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Evaluation

Management response to the evaluation of UNDP support to social protection

I. Introduction

1. In 2022, the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office undertook an evaluation of UNDP support to social protection for the period 2016-2022. The evaluation took a forward-looking view by providing recommendations to inform the strategic and programmatic direction of UNDP support over the remainder of the period of the current Strategic Plan (2022-2025) and the global efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goal target 1.3 to “implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.” The evaluation was prepared in accordance with the multi-year evaluation plan of the office (DP/2022/6), approved by the Executive Board at the first regular session of 2022. The executive summary of the evaluation is contained in document DP/2023/17.

2. This is the first global thematic evaluation on social protection. The evaluation covers all regions of UNDP operations (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Arab States, Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Latin America and the Caribbean). The time frame of the evaluation includes the first year after the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the period of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, for which social protection was key to the response and recovery, and other ensuing connected crises and transitions.

3. At the heart of the UNDP mandate is the focus on leaving no one behind and supporting countries’ structural transformation towards more inclusive, green and resilient societies in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP welcomes the findings of this thematic evaluation and its seven recommendations, which will inform the organization’s work in supporting countries to deliver the next generation of social protection schemes in alignment with its Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 and the Goals. UNDP will build on the areas that have been identified as strong, while responding to the areas in need of strengthening.

II. Social protection in the global development context

The world’s population continues to be massively unprotected

4. More than half of the global population continues to have no access to comprehensive social protection that enables people to cope with life risks. Globally, fewer than 20 per cent of unemployed workers receive unemployment benefits, only 33 per cent of persons with severe disabilities receive



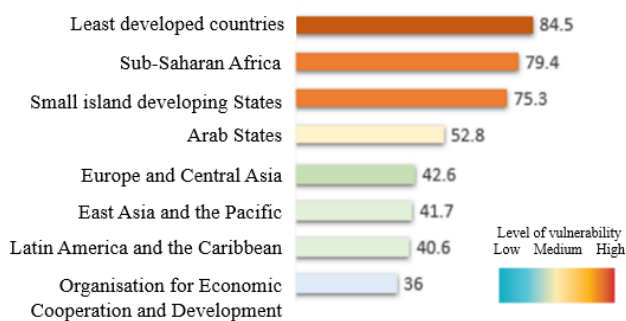
disability benefits, and only 26 per cent of children and less than 29 per cent of vulnerable persons receive social assistance. One third of the global population is not covered by a social health protection scheme, and more than 20 per cent of older persons receive no pension.¹ These staggering statistics translate into real lives, families and communities that continue to struggle daily.

5. Although social protection varies from country to country, it often refers to a range of policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability and promote social inclusion and human development. These policies and programmes typically include, inter alia: (a) social insurance (e.g., disability insurance, unemployment insurance, old-age pensions); (b) social assistance (e.g., conditional or unconditional cash transfers, in-kind assistance, subsidies, child assistance, housing assistance, school feeding programmes); and (c) labour-market schemes and policies (e.g., workers’ rights, decent work, minimum wage laws, occupational health and safety standards and regulations). Across countries there has been a growing recognition of the importance of social protection as a precondition to promote sustainable inclusive growth and reduce inequalities. Many countries continue to explore new social protection approaches to meet people’s needs in the twenty-first century.

The COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point for social protection

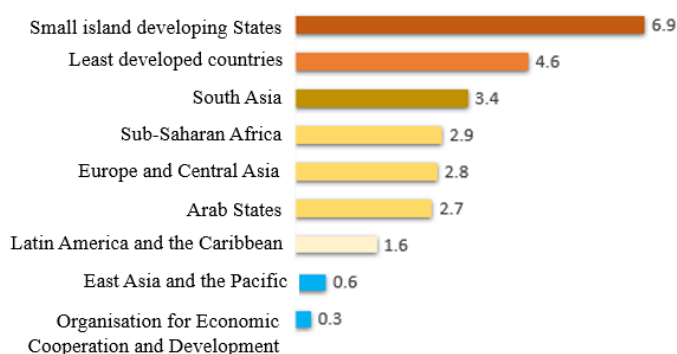
6. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that existing vulnerabilities limited the capacities of countries and individuals to respond, further exacerbating deprivations and inequalities between haves and have-nots. Countries with limited social protection coverage and high dependency of the gross domestic product (GDP) on remittance inflows, which reduced available resources, were more susceptible to socioeconomic shocks.²

Figure I. Percentage of population without any social protection or labour programmes, by region and /or country typology



Source: UNDP (2020), COVID-19 and Human Development

Figure II. Remittances inflows, as percentage of GDP, by region and/or country typology



7. The 1.6 billion informal workers globally – most of whom are women in developing countries – working with limited or no labour law protection, social benefits such as pension, health insurance or paid sick leave, with lower wages and in unsafe conditions, became more vulnerable. The pandemic has also exposed the extent of society’s dependence on women’s unpaid and low-paid care work, due to reduced access to care services, unequal gender division of care work and increased care needs.

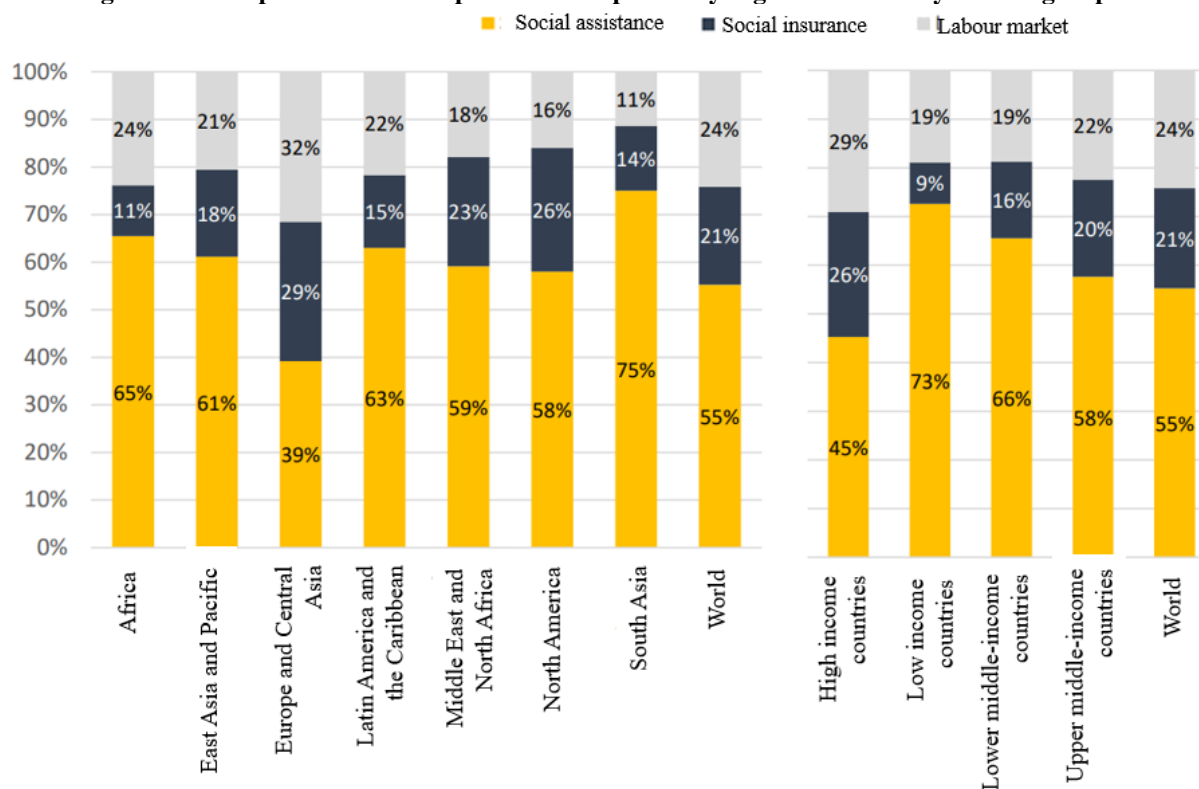
8. Globally, the COVID-19 response has sparked a new generation of social protection schemes employed by countries with unprecedented agility. In the past three years, to support the most vulnerable populations in coping with the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, over 190 countries have rolled out more than 3,333 social protection measures, with 73 per cent of low-income countries and 66 per cent of lower-middle-income countries relying on social

¹ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021), World Social Protection Report 2020-2022: Social protection at a crossroads – in pursuit of a better future.

² UNDP (2020), COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery. New York.

assistance measures, with cash transfers as the main instrument (see figure III).³ UNDP mapped social protection responses in the Global South⁴ during the pandemic to better understand their beneficiary registration and identification methods, coverage, benefit levels, dates of announcement and implementation of measures, budget and source of financing, implementing institutions and legal frameworks in place. Despite their limitations and pitfalls, Governments can be hailed for their ability to adapt rapidly and deploy emergency response through digital means.

Figure III. Composition of social protection responses by region and country income groups



Source: World Bank (May 2021)

9. Nevertheless, many of the social protection schemes were temporary and not sufficient. Many did not target adequately and did not benefit the most vulnerable. Much remains to be done, including exploring solutions for the “missing middle” – those who do not qualify as extremely poor to receive social assistance benefits but whose source of employment offers little, if any, protection. The momentum generated by the pandemic should be harnessed to integrate those short-term measures into social protection systems to aide countries to recover and build resilient societies. Countries will need to explore and expand social protection schemes that go beyond public systems to include hybrid funded programmes involving public-private partnerships, philanthropic support and impact investments.

Expanding the boundaries of social protection: good governance systems, integrated services and universal coverage

10. Globally, there is a need to continue to elevate political advocacy around social protection into global and national development agendas. Social protection should not be restricted to addressing extreme poverty, but rather tackle sources of vulnerability of individuals and to reach the missing

³ World Bank (May 2021), [Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures](#).

⁴ Hammad, M, F. Bacil, F. V. Soares. 2021. [Next Practices — Innovations in the COVID-19 social protection responses and beyond](#). Research Report No. 60. New York and Brasília: UNDP and International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.

middle, including the benefits and feasibility for universal health coverage and universal social protection coverage, for instance.⁵ Many social protection schemes are not designed as long-term solutions. During the COVID-19 response, cash-based interventions were the most common type, but the crisis showed that other types of programmes such as care, unemployment protection and health insurance across the life continuum were of high demand and needed to be enhanced. Weak governance systems, including the administrative, institutional and legal architecture that underpins and delivers the programmes, can perpetuate gaps in coverage and must be addressed. Unequal access to social protection, combined with a continuous erosion of trust in public institutions, perception of growing corruption, rising economic inequality and political polarization, will continuously undermine social trust and social capital, eroding the basis for an effective social contract.

11. A key trend in the new era of social protection is the shift towards more comprehensive and integrated systems to reduce fragmentation and augment investment impact. Rather than treating social protection as a collection of separate programmes, policymakers are increasingly seeking to develop integrated systems that provide a continuum of support to individuals and families over the life course. Another trend is the emphasis on universal social protection. While targeted social protection programmes can be effective in addressing specific needs, there is growing recognition of the benefits of universal programmes that provide support to all individuals and households, regardless of their income or other identity factors. In 2005, the World Health Assembly agreed on a resolution calling on Member States to work towards universal health coverage to reduce health inequities and in 2012, the General Assembly adopted a resolution recognizing that universal health care is a key component of sustainable development. As per the World Health Organization, about 32 countries⁶ worldwide have achieved universal coverage for essential health services, made possible through a combination of increased public spending on health, health insurance and strengthening health systems. Some of these programmes continue to face challenges regarding quality and equitable access to care, as well as securing sufficient financing, but they demonstrate a concerted effort towards promoting equitable health outcomes.

Identifying sustainable sources of financing for social protection

12. As of November 2022, 37 of the world's 69 poorest countries were either at high risk or already in debt distress, while one in four middle-income countries, which host most of the extreme poor, were at high risk of fiscal crisis. Rapidly deteriorating fiscal space must be protected to avoid further deepening of a protracted economic crisis in the most vulnerable countries. Tax revenues are shrinking at the very time mitigation measures are needed the most. Two recurring themes have emerged: the need to expand social protection systems to reach the most vulnerable through cash transfers or unemployment insurance; and to expand support for lost jobs, incomes and livelihoods, working with small and medium-sized enterprises and supply chains.

13. To expand social protection schemes – such as cash transfers, health care and other forms of social assistance – to reach the 55 per cent who are unprotected, an estimated investment of 3.8 per cent of global GDP would be required.⁷ This investment could have significant

⁵ See, for example, World Economic Forum, 'Universal basic income is the answer to the inequalities exposed by COVID-19', 17 April 2020, accessed 5 April 2023.

⁶ Examples of countries that have adopted universal health care programmes include Cuba, which in the 1960s, established a national health-care system that provided free health care to all its citizens and legal residents. Brazil implemented its Unified Health System in 1988, funded by taxes and government subsidies. Thailand adopted the Universal Coverage Scheme in 2002, funded with taxes and public subsidies. Rwanda introduced its Community-Based Health Insurance in 1999, covering 90 per cent of the population, and a national health insurance scheme for the remaining 10 per cent. Ghana introduced its National Health Insurance Scheme in 2003, funded by premiums, taxes and donor funding. Mexico developed its Seguro Popular programme in 2004, covering the uninsured population. India developed its Ayushman Bharat programme in 2018, providing health coverage to about 100 million low-income families. As needs of countries continue to evolve, some of these programmes may have changed.

⁷ ILO (2021).

spillover effects in building social capital, improving health outcomes and productivity and increasing economic growth and stability.

The role of the United Nations in bridging gaps in a coherent manner

14. The United Nations development system has played a key role in galvanizing action among Governments and relevant stakeholders to elevate the social protection agenda. Existing country, regional and global coordination mechanisms have facilitated knowledge and resources from a policy, planning and financing perspective. Since 2009, the [social protection floor initiative](#) has raised global awareness and advocated with Governments for the establishment of a social protection floor, which includes basic social security guarantees for access to health care, education, food and income, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries.

15. A consortium of 20 United Nations agencies and partners has developed the [inter-agency social protection assessment](#) tool to build capacities to improve social protection programme design and delivery and increase coordination. At the recommendation of the G20 Development Working Group, the [Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board](#), comprising representatives of international organizations and bilateral institutions, was established in 2012 to enhance global coordination and advocacy on social protection issues and to coordinate international cooperation in countries' demand-driven actions.

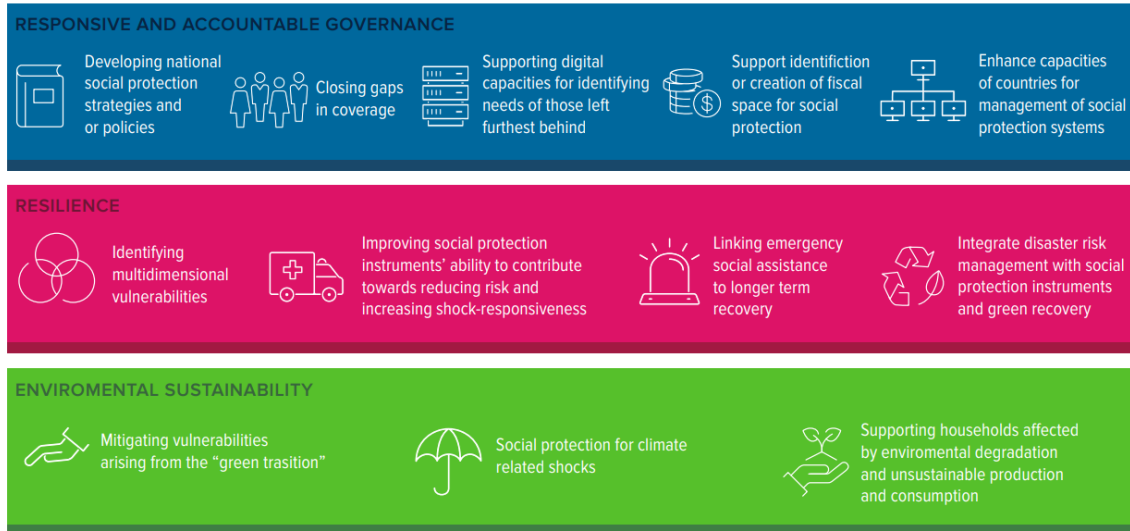
16. To facilitate coordination within United Nations country teams (UNCTs), the Joint SDG Fund supported social protection as one of its key transformative areas of investment, fostering joint programmes in over 25 countries worldwide. Since its establishment, the fund has financed \$258 million in commitments across 225 programmes, of which 69 focus on social protection, channelled through 31 United Nations entities in 118 UNCTs. To tackle the multiple crises the world is facing and regression of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, the Secretary-General launched the [Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions](#) to increase coordination within the multilateral system and facilitate the creation of 400 million jobs and extend social protection to the 4 billion people currently excluded from these benefits.

III. UNDP support to social protection and its added value

The UNDP approach to social protection

17. The UNDP engagement in social protection is firmly grounded in the human development approach which aims at narrowing the gaps in basic capabilities (education, health, and life expectancy outcomes) and gradually enhancing advanced capabilities (quality of education and health care) that will give citizens the freedom and opportunity to live the lives they aspire to. The [UNDP social protection offer](#) is anchored in the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, specifically signature solution 1, which advocates for a moonshot to empower 100 million people, including marginalized and excluded populations, to escape persistent multidimensional poverty and vulnerabilities.⁸ It promotes integrated development solutions across responsive and accountable governance, resilience-building and environmental sustainability (see figure IV below).

⁸ UNDP (2022), [UNDP's Social Protection Offer 2.0](#), New York, October 2022.

Figure IV. The UNDP integrated offer on social protection*

* The offer is articulated around 12 social protection solutions that cut across the three key thematic components with the aim of supporting 120 countries by 2025.

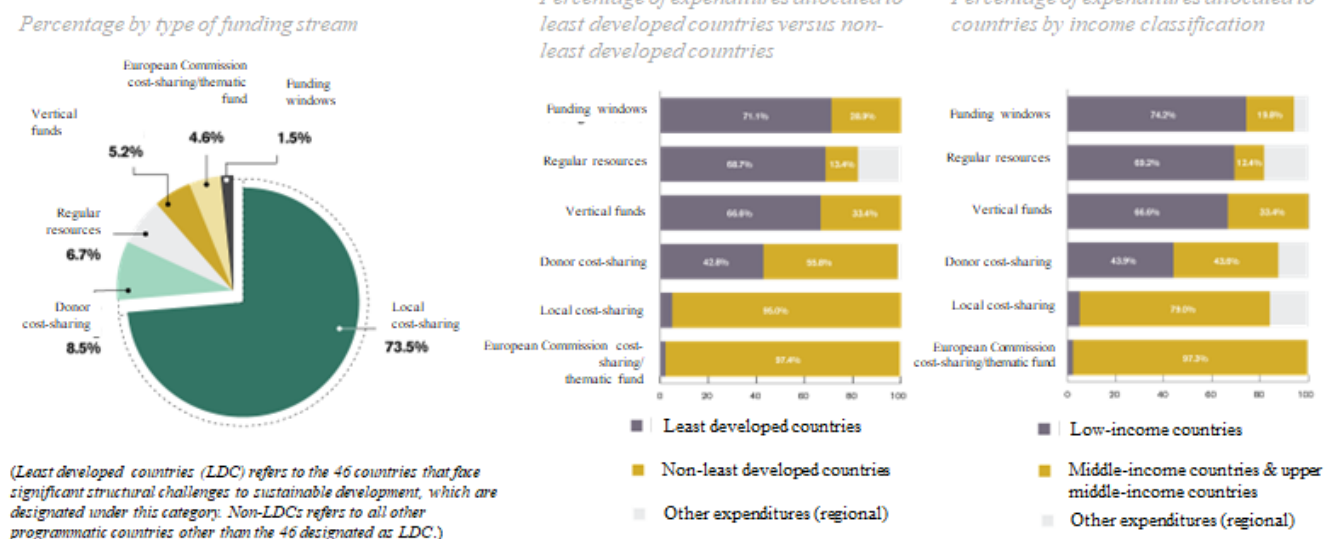
18. As part of its efforts in support of poverty eradication, in 2018 UNDP introduced a “leave no one behind” marker which identifies 18 priority groups targeted during project implementation. The groups include: people living in rural areas; persons negatively affected by armed conflict or violence; internally displaced persons; people living in multidimensional poverty; women; youth; persons affected by natural disasters; refugees; the unemployed; and persons with disabilities. The marker will continue to be used to monitor how UNDP is targeting vulnerable groups in its overall programming, including the social protection portfolio.

The UNDP social protection portfolio

19. UNDP has continuously provided support to Governments in [programme countries in designing and implementing social protection systems and schemes](#). In 2022, about 45 UNDP country offices had their country programme outputs directly linked to the Strategic Plan output on social protection. Figure V below showcases the countries where social protection drives UNDP programmatic actions. In other countries, social protection is mainstreamed across other thematic areas. An illustrative subset of the UNDP social protection portfolio is described below.

20. UNDP will continue to support least developed countries (LDCs) to scale up inclusive, shock-responsive, adaptive and fiscally sustainable social protection mechanisms, in line with the [Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries, 2022-2031](#). While the UNDP social protection offer cuts across country typologies, a major priority is supporting LDCs in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

21. Within the UNDP budget, the large share of government local cost sharing invested in middle-income and upper-middle-income countries under the social protection portfolio (between 2018-2021) could be perceived as an overall reduction of UNDP expenditures in low-income countries, but this is not the case. (See figures below which indicate that over 69 per cent of regular resources are allocated to low-income countries). Between 66 and 75 per cent of funding from regular resources, funding windows and vertical funds is directed to LDCs. Donor cost-sharing funds are relatively balanced between least developed and other countries.

Figure V. Funding streams, 2018-2021

Source: UNDP (March 2023)

Support to modernization of social protection systems into integrated service delivery models and institutional strengthening

22. In partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of Kazakhstan, UNDP supported the [modernization of the social protection system](#) by improving the quality and targeting of social services, as well as promoting an integrated model of service delivery. In Tunisia, UNDP has collaborated with the Government to strengthen the social protection system, including through the implementation of a national social security programme for low-income families. UNDP provided technical support for the development of a social registry and the establishment of a national social protection agency.

Designing social protection measures with the most vulnerable in mind

23. UNDP has been working with the Government of Cambodia to expand social protection coverage to rural areas, including through the development of a social registry, implementation of a cash transfer programme for poor and vulnerable households, and development of social protection schemes for informal workers in sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and construction. UNDP has been supporting the Government with the Identification of Poor Households (IDPoor) programme, a nationwide community-based poverty identification system and a critical component of its efforts to achieve universal health care. IDPoor promotes and allows shared data across the government system and facilitates different sectors to channel complementary support to those same poor households, who are in possession of equity cards. Households with people living with HIV in Cambodia and other vulnerable groups are given additional weight in the methodology to ensure that they are eligible for social protection programmes such as free health care and scholarships. IDPoor thus allows coordination of social protection across ministries, departments and agencies to ensure that one-stop delivery points can provide comprehensive social protection benefits. In Nepal, UNDP support focused on the social protection response to communities affected by the earthquake through a temporary basic income.

24. UNDP and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ([UN-Women](#)) and the [World Food Programme](#) are supporting the Government of Indonesia in rolling out social protection that is more effective in reaching the most vulnerable, utilizing schemes that are inclusive, responsive and adaptive to climate-related shocks and other disasters. UNDP supported the

Government of Zimbabwe to develop social protection systems that are gender-sensitive and responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable. UNDP works with civil society organizations to provide cash transfers to vulnerable households and support the livelihoods of women and youth. In Somalia, UNDP has worked with the Government and civil society organizations to provide non-conditional cash transfers to vulnerable households. In India, UNDP has partnered with Unilever Limited to promote an inclusive circular economy through social inclusion of Safai Sathis (waste pickers) in the country's waste management sector, with 100,000 households expected to benefit. In 2020, UNDP [surveyed 9,300 Safai Sathis in 14 cities across 10 Indian states](#) to understand their demographic, work, income, financial and housing conditions along with their levels of enrolment and access to social protection measures. UNDP has supported digitalization of public services and e-governance solutions relevant to the public sector to facilitate access to basic social services, including in Burundi, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad and Comoros.

The socioeconomic response to COVID-19 and social protection

25. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the weakness and fragmentation of pre-existing social protection systems, especially for people who have typically been left behind. As the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic crisis deepened, many countries topped up or expanded existing social assistance or cash transfer programmes to reach vulnerable populations including informal workers, self-employed workers, domestic and unpaid care workers and migrant and internally displaced populations. In 2020, the UNDP report, *Temporary Basic Income: Protecting Poor and Vulnerable People in Developing Countries*, provided estimates of a minimum guaranteed income above the poverty line for vulnerable people in 132 developing countries.⁹ Since then, UNDP has started working on the implementation of cash or similar transfer expansions across regions, providing support in Honduras (voucher transfer system), Namibia and Pakistan.

26. Despite an increasing number of countries investing in social protection during the pandemic, social protection systems still do not systematically include people living with HIV and key populations. UNDP and the International Labour Organization developed a [checklist for countries to assess](#) the adequacy and inclusiveness of social protection programmes and policies including these populations.

27. COVID-19 has led to a stark regression of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Progress towards the Goals will be shaped by interactions between many global systems, COVID-19 and the special efforts that national societies and the global community are making to address the pandemic and (re)set themselves on accelerated sustainable development pathways. UNDP and Pardee Center (University of Denver) simulated the pathway scenarios of the pandemic's impact on the Goals. This includes a high damage scenario, where economic recovery is delayed, further impairing the ability of Governments to invest in the Goals. The study also includes an "SDG Push" scenario to illustrate the types of investments necessary to accelerate progress by 2030, including increased efficiency of governance, behavioural changes (production and consumption), big investments (digitalization and green recovery) and investments in social protection.

IV. Findings and conclusions of the evaluation

28. UNDP welcomes the evaluation's findings as they provide evidence to inform necessary adjustments in the organization's efforts to enhance its work on social protection. It is pleased to note the evaluation's stance on the relevance and growing significance of the UNDP approach to social protection in both development and crisis contexts, and the appreciation for its unique vision on simultaneously supporting existing social protection needs and increasing resilience to compounding future threats.

⁹ The report indicated the feasibility of a sixth-month temporary basic income within fiscal and administrative reach of most developing countries, averaging 1.6 per cent of developing countries' GDP, or about one third of what these countries were expected to pay on external debt service in 2020.

29. UNDP commends the comprehensiveness and depth of this first thematic evaluation on social protection and underscores that its work on social protection features in a multitude of evaluations that span related thematic areas, as well as global, regional and country programmes. They often converge with the findings of this evaluation on the comparative advantage of UNDP, the need for integrated approaches and for scaling up interventions. The 2017 [evaluation of the UNDP Strategic Plan and regional programme](#) referred to the overarching focus of UNDP on the poorest of the poor and highlighted its contribution to creating enabling environments to support Governments to develop pro-poor policies and expand local capacities for social protection.

30. UNDP appreciates the evaluation's positive findings on the extent to which it has developed a relevant global offer that corresponds to the central themes of social protection policy and practice globally, and how its main strength rests on its focus of linking social protection instruments with initiatives for risk prevention, recovery, environmental protection, livelihoods promotion and economic transition, gender equality and climate shocks. UNDP further welcomes the recognition that its multilevel and multi-stakeholder approach is aligned to emerging models for strengthening social protection. Whereas the evaluation identifies the UNDP comparative advantage as being rooted in its multisectoral approach and highlights that the relevance of social protection as an area of work is reflected in regional programme planning, UNDP notes that concerted efforts are needed to ensure that these key features of its approach develop into clear social protection programme offers by country offices.

31. UNDP welcomes the finding that support to cash transfer programmes has enabled better targeting of beneficiaries and has contributed to improving overall government systems for beneficiary identification. While its engagement in this area is deemed transformative in select countries, UNDP notes that additional opportunities exist for streamlining cash transfers of non-State actors. Furthermore, even though cash transfer support has been critical in providing sustenance and promoting livelihoods in crisis contexts, its integration with long-term social protection systems is hindered by the absence of robust institutions in fragile countries facing protracted crises.

32. Overall, UNDP accepts the seven recommendations made by the evaluation and will continuously strive [to improve its portfolio on social protection](#) by decreasing vulnerabilities to risks and shocks, empowering beneficiaries by increasing the productive capacities and new capabilities of vulnerable households, and building a more just society based on fairness by addressing structural drivers of poverty, inequality and vulnerability. Below are details on how UNDP will address each recommendation. A detailed matrix containing key concrete and measurable actions per recommendation is in the annex.

Recommendation 1

33. UNDP accepts the recommendation and recognizes the importance of exploring the convergence of social protection with other areas such as governance, inclusive growth, economic empowerment, health, resilience and environment. UNDP is already investing in integrated programming and policy, data and knowledge.

34. Strategic integration will rely on a shared understanding of social protection, its interlinkages with other thematic areas and the organization's ability to transform independent, specialized and sectoral interventions into cohesive and synergistic development offers, based on the demand of partner countries. The UNDP data strategy (2023-2025) focuses on data interoperability between the different signature solutions, and further highlight ways in which social protection can intersect with other areas. Through its Data Futures Platform, UNDP will anchor evidence-based policymaking and improve its understanding of connections and interlinkages of social protection with other thematic areas. Harnessing the collective intelligence of its Global Knowledge Hub, UNDP will continue to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise across different signature solutions, promote cross-cutting

approaches to addressing social protection challenges and support the development of holistic, effective and impactful solutions.

35. Capitalizing on its comparative advantage and in partnership with government, development partners, the private sector and civil society, UNDP will support countries in strengthening their social protection systems, making them shock-responsive, risk-informed, inclusive and gender-responsive. To this end, under the global programme “governance for people and planet,” UNDP will carry out mapping of governance-related “leverage points” to support social protection systems, including governance data indicators. The social action for environment and resilience framework will be developed to ensure the systematic integration of social protection elements in the vertical funds pipeline. UNDP will further assure that social protection dimensions are mainstreamed within the Leaders’ Pledge for Nature and its related action tracks and targets.

Recommendation 2

36. UNDP acknowledges the need to give practical guidance to country offices on strategic positioning and therefore accepts recommendation 2. As a trusted development partner, UNDP will continue to provide integrated strategic services, working with UNCTs and supporting Governments in their formulation of strategies and initiatives geared to respond to complex, manifold development challenges, utilizing a range of global assets, tools and services tailored to country contexts. UNDP is committed to extend support to countries in assessing and identifying the risks and vulnerabilities faced by their populations, enabling the development of risk-informed social protection solutions that are tailored to the specific needs of each country and capable of addressing existing social risks.

37. With regards to strengthening social protection support to low-income and least developed countries, UNDP will scale up its support to countries to address key constraints to inclusive social protection, including policy financing (e.g., limited fiscal space, elevated levels of indebtedness, high out-of-pocket costs), policy design and implementation (e.g., coverage challenges due to high levels of informality) and the political economy (e.g., absence of or weak social contracts).

Recommendation 3

38. In the frame of its institutional offer on social protection, which places added emphasis on environmental sustainability, UNDP fully accepts recommendation 3. UNDP is committed to strengthening the connection between social protection and the green transition. This can be achieved by mitigating risks for vulnerable groups and job losses resulting from the green transition, establishing inclusive and gender-responsive social protection for climate-related shocks, and supporting individuals and households affected by environmental degradation and unsustainable production. UNDP is committed to utilize its Data Futures Platform to support improved understanding of the interlinkages between social protection and the green transition, including scenarios on impact assessment.

39. To strengthen active labour-market policies, UNDP is committed to supporting countries in expanding inclusive labour-market solutions while considering technological challenges and the future of work. To this end, the development of the Inclusive Growth Tracker, to be piloted in Latin America and the Caribbean, will provide a menu of active labour-market policies for country offices and policymakers to adopt in their national contexts. Emphasizing labour demand, it will include the evaluation of interventions carried out by UNDP to increase the productivity of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and promote decent work and inclusive growth. This work will be complemented through the development of guidance for the design of active labour-market policies that enable job creation and build a resilient workforce in the context of the green transition.

40. Through its Istanbul International Centre for Private Sector Development, UNDP will develop a framework for private sector engagement in skills development, including tools and guidance on growth and priority areas such as digital skills, green skills, twenty-first century skills and the future of work, as well as the financing of interventions in such areas.

Recommendation 4

41. UNDP recognizes the need to strengthen the linkage between humanitarian assistance and national social protection systems with the aim to address poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion and to strengthen resilience. It therefore accepts recommendation 4. UNDP will support policy engagement to elevate the social protection agenda at the outset of large-scale political and socioeconomic crises as well as natural disasters (e.g., through post-disaster needs assessments, disaster recovery framework, pandemic recovery needs assessments, etc.), including through response, long-term reform of national social protection systems and multi-stakeholder policy engagement including with Governments, development partners and international financial institutions.

42. UNDP is committed to ensuring that in crisis- and conflict-affected countries, social protection initiatives will be designed to target the most vulnerable populations, including internally displaced persons, refugees and others affected by conflict and natural disasters. UNDP will take stock of its experience in social protection and inclusion of internally displaced persons and develop policy guidance with the aim of identifying entry points for addressing challenges to social protection and inclusion. UNDP will develop and roll out guidance documents on integrating social protection and insurance schemes through policy dialogues, livelihoods and economic recovery in crisis and post-crisis settings (including a module on social protection). Lastly, UNDP will scale up support to small island developing States and coastal cities to implement social protection measures based on the multi-poverty vulnerability index, and to build the socioeconomic resilience of the urban poor and other marginalized groups.

Recommendation 5

43. UNDP fully accepts this recommendation and is committed to expanding the use of digitalization in social protection. It will continue to advocate that countries use digitalization to build and maintain social registries, diversify digital payment systems, increase transparency, improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, employ digitalization and machine learning to develop predictive analytics for fraud detection in social insurance, and provide other social protection services and benefits. At the country level, UNDP will continue to work with Governments in building digital platforms that enable citizens to access and benefit from social protection programmes, and facilitate dialogue and collaboration between government, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders to develop joint digital initiatives and projects. To this end, UNDP work on the development of digital public infrastructure, such as digital identity platforms and payment systems, will serve as fundamental building blocks for digital innovations and services that benefit all.

44. Through its Chief Digital Office, UNDP will utilize its existing digital fitness programme, the digital advocates network and the digital community of practice to better leverage digitalization in support of social protection initiatives, including the development of a digital guide on social protection. UNDP will strengthen efforts to encourage interoperability between foundational registries (civil registration and national management) and social protection registries through inclusive digitalization processes. Lastly, it will strive to bridge the digital divide by engaging meaningfully with the private sector and ensuring that skills-development initiatives are aligned and respond to labour-market demands.

Recommendation 6

45. UNDP fully accepts this recommendation and is committed to leveraging existing partnerships and pursue new ones, particularly with the private sector, to allow for a more holistic and integrated approach to supporting national social protection systems. UNDP prioritizes partnerships to enhance social protection systems and expand coverage of social services to the population. It will continue to work closely with government entities in respective countries and is committed to developing partnerships with United Nations agencies and other international institutions, particularly in the context of the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions.

46. UNDP agrees on the need to prioritize deeper private sector engagement in the delivery of social protection services, job creation, skills development and financing social protection. It will seek to ensure greater private sector engagement in the design and delivery of job creation and skills-development initiatives. By working with key public and private sector entities, UNDP will strengthen the responsiveness and inclusiveness of national skills systems; empower micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to gain the necessary skills for an inclusive digital transformation; and help reduce inequalities, exclusion and marginalization of the disadvantaged because of the changing nature of the work. UNDP will continue to emphasize supporting and bringing private sector financing for community-based action.

Recommendation 7

47. UNDP fully accepts the recommendation and is committed to advancing gender equality through developing national and subnational gender-responsive social protection strategies and programmes and addressing institutional gender norms that adversely affect service delivery. To build resilience, UNDP will continue to focus on addressing the root causes of gender-related constraints (e.g., women's overrepresentation in informal employment) and in supporting the development of a care economy and well-functioning care systems that recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. Related to environmental sustainability, UNDP will continue to focus on women's economic security and empowerment to mitigate risks ensuing from the green transition, and on addressing gender-related vulnerabilities due to climate shocks.

48. UNDP will create a global learning lab on gender-equal economies to elevate institutional capacities for the design and implementation of programmes that integrate the gender-equal economies agenda with the expansion of care systems and social protection. In addition, it will develop "equanomics", a global initiative that aims to scale up the ongoing work of UNDP towards gender-equal economies in three key areas: (a) expanding care systems; (b) fiscal policies work for gender equality; and (c) data and evidence to inform policymaking.

V. Meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century: the future social protection work of UNDP

49. With more than half the people in the world receiving only partial or no social protection, their capacity to withstand shocks is limited. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was already in havoc due to the waves of protest and social unrest erupting since 2019. Signs that a new social contract was urgently needed were reconfirmed when the pandemic broke out, leaving more than 180 countries adopting lockdown or stay-home measures for social distancing.¹⁰ Governments were forced to respond swiftly, either with temporary or long-term measures, given the large number of vulnerable people unable to cope with the health and socioeconomic impacts. Many countries are now revisiting their policies and social protection design to ensure they are shock-responsive and adaptive to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

50. In the next few years, many of the poorest economies will experience low and insufficient growth to expand their fiscal space to finance transformative investments in the Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Agreement commitments in energy transitions, digital infrastructure and social protection. In this scenario, developing countries will be unable to initiate any new relevant investments. Existing debt will make it unattractive to new financiers and high debt service burdens can crowd out critical government spending and investments. Based on credit ratings and debt sustainability risk analysis, [a group of 52 developing countries are expected to suffer severe debt distress](#). These include 17 low-income countries, 18 lower-middle-income and 17 upper-middle-income countries, accounting for 15 per cent of the global population and 40 per cent of the world's extreme poor. To free up fiscal space

¹⁰ According to the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.

and increase financial liquidity, the Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus Plan calls for additional resources, effective debt restructuring and expansion of development financing.

51. The new era of UNDP social protection work will be characterized by a growing focus on digital technologies and financing, which are critical enablers under the current Strategic Plan. Technologies are enabling faster and more accurate targeting of beneficiaries or allowing beneficiaries to access services and benefits remotely. Innovative financing mechanisms such as social impact or development impact bonds can help mobilize private sector resources but need to be balanced with debt restructuring measures. Expanding microinsurance for informal workers provided either by insurance companies, cooperatives or community-based organizations will also be a priority.

52. With demographic shifts and changing social norms, there is an increased demand for care services and focus on the growing care economy. As [women represent about 70 per cent of the global health and social care workforce](#), including both paid and unpaid care work, UNDP will explore options to complement existing public social protection schemes within the care economy, not as a replacement for what national and local governments must do. For instance, "[people to people social protection](#)" could boost social cohesion and foster trust and solidarity.

53. Social protection is experiencing a renaissance in the global development policy discourse due to the polycrisis that requires more agile and inclusive social protection systems. While the standard UNDP modus operandi is highly disaggregated and tailored to country needs, there may be scope for one or more global initiatives of scalable proportions, pulling programmatic, operational and thought leadership resources into a single moonshot.

54. Moving forward, UNDP priority investments are to develop a new generation of social protection schemes that are adequate for low-income informal workers and women; build digital capacities and mechanisms that will bring more of the population into the formal financial system and promote savings, with special outreach to women (leveraging digital social welfare payments, including government-to-person payments); and support micropension schemes for low-income informal workers or the most vulnerable. UNDP will make a strong business case for financing social protection and better targeting and governance, as a necessary investment in human capital, which can improve productivity, economic growth and overall well-being.

Annex. Key recommendations and the management response

Recommendation 1. UNDP should leverage its comparative advantage to identify its niche in supporting social protection. UNDP should prioritize support to social protection systems, while making greater efforts to explore the convergence between social protection and programmes in other areas such as governance, inclusive growth, economic empowerment, health, resilience and environment.

Management response:

UNDP accepts recommendation 1 and recognizes the importance of exploring the convergence of social protection with other relevant practice areas, including leveraging its existing vertical fund portfolios. To advance this, UNDP is already investing in capacities and resources across three critical areas: integrated programming and policy; data; and knowledge. Capitalizing on its comparative advantage and in partnership with government, development partners, the private sector and civil society, UNDP will support countries in strengthening their social protection systems, making them shock-responsive, risk-informed, inclusive and gender-responsive.

Key action(s)	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1.1. Under the global programme “governance for people and planet,” carry out mapping of governance-related “leverage points” to support social protection systems (including data/governance indicators related to social protection).	Q4, 2023	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support (BPPS)		
1.2. Develop the social action for environment and resilience framework to ensure the systematic integration of social protection elements in the vertical funds pipeline.	Q4, 2023	BPPS, regional bureaux		
1.3. Ensure that social protection dimensions are mainstreamed within the Leaders’ Pledge for Nature and its related action tracks and targets.	Q3, 2023	BPPS		

Recommendation 2. UNDP should detail its programmatic approach for social protection and provide practical guidance for strategic positioning in different country contexts. UNDP country offices should select and focus on a limited number of high-payoff solutions from the range of areas covered in the social protection offer, based on careful analysis of the specific context. UNDP should strengthen its social protection support to low-income and least developed countries.

Management response:

UNDP accepts recommendation 2 and recognizes the need to unceasingly provide practical guidance to country offices in terms of strategic positioning across development contexts. As a trusted development partner, UNDP will continue to provide integrated services, working with United Nations country teams and supporting Governments in the formulation of strategies and initiatives to respond to complex development challenges, utilizing a range of global assets, and bespoke tools and services. UNDP is committed to extending support to countries in assessing and identifying the risks and vulnerabilities faced by their populations, enabling the development of risk-informed social protection solutions tailored to specific needs of each country. The UNDP social protection offer will continue to be deployed on a country-demand basis, but the resource allocation to its programmatic work will follow the formula as agreed with the Executive Board, prioritizing the most vulnerable first. When targeting the constraints of low-income and middle-income countries, including least developed countries, UNDP will continue to strengthen its work on social protection financing schemes, debt sustainability and policy design and implementation. Further, while recognizing that the social protection needs are greatest in low-income and least developed countries, where basic systems are often not in place, expansion of social protection coverage in middle-income countries is constrained due to fragile revenue sources that are acutely under pressure amid recovery and macrofiscal crisis. In these contexts, UNDP is committed to provide policy advisory and technical support as well as analytics to

support reform of national social protection system towards a more inclusive system that prioritizes the vulnerable segments of the population, including through scoping sustainable financing options.				
2.1. Work with low-income and middle-income countries, in particular LDCs, to assess the opportunities and barriers for scaling up solidarity mechanisms and community-based mechanisms to complement existing public and private social protection coverage.	Q4, 2023	BPPS, Regional bureaux		
2.2. Scale up support to the least developed countries, in line with the Doha Programme of Action (2022-2031), to design, plan and implement inclusive, shock-responsive and fiscally sustainable social protection mechanisms and elevate the agenda of social protection.	Q4, 2024	BPPS, Crisis Bureau, Regional bureaux		
Recommendation 3. UNDP should strive to strengthen the nexus of social protection schemes with a green, just transition. In this regard, it should strengthen its support to active labour-market programmes, going beyond its supply-side, skills-development projects and making them relevant to current technological and environmental trends.				
Management response: UNDP fully accepts recommendation 3 and commits to strengthening the connection between social protection and green transition. This will be achieved by mitigating risks for vulnerable groups resulting from the green transition, establishing inclusive and gender-responsive social protection for climate-related shocks, and supporting individuals and households affected by environmental degradation and unsustainable production. To strengthen active labour-market policies, UNDP will support countries in expanding inclusive labour-market solutions while considering the emerging challenges and opportunities with digital transformation and the future of work.				
3.1. Utilize the Data Futures Platform to model the scenarios of the interlinkages between social protection and green transition and its impact.	Q4, 2024	BPPS		
3.2. Develop a framework for private sector engagement in skills development, including financing schemes, tools and guidance on priority areas such as digital, green and twenty-first century skills and the future of work (contributes also to recommendations 5 and 6).	Q4, 2024	BPPS		
3.3. Develop guidance for country offices to design active labour-market programmes that enable job creation and build a resilient workforce in the context of the green transition.	Q2, 2024	BPPS		
3.4. Support to programme countries in the development of a loss and damage assessment framework which adequately integrates social protection interventions to protect the most vulnerable to climate shocks	Q2, 2024	BPPS, Regional bureaux		
Recommendation 4. UNDP should strengthen the linkages between humanitarian assistance and national social protection systems at the country level, and better link short-term and long-term approaches in the context of an adaptive and shock-responsive approach to social protection.				

Management response: UNDP accepts recommendation 4 and recognizes the need to strengthen the linkages between humanitarian assistance and national social protection systems with the aim to address poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion, contributing to strengthening resilience. In crisis- and conflict-affected countries, adaptive social protection initiatives will be designed to target the most vulnerable populations, including internally displaced persons, refugees and those affected by conflict and natural disasters.				
4.1. Develop guidance on integrating social protection within insurance schemes, focusing on small-scale producers and building on the ongoing work with the insurance industry.	Q2, 2024	BPPS		
4.2. Take stock of UNDP experience in social protection and inclusion of internally displaced persons and, in collaboration with relevant United Nations partners, develop policy guidance to inform programmatic interventions at country level.	Q4, 2023	BPPS, Crisis Bureau		
4.3. Roll-out of the guidance on livelihoods and economic recovery in crisis and post-crisis settings, including a module on social protection, through a series of regional and country trainings.	Q4, 2023	Crisis Bureau, BPPS, Regional bureaux		
4.4. Scale up support to small island developing States and coastal cities to implement social protection measures based on the multi-poverty vulnerability index to build socioeconomic resilience of the urban poor and marginalized.	Q4, 2023	Crisis Bureau, BPPS, Regional bureaux		
Recommendation 5. UNDP support to national identification systems highlights that the use of technology has the potential to streamline social safety net assistance at the country level. Building on its ongoing work, UNDP should strengthen further its support to digitalization for social protection while striving to bridge the digital divide.				
Management response: UNDP fully accepts recommendation 5 and is committed to expanding the use of digitalization in the field of social protection. UNDP will continue to advocate for countries to use digitalization to build and maintain social registries, diversify digital payment systems, increase transparency, improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and employ digitalization and machine learning to develop predictive analytics for fraud detection in social insurance schemes and other social protection services and benefits. At the country level, UNDP will work with Governments in building digital platforms that enable citizens to access and benefit from social protection programmes, as well as facilitate dialogue and collaboration between Governments, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders to develop joint digital initiatives and projects. To this end, UNDP work on digital public infrastructure, such as digital identity platforms and payment systems, will serve as fundamental building blocks for digital innovations and services that benefit all.				
5.1. Utilize the UNDP digital fitness programme, the digital advocates network and the digital community of practice to better leverage digitalization in support of social protection initiatives, including a digital guide on social protection.	Q4, 2024	Chief Digital Office, BPPS		
5.2. Strengthen efforts to encourage interoperability between foundational registries (civil registration and national management) and social protection registries through inclusive digitalization processes.	Q4, 2023	BPPS, Regional bureaux		
5.3. Develop a framework for private sector engagement in skills development, including tools and guidance on growth and priority areas such as digital skills, green skills, twenty-first century skills, and future of work as well as the financing interventions in such areas (contributes also to recommendations 2 and 6).	Q4, 2024	BPPS		

Recommendation 6. Partnerships should be explored to allow a more holistic and integrated approach in supporting national social protection systems. UNDP should enable private sector engagement in the delivery of social protection services and in approaches for social protection financing.

Management response:

UNDP fully accepts recommendation 6 and is committed to leverage existing partnerships and pursuing new ones, particularly with the private sector, to allow for a more holistic and integrated approach to supporting national social protection systems. UNDP prioritizes partnerships as a means to enhancing social protection systems and expanding coverage of social services to the population. UNDP will continue to work closely with government entities in respective countries and is committed to developing partnerships with United Nations agencies and other international institutions, particularly in the context of the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions.

UNDP agrees on the need to prioritize further private sector engagement in the delivery of social protection services, job creation, skills development and financing social protection. This should also envisage greater engagement in the design and delivery of job creation and skills-development initiatives. By working with key public and private sector entities, UNDP will strengthen the responsiveness and inclusiveness of national skills systems, empower small and medium enterprise to gain the necessary skills for an inclusive digital transformation, and help reduce inequalities, exclusion and marginalization of the disadvantaged as a result of the changing nature of the work. UNDP will also continue to place a strong emphasis on supporting and bringing private sector financing for community-based action.

6.1. Leverage partnerships for the roll-out and implementation of the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transition to enhance national social protection systems.	Q4, 2024	BPPS		
6.2. Develop new financial instruments on biodiversity credits, including the piloting of Tiger Recovery Bond, to direct financing towards community livelihoods and well-being.	Q4, 2024	BPPS		

Recommendation 7. UNDP should strengthen its contribution to gender-responsive social protection, particularly through its support to social care and informal sector workers.

Management response:

UNDP fully accepts recommendation 7 and is committed to advancing gender equality through the development of gender-responsive national and subnational social protection strategies and programmes as well as addressing institutional gender norms that adversely affect service delivery. In addition to building resilience, UNDP will continue to focus on addressing the root causes of gender-related constraints (e.g., women's overrepresentation in informal employment) and in supporting the development of well-functioning care systems that recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. Related to environmental sustainability, UNDP will continue to focus on women's economic security and empowerment to mitigate risks that ensue from the green transition, as well as in addressing gender-related vulnerabilities due to climate shocks.

7.1. Create a global learning lab on gender-equal economies to elevate institutional capacities to design and implement programmes that integrate the gender-equal economies agenda with the expansion of care systems and social protection.	Q4, 2023	BPPS		
7.2. Develop the equanomics global flagship to scale up existing good practices and models and to strengthen evidence-based policymaking.	Q4, 2023	BPPS		

*The implementation status is tracked in the Evaluation Resource Centre.