



WFP Social Protection Brief

# The Evolution of Social Protection

January 2024

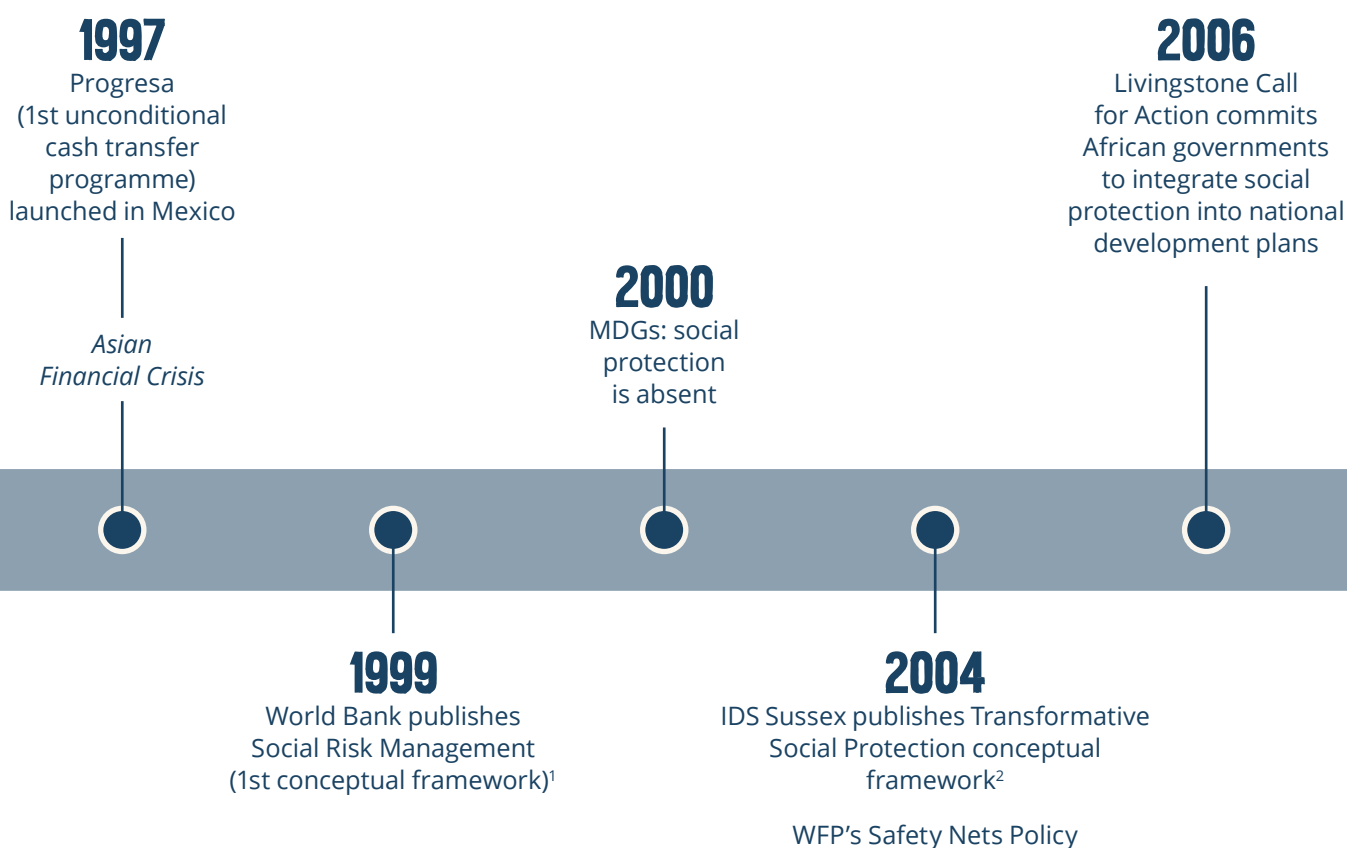


# Introduction

Social protection is broadly defined as a set of collective mechanisms for protecting all members of a society from unmanageable risks and shocks and to help meet essential needs, while realising people's right to a decent life. As a component of international development policy, social protection has its origins in humanitarian responses to famines during the 20th century, and in 'social safety nets', set up in the 1980s to protect vulnerable people in the Global South against risks and shocks such as HIV and AIDS, and global financial crises.

This brief focuses on the emergence of social protection, as a distinctive set of policies and programmes that first appeared in the 1990s, and was successfully promoted throughout the Global South since the early 2000s by the international development community.

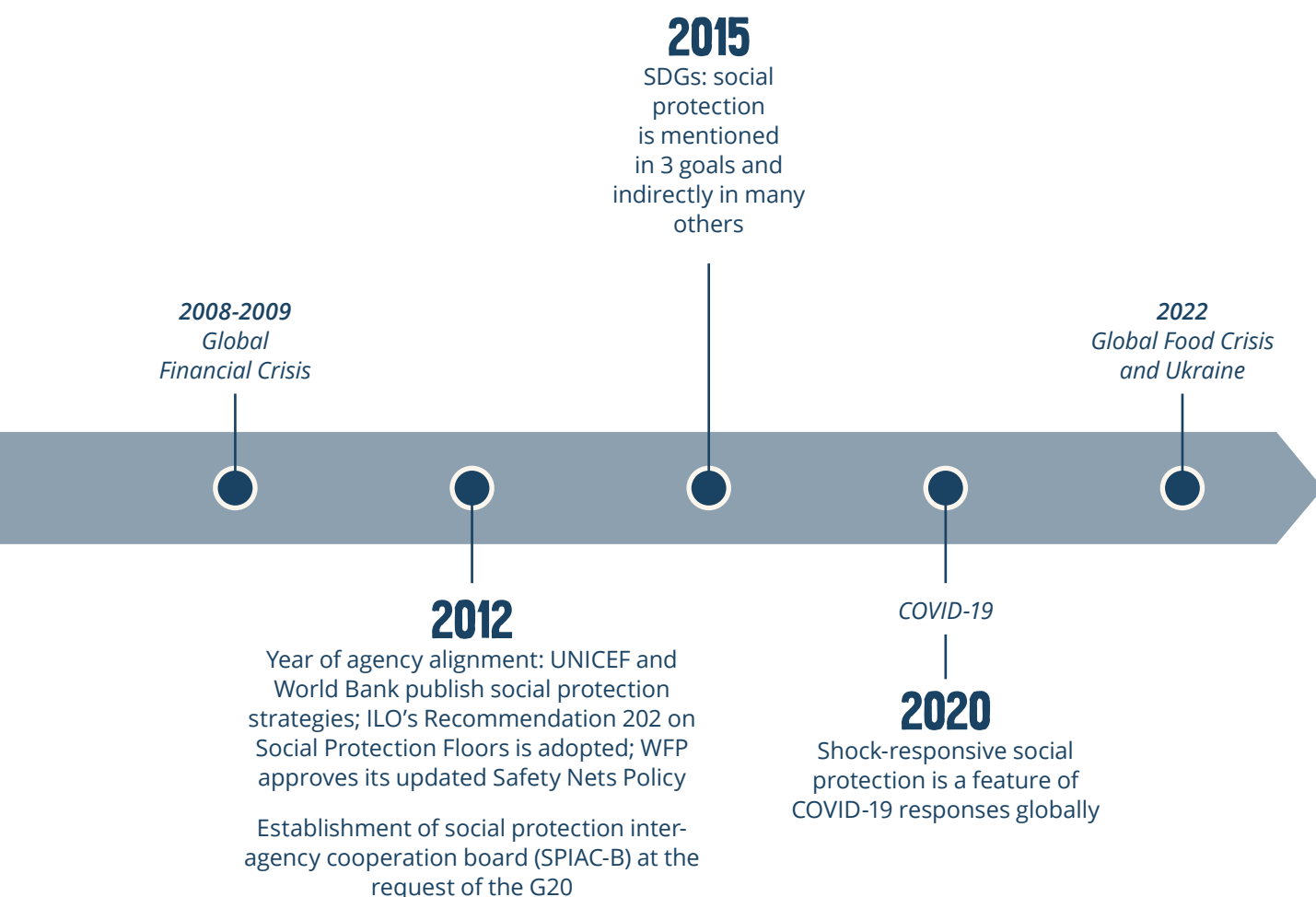
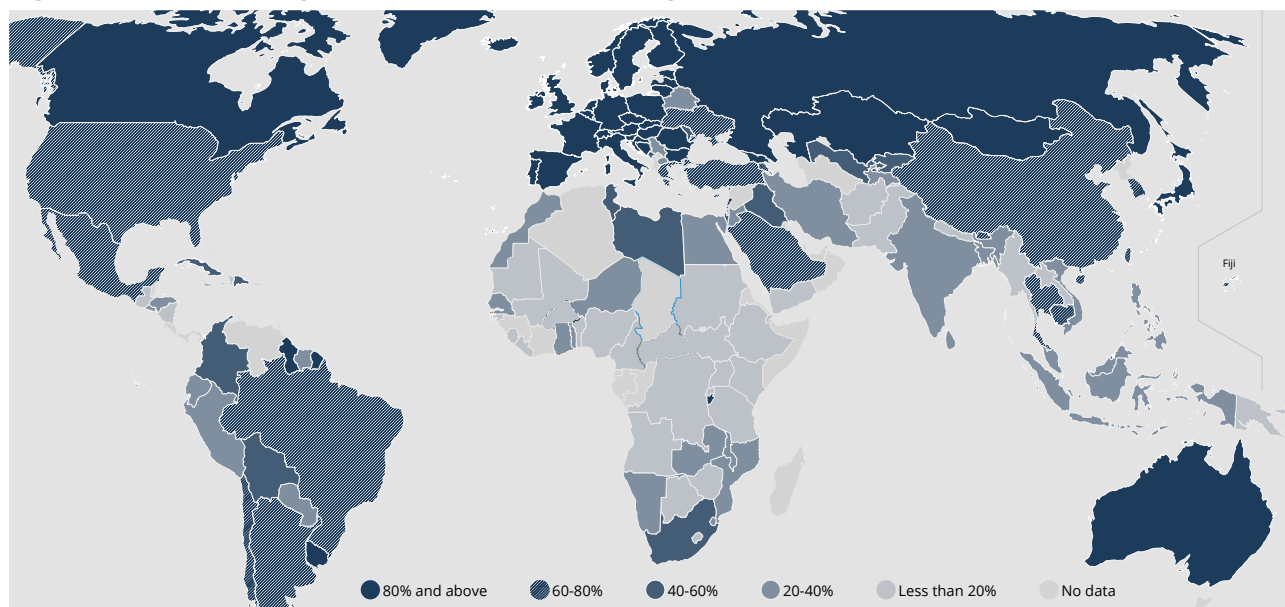
Most governments now have social protection systems in place, and are delivering social cash transfers and other forms of social assistance or social insurance to their poor and vulnerable citizens and residents. However, it has taken 25 years to reach this point. This paper offers a brief history of social protection in this period.



1 Holzmann, R. and Jorgensen, S. (1999). Social protection as social risk management : conceptual underpinnings for the social protection sector strategy paper. Social Protection Discussion Papers and Notes 20119, The World Bank.

2 Devereux, S. and Sabates-Wheeler, R. (2004). Transformative social protection. Working paper series, 232. Brighton: IDS.

Figure 1. World social protection effective coverage in 2022<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> ILO, World Social Protection Database, based on SSI; ISSA/SSA, Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT, ECLAC, IMF, WHO, WB, UNDP, UNICEF, completed with national data sources.

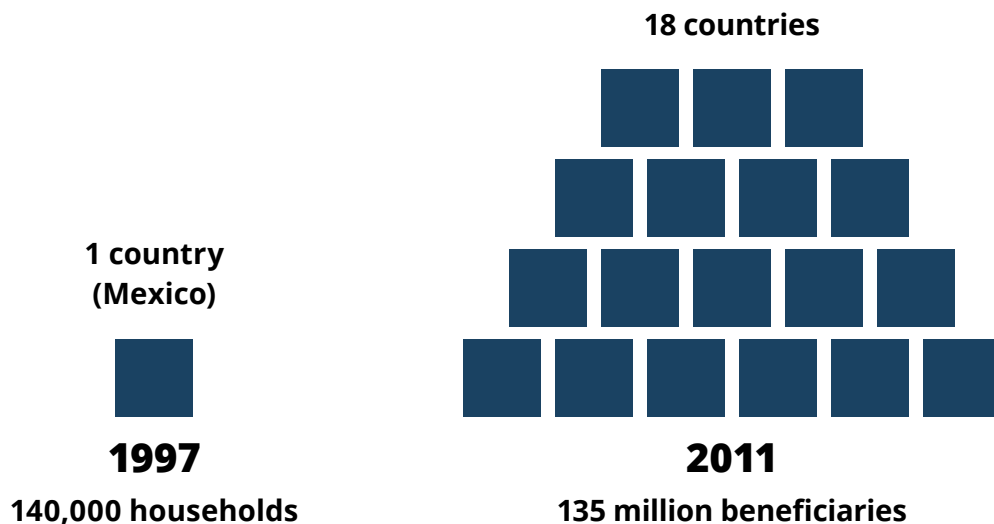
# PHASE 1: INCEPTION

The first wave of ‘modern’ social protection was **conditional cash transfer** programmes (CCTs) that emerged in Latin America in the late 1990s, of which *Progresar/Oportunidades* in Mexico and *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil are the best known. By 2011, 18 countries in Latin America had a CCT, reaching 19% of the region’s population<sup>4</sup>.

While CCTs were mostly managed and funded by national governments, social protection in Africa was dominated in early 2000s by donor-funded projects, designed to demonstrate that **unconditional cash transfers** are effective at alleviating poverty and managing risk. One of the first was the Kalomo Pilot Social Cash Transfer Scheme, launched in Zambia in 2003 with German government support.

Learnings from these projects were captured and disseminated by impact evaluations and policy advocacy. A key event was the Inter-governmental Conference on Social Protection held in Livingstone, Zambia in 2006<sup>5</sup>. Within a few years, most countries in East and Southern Africa had their own cash transfer schemes, often with technical and financial support from international development partners.

**Figure 1. Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes in Latin America between 1997 and 2011<sup>6</sup>.**



4 Arriagada, I. (2011). Family and cash transfer programs in Latin America. Expert Meeting on Assessing Family Policies. New York: UNDESA.

5 Schubert, B. and Beales, S. (2006). Social cash transfers for Africa: A transformative agenda for the 21st century. Intergovernmental regional conference report: Livingstone, Zambia, 20-23 March 2006. London: HelpAge International.

6 Arriagada, I. (2011). Family and cash transfer programs in Latin America. Expert Meeting on Assessing Family Policies. New York: UNDESA.

## PHASE 2: EXPANSION

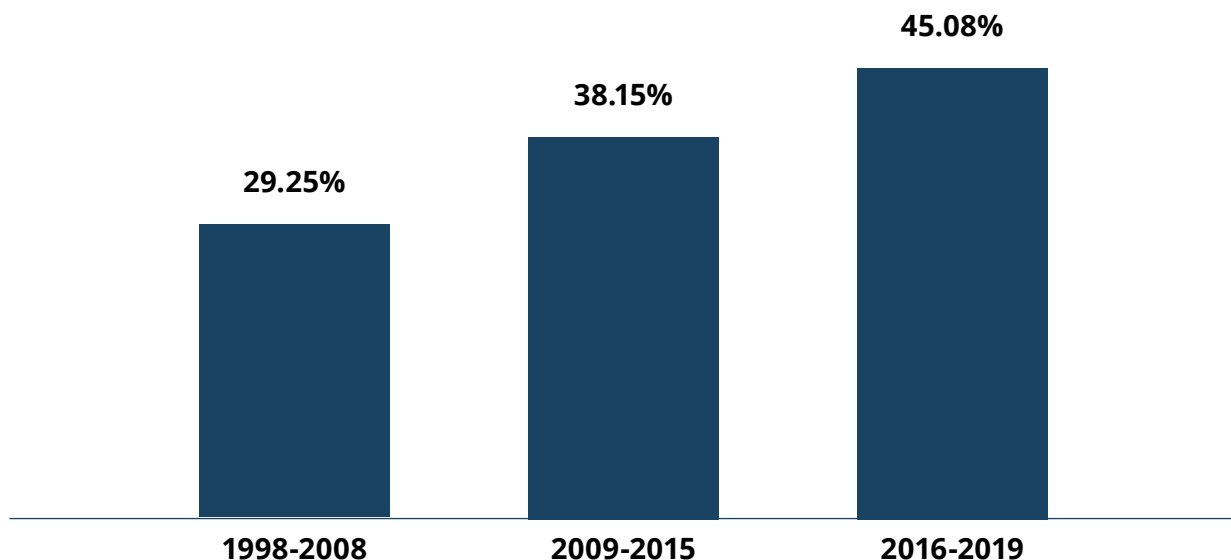
During the early 2000s, the number of social protection programmes and their beneficiaries increased dramatically. The Child Support Grant in South Africa (launched in 1998) and the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia (launched in 2005) rapidly reached millions of beneficiaries and became Africa's largest social assistance programmes.

In Asia, countries such as China, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Philippines set up large cash transfers, social insurance, public employment and 'graduation model' programmes. The graduation model, which originated in Bangladesh, aims to meet essential needs and reduce poverty by building human capital and livelihoods in an accelerated manner. Another indicator of expansion is the rising number of countries that had a National

Social Protection Policy (NSPP). No African country had a NSPP in 2000, but this increased to 35 countries by 2020, almost 2/3 of the continent.

In 2012, several influential development agencies solidified their commitment to social protection with position statements, including: the ILO (Recommendation on National Social Protection Floors); UNICEF (Social Protection Strategic Framework); the World Bank (Social Protection and Labor Strategy); and the World Food Programme (updated Safety Nets Policy).

**Figure 2. Global social assistance coverage over time (% of population)<sup>7</sup>**



<sup>7</sup> Data from The World Bank Atlas of Social Protection Indicators of Resilience and Equity (ASPIRE).

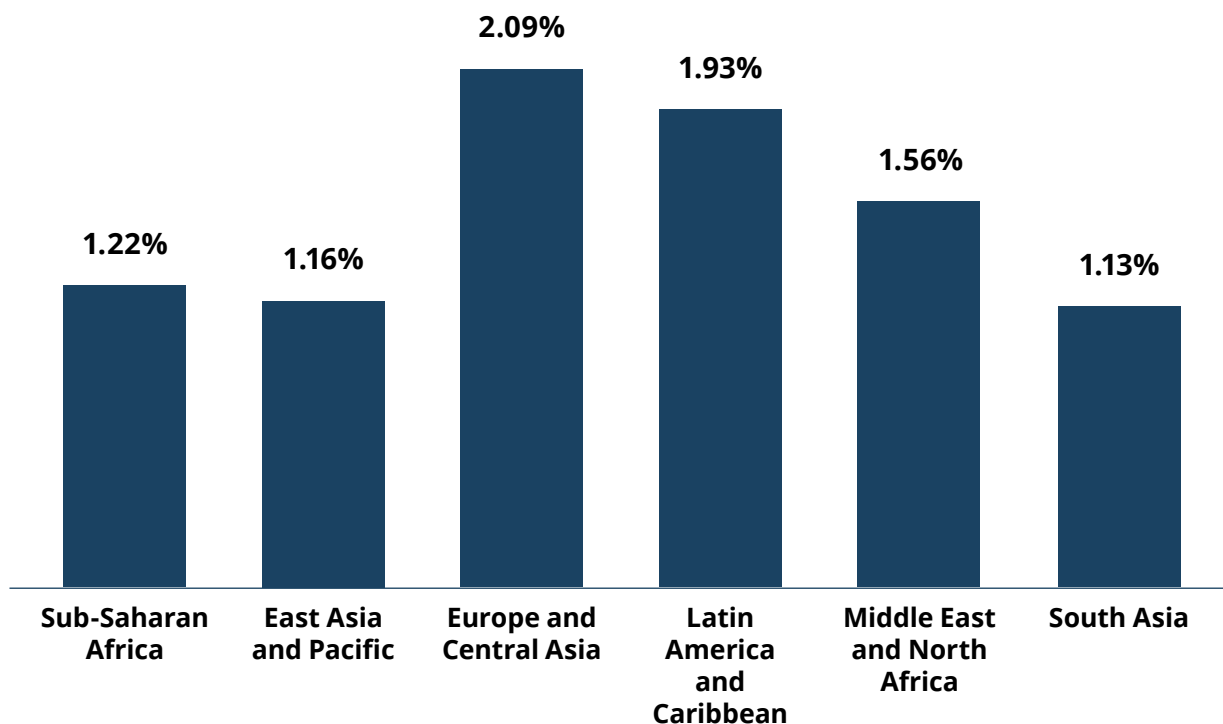
## PHASE 3: CONSOLIDATION

In countries where social protection was introduced as donor-funded pilot projects, a significant development occurred when these projects were taken over by the government and scaled up to national programmes. Not only did this enhance national ownership; it was usually accompanied by stronger linkages with social sectors (education, health) and productive sectors (agriculture, employment).

A consolidated approach to school feeding, for example, is 'home-grown school feeding', which replaces imported food aid with local produce procured from farmers near schools, and recruits local women and men as food handlers, thereby generating employment and income multipliers as well as enhancing the food security and education of schoolchildren.

Another form of consolidation is 'graduation model' or 'economic inclusion' programmes, that provide a package of social assistance and livelihood support, to graduate participants out of (extreme) poverty. These more holistic or integrated approaches are also called 'social protection plus'. There is growing recognition that programmes that work across sectors – such as child-sensitive, food and nutrition sensitive, HIV-sensitive, or shock-responsive social protection – are more effective.

**Figure 3. Average social assistance spending as % of GDP, by region, 2010–2021<sup>8</sup>**



<sup>8</sup> Data from The World Bank Atlas of Social Protection Indicators of Resilience and Equity (ASPIRE).

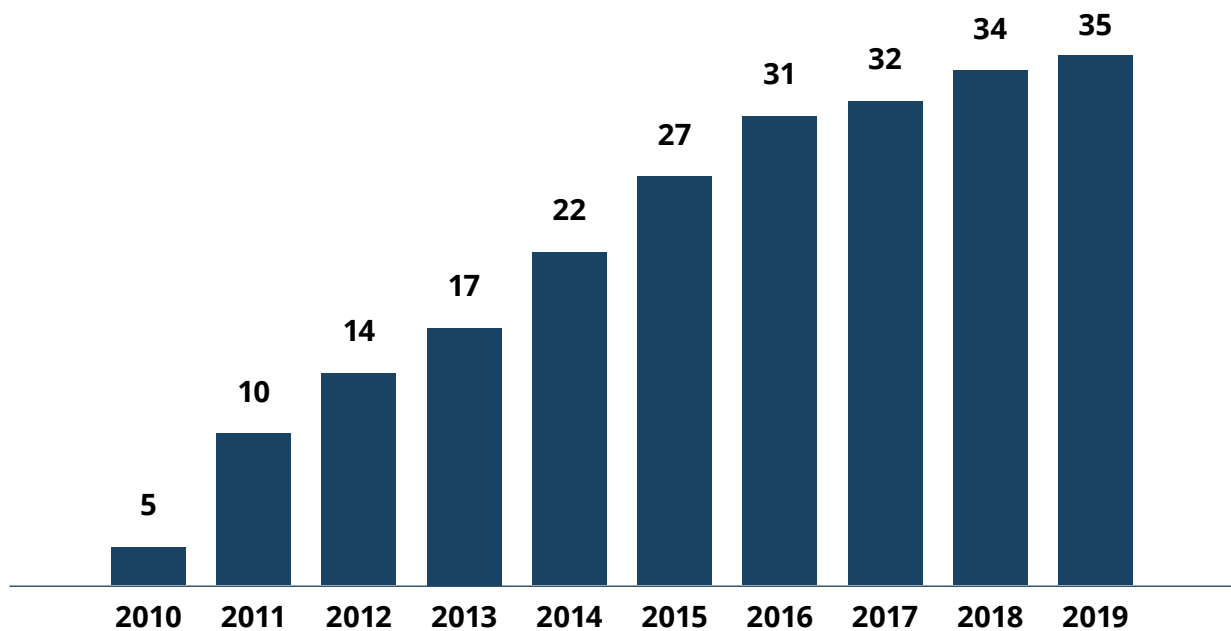
## PHASE 4: INSTITUTIONALISATION

The **institutionalisation** of social protection starts when a government sets up ministries, departments, or agencies to administer social protection. Some countries passed framework legislation that gave citizens rights to social protection – universal or based on eligibility criteria. Beneficiary management tools were established, including single registries and MIS (management information systems) for targeting, registration, payments, and M&E (monitoring and evaluation).

Well-established social protection systems also have predictable financing arrangements, national policies or strategies with action plans or implementation plans, and a cadre of staff such as social workers, whose roles include delivering social protection.

Development agencies provided technical and financial assistance to build the institutions for social protection systems in many countries. These also included mechanisms for good governance, such as complaint response mechanisms for bottom-up accountability.

**Figure 4. African countries with a National Social Protection Policy, 2010–2019<sup>9</sup>**



<sup>9</sup> Devereux, S. (2020). Policy pollination: A brief history of social protection's brief history in Africa. IDS Working Paper, 543. Brighton: Centre for Social Protection, Institute of Development Studies.

## PHASE 5: COVID-19

COVID-19 posed unprecedented challenges to governments and societies across the world. Apart from the health impacts, lockdowns that were imposed as one measure to contain the spread of the disease created severe financial hardship for millions, reversing progress in the achievement of almost all of the SDGs.

Most governments responded to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 by delivering various forms of support. Countries that had well-established, functioning social protection systems were better placed to mobilise a rapid and effective humanitarian response.

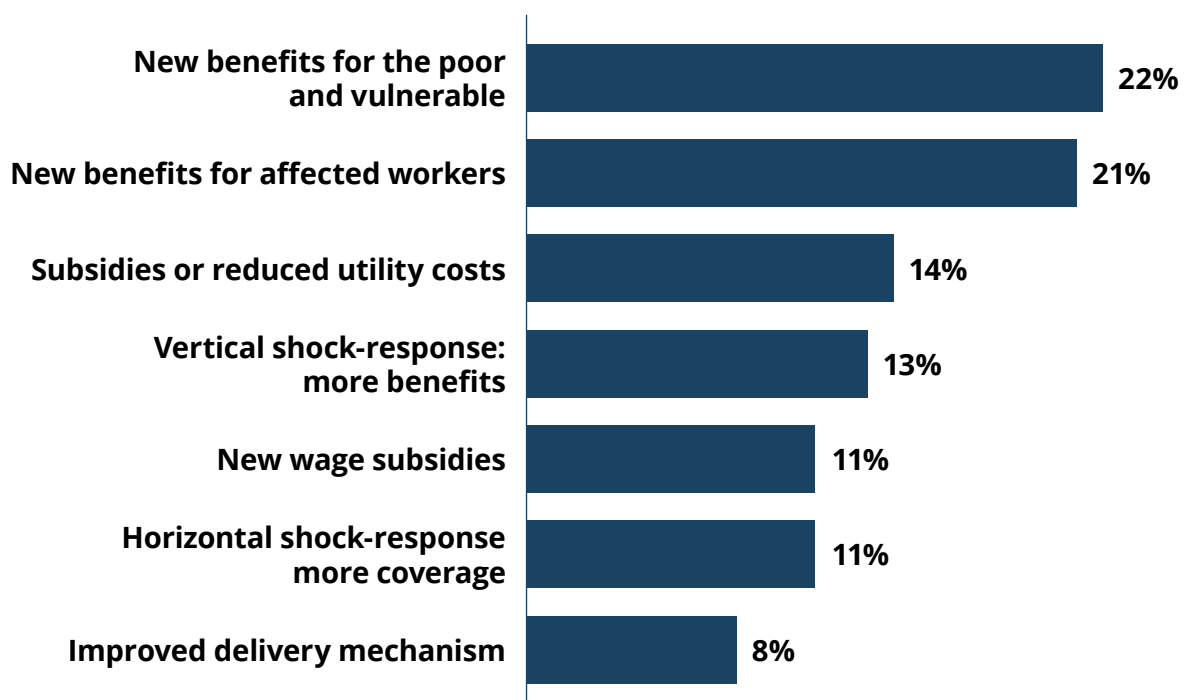
Conversely, countries with limited or poorly functioning social protection systems pre-pandemic were not able to mobilise support for individuals and families as rapidly and effectively. In a sense, COVID-19 provided a stress test for social protection, and social

protection proved its value under the extreme stress created by the pandemic.

‘Shock-responsive’ social protection responses included horizontal expansion (adding new beneficiaries to existing programmes, using existing platforms for targeting, registration, payments and beneficiary management), and vertical expansion (temporarily increasing the benefits paid to existing beneficiaries of social assistance programmes).

Many governments established new social assistance programmes during the pandemic, such as emergency cash and food transfers for workers who lost their income during lockdowns. These interventions highlighted and responded to a significant gap in social protection systems, most of which provide no coverage or inadequate support for self-employed, informal, and low-paid workers.

**Figure 5. Social protection responses to COVID-19 in 195 countries<sup>10</sup>**



<sup>10</sup> Data from ILO Social Protection Monitor.



## PHASE 6: TOWARDS THE SDGS

COVID-19 was a major setback for progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the deadline of 2030 approaching fast. On the other hand, social protection offers a proven set of instruments for reducing poverty and hunger, and it supports progress towards several other SDGs.

The World Social Protection Report 2020–22 is titled ‘Social Protection at a Crossroads’. The Report points out that governments face a choice: to implement austerity budgets post-COVID-19 because of economic contractions since 2020, or to invest more in building “universal, comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection systems”<sup>11</sup>.

Since this Report was published, the war in Ukraine has triggered price rises and a cost-of-living crisis as well as a global food and nutrition crisis across the world. In addition to responding to immediate humanitarian needs, WFP called for strategic investments in social protection and sustainable food systems<sup>12</sup>.

The Report describes austerity measures as the ‘low road’, because cutting social spending as a response to crisis is likely to exacerbate and prolong crisis conditions. Investing in social protection is the ‘high road’, because this will guarantee “at least a basic level of social security for all over the course of their lives.” UNDP has similarly argued that governments should invest in a ‘big push’ – social protection, digitalisation, and green economy – to recover the ground lost during COVID-19<sup>13</sup>.

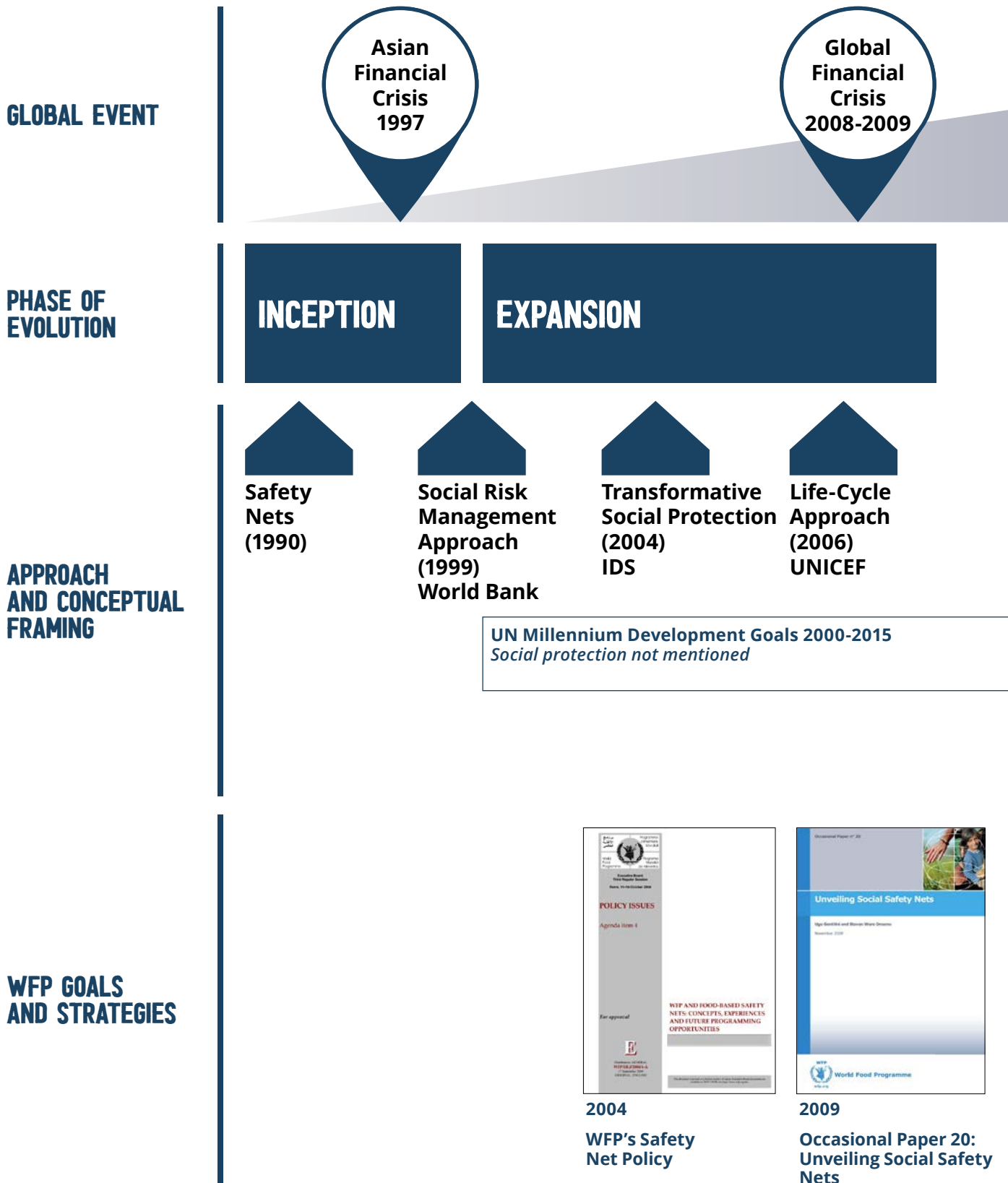
Social protection on its own will not ensure that countries meet their SDG targets. But considering the impacts of COVID-19 and the global food and nutrition crisis, we are similarly faced with a high and low road in the choice to invest in social protection systems that address zero hunger and curtail the long-term impacts and costs of malnutrition in society.

11 ILO (2021). World Social Protection Report 2020-22: Social protection at the crossroads □ in pursuit of a better future. Geneva: International Labour Office.

12 WFP (2022). War in Ukraine drives global food crisis. Rome: World Food Programme.

13 Abidoye, B., Felix, J., Kapto, S. & Patterson, L. (2021). Leaving No One Behind: Impact of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). New York, NY and Denver CO: United Nations Development Programme and Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures

# Evolution of Social Protection Infographic



Source: Stephen Devereux (2022) 'Keynote Address: Social Protection: Evolution, Drivers, Points of Inflection and Fracture'. WFP Social Protection Retreat, Rome 2022.



Countries increasingly facing protracted, multiple, complex crises (climate, conflict, economic...)

**COVID-19  
Pandemic  
2020-**

**Global  
Food Crisis  
2022-**

**CONSOLIDATION AND  
INSTITUTIONSALISATION**

**COVID-19**

**TOWARDS  
THE SDGS**



**Social  
Protection Floor  
(2012)  
ILO**



**Shock  
responsive  
Social Protection  
(2018)  
OPM**



**Adaptive  
Social Protection  
(2020)  
World Bank**

**UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030**

1.3 - Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

5.4 - Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

10.4 - Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.



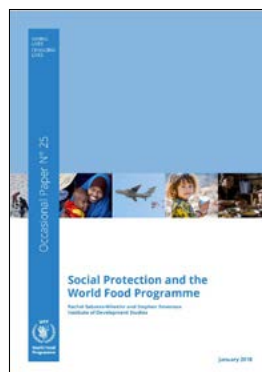
2010

**From Food Aid to Food Assistance**



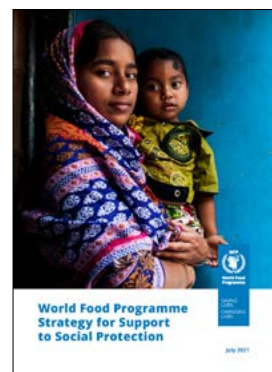
2012

**WFP's Safety Net Policy Update**



2018

**Occasional Paper 25:  
Social Protection and the  
World Food Programme**



2021

**WFP Strategy for  
Support to Social  
Protection**

For further information, do get in touch with us at [socialprotection@wfp.org](mailto:socialprotection@wfp.org).

To know more about WFP's work in social protection, follow this link: [www.wfp.org/social-protection](http://www.wfp.org/social-protection)

### **World Food Programme**

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Cover page: WFP/Rein Skullerud

Contributions: This brief was written by Stephen Devereux with research assistance from Becky Carter from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The brief benefited from technical guidance from Keetie Roelen (IDS), as well as advice and contributions from Juan Gonzalo Jaramillo Meija and Davis Wilhelm from the Social Protection Unit and the Knowledge and Learning Management team (WFP).