

Social Protection Floors in South East Asia: Closing protection gaps for children and families

Rachael Chadwick

Abstract:

This paper synthesises analysis and recommendations emerging from social protection floor (SPF) assessment exercises conducted by the ILO in collaboration with governments and UN partner agencies in Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, to provide a situational analysis of the SPF as it relates to children in the ASEAN region. The SPF refers to a set of minimum social security guarantees that together ensure basic income security for the working-age population, the elderly and children, as well as access to affordable essential healthcare for all. While child welfare is included as a specific component of the SPF, child poverty and wellbeing are also impacted by the other elements of the floor, particularly access to healthcare (including maternity care) and income security for the working-age population (those providing for children).

Global approaches to tackling poverty and deprivation have increasingly turned to social protection as a multi-dimensional framework that simultaneously addresses standards of work, education, health care, food security and income security in the pursuit of development that is sustainable and equitable. In recent years the ILO has strengthened its organisational commitment to the strategic objective of social protection under its Decent Work Agenda with efforts to promote and advocate for national floors of social protection. As co-lead agency of the United Nations System Chief Executive Board's Social Protection Floor Initiative (SPF-I) and through the recent adoption of Recommendation 202 (2012), the ILO has sought to encourage governments to define their own SPFs and commit to policy measures that will achieve – at a minimum – the basic social security guarantees that comprise it.

In recognition of the need to take stock of existing social protection realities in order to understand what elements of national SPFs are in place and where 'holes' in the floors exist, the ILO collaborated with governments and UN partner agencies in the ASEAN region in 2011-2012 to conduct several SPF assessment exercises. A Social Protection and Performance Review (SPER) was undertaken in Cambodia, supplemented by an ILO/EU financial assessment of the Cambodian government's National Social Protection Strategy for the Poor and Vulnerable (NSPS). In Indonesia and Thailand, a similar exercise was conducted in the framework of an Assessment Based National Dialogue (ABND) on the social protection floor. In Vietnam, the ILO undertook an analysis of the government's National Social Protection Strategy (2011-2020) in the context of SPF objectives.

The studies utilised similar methodology, with the common objective of assessing whether the SPF is a reality for the population of each respective country. Policy gaps and implementation issues were identified and recommendations made for the further design and implementation of social protection provisions in order to guarantee a social protection floor for the entire population. Finally, the ILO Rapid Assessment Protocol



(RAP) costing tool was used to estimate the cost and affordability of implementing recommendations.

While socio-political and economic contexts vary between and within the four countries, ILO researchers observed key parallels in the challenges to – and opportunities for – securing basic income for children. These findings have relevance for social protection and child-sensitive development agendas globally. Some of the key findings include:

- *Fragmented, ad hoc and overlapping existing social protection programmes – both those specifically targeting children and generally;*
- *Low coverage and inconsistent eligibility/targeting criteria of child-specific social protection programmes due to outreach capacity and data deficiencies;*
- *Lack of awareness or knowledge of entitlements to existing benefits among families/parents;*
- *Issues in programme management and disbursement of benefits;*
- *Lack of protection for workers in the informal sector, resulting in financial insecurity for families and children.*

This paper draws upon the common social protection floor ‘gaps’ identified across the various SPF assessment exercises to present policy recommendations for completion of national SPFs for children and families in the ASEAN region. Recommendations include:

- *Establish a universal child allowance or extend cash transfer programmes to children and mothers to include all poor and very poor;*
- *Ensure that health care packages have adequate levels of protection, including provisions for prevention of mother-to-child transmission of serious diseases such as HIV and syphilis;*
- *Improve beneficiary databases in order to improve targeting mechanisms;*
- *Design and pilot a Single Window Service for social protection programmes.*

By presenting the policy gaps and recommendations related to securing basic income security for children within the context of broader assessments of national SPFs, the paper highlights the symbiotic links between various aspects of social protection and the need for holistic programmatic and policy approaches sensitised to vulnerable groups. The paper will also discuss the costing scenarios presented as part of the assessment exercises to demonstrate that completing the SPF for children is not financially prohibitive for governments and that issues of program coordination and beneficiary targeting are at least as important as proposed contributions from GDP. By drawing together data and analysis from several country studies within the ASEAN region, the paper provides a foundation for comparison with, and further discussion of, global efforts to define and create national SPFs and ensure income security for children.

