Photo: The Equity Card  
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## THE USP CUBE: PROGRESSIVE REALISATION OF THE 3 DIMENSIONS (POLICY CHOICES) OF UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION



## Core characteristics of USP

Despite the great diversity of countries and their social protection systems, the pathways on which they progressively move towards USP appear to share certain fundamental characteristics:

- **The goal:** *Equitable access to comprehensive risk coverage through a coherent system.* Universal coverage signifies that the **entire** population has **equitable** access to schemes that protect them from poverty and the potential negative consequences of risks to which they are exposed, including life-cycle risks.
- **The approach:** *Nationally led and tailored to the population’s specific needs.* National governments should lead the design of social protection systems, so that these can be adapted to the existing institutional landscape, as well as to the context-specific needs of the population.
- **The design:** *Capacity for adjustment and expansion.* The realisation of USP needs to recognise and accommodate progressive expansion – by increasing the number of people in one or more programmes, as well as the number of risks covered and financial coverage – towards a comprehensive national USP system.

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To download the full document go to [http://health.bmz.de/ghpc/evidence\\_briefs/index.html](http://health.bmz.de/ghpc/evidence_briefs/index.html)



## Elements of a systems approach to USP

USP implies a focus on coordinating and harmonising a range of programmes within and across sectors to build a coherent, overarching system that provides comprehensive coverage to all. This includes reducing fragmentation and inefficiencies of existing programmes, as well as identifying coverage gaps based on context-specific needs. Essential elements of developing such a system include:

**National vision and strong institutional leadership**, to rally diverse stakeholders with potentially conflicting agendas including from the private and informal sectors around the common goal of USP. Multisectoral coordination and accountability mechanisms are key when it comes to fostering civil society buy-in, ensuring that beneficiaries' changing needs are at the heart of USP implementation.

**Translating the vision into a practical roadmap and legal framework for implementation.** The goal of USP determines which risks need to be covered and identifies gaps in the existing provision of social protection, in order to adapt and interlink existing programmes into an overarching, integrated social protection system, moving from a programme perspective to a systems perspective.

**Bold decisions on financing are indispensable for funding the ambitious goal of USP.** These can include combatting tax avoidance and evasion, developing hitherto untapped revenue streams, and finding the right combination of contributory, state-financed and externally funded schemes.

**Targeting, social registries, integrated service provision, and global goods** such as openIMIS are further important aspects for implementing a national USP roadmap.

USP has 'moved the goalposts' in the domain of social protection from a focus on implementing individual programmes to a broader perspective of consolidating a diversity of programmes in one coherent, overarching social protection system that covers all people for all risks. As with any goal, it is necessary, step by step, to push reality progressively closer to this objective.

Development cooperation should support and facilitate national governments' efforts to conceive, fund and implement complete systems. More learning, discussion and exchange will be needed to gradually find the best route through currently uncharted territory. To move this endeavour forward, this paper proposes a number of questions for further discussion:

### KEY POINTS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

- Is the USP2030 goal (SDG 1.3) realistic?
- How to provide USP in Lower- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) including to people in the informal sector?
- What is the role of targeting in USP?
- What problems can hamper the development of USP?
- Has the focus on the official shared goal of USP2030 improved coordination among development partners?

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