5

Social Assistance

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If the first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" is to be taken seriously, most low- and middle-income countries face a huge challenge. An estimated 1 billion people have indeed escaped extreme poverty since the early 1990s, and the global poverty rate fell from 35% in 1990 to 10.7% in 2013, but the absolute number of people living below the international poverty line of $1.90 at purchasing power parity has hardly changed. Countries in Asia contributed greatly to the overall decline in poverty rates: from 2012 to 2013, over 100 million people in Asia left extreme poverty behind, notably in India, Indonesia, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) (World Bank 2016). Yet the living standards of those still below that line have hardly improved (Ravallion 2016). The achievement of the first SDG requires additional efforts at global and national levels, particularly on policies that address chronic poverty traps and that improve the outcomes of poor and vulnerable populations.

SDG Target 1.3 (Implement social protection, including floors) explicitly recognizes the potential of social protection systems for eradicating poverty. Noncontributory social protection schemes—also known as social assistance schemes[59]—as part of comprehensive social protection systems are important for guaranteeing a minimum consumption level for poor and vulnerable households, allowing them productive livelihoods, and promoting access and use of other public services such as education and health care.

Evidence of the positive impacts of social assistance, particularly of cash transfers, on the lives of the poor and vulnerable has accumulated over the past decade.[60] In developing countries with at-scale social protection systems, poverty and inequality have decreased considerably. International evidence is highly conclusive about the positive effect of cash transfers on school attendance, food

[58] The author would like to thank Eszter Timar for the excellent research assistance. This chapter benefited from comments from Michael Cichon, Willem Adema, Karin Schelzig, Nuno Cunha, and Sri Wening Handayani.

[59] Or in the terminology of the World Bank "social safety nets" (World Bank 2015). We will use the terms "social assistance" and "noncontributory social protection" interchangeably.

[60] See, for example, Handa and Davis (2006); Barrientos and Scott (2008); ILO (2010); IEG (2011); UNICEF (2012); Tirivayi, Knowles, and Davis (2013); World Bank (2015); and Bastagli et al. (2016).

consumption, and the health status of the population. Changes in disposable income stemming from social transfers positively affect labor supply and reduce rates of child labor. Additional effects are related to investments in child well-being and productive activities that raise human and physical capital and that foster labor productivity. Moreover, cash transfers are likely to be spent locally, generating local and regional economic multiplier effects.[61]

In the context of chronic poverty traps—often the result of unfavorable household demographics, little education, and lack of productive assets (Woolard and Klasen 2005; Scott et al. 2014; Mideros and Gassmann, forthcoming)—social assistance programs not only lift consumption floors, but also foster economic and social mobility for those at the bottom of the welfare distribution (Gertler, Martinez, and Rubio-Codina 2012). By extending coverage and improving the adequacy of noncontributory social protection measures, the poorest can eventually reach a sustainable growth path.

Social assistance programs, especially cash transfer programs, have become increasingly popular in low- and middle-income countries. According to the World Bank (2015), all of the 157 surveyed developing countries had at least one social assistance program. School feeding programs and unconditional cash transfers, such as social pensions and family allowances, are the most frequently used instruments. This is also the case in Asia, where among 29 countries, 18 have an unconditional cash transfer program and 19 have a school feeding program.[62] In the region, public works programs are available in 14 countries; conditional cash transfer programs and unconditional in-kind transfers in 11 countries; and fee waivers related to education, health, or housing services in 10 countries (World Bank 2015, p. 11).

Coverage of the poor remains limited, however, particularly in South Asia, where only 21% of the poorest 20% benefit from social assistance programs. Overall, 39% of the population in East Asia and the Pacific and 17% in South Asia are covered by noncontributory social protection schemes (World Bank 2015, p. 46). These numbers point to sizable coverage gaps in the region, indicating that substantial additional investments are required before social protection floors become a reality (ILO 2012).

[61] Mideros, Gassmann, and Mohnen. 2016. Estimation of Rates of Return on Social Protection: Ex Ante Microsimulation of Social Transfers in Cambodia. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*. 8(1). pp. 67–86.

[62] These numbers do not include countries in Central Asia, which fall under "Europe and Central Asia" according to the World Bank regional classification.

With limited fiscal resources, governments must decide whether to extend coverage (the horizontal dimension) or strengthen adequacy (the vertical dimension) of social assistance programs. While universal or categorical allocation of social assistance is the preferred solution in the long term, countries can build on current schemes in the short run and gradually extend eligibility and transfer levels over time.

Policy options include smart targeting (excluding wealthy households), sequentially including additional groups, raising eligibility thresholds of poverty targeting to reduce exclusion errors, consolidating current social assistance programs and subsidies, improving administrative procedures and use of social registries, and aligning social insurance and social assistance programs. Yet governments also need to invest in supply-side measures in providing services. Only then can demand strengthened by social assistance translate into better opportunities for the poor and vulnerable.

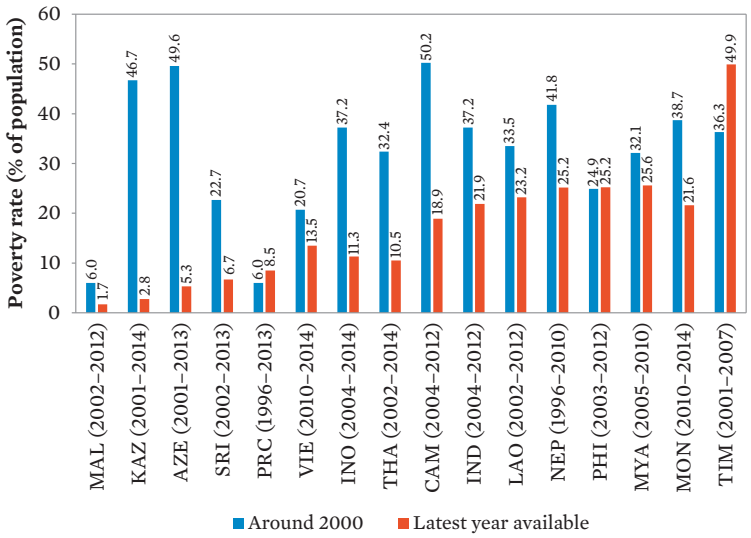
How Big Is the Social Assistance Gap?

In this chapter, social assistance is defined as noncontributory social protection provided on a regular basis and financed from general government revenues. The focus is primarily on cash-based programs, which may be targeted universally at specific groups of the population or means-tested. Eligibility criteria can range from simple categorical requirements, such as being of a certain age, to criteria related to household means, and any combination. Program eligibility may be further tied to conditions, as with conditional cash transfers, school feeding, or public works programs.

Poverty and Deprivation

The region had been successful in reducing poverty from 2002 to 2013. About 707 million people moved out of extreme poverty, as measured by international standards. Yet recent data show that roughly 9% (330 million) of the population of Asia and the Pacific still lives in extreme poverty (ADB 2016). Nationally, 14 of our 16 Asian focus countries saw rapidly decreasing poverty rates, though rates remained virtually unchanged in the Philippines, or even climbed sharply, as in Timor-Leste (Figure 5.1). Among the 16 countries, seven have more than one-fifth of their population living below their national poverty line. Moreover, distribution around the line is generally dense, which means that a shock can push large groups of the population into poverty. The dynamic nature of poverty also means that most poverty statistics are always playing a game of catch-

Figure 5.1: Poverty Trends Based on National Poverty Lines



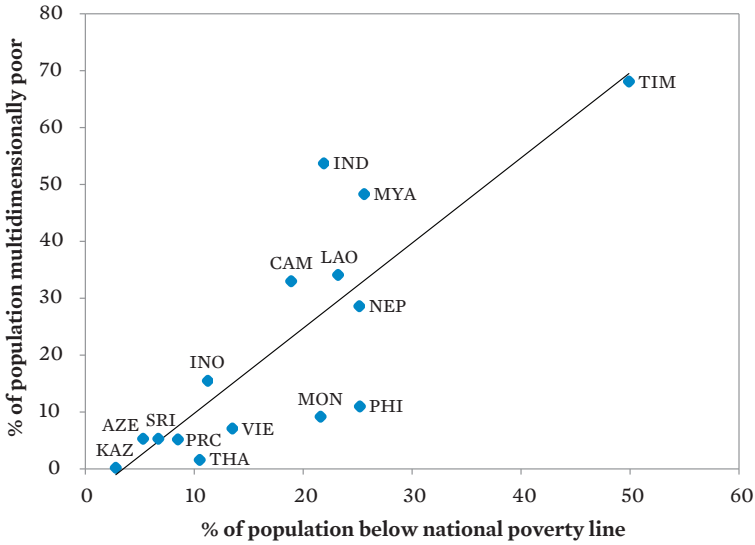
AZE = Azerbaijan, CAM = Cambodia, IND = India, INO = Indonesia, KAZ = Kazakhstan, LAO = Lao People's Democratic Republic, MAL = Malaysia, MON = Mongolia, MYA = Myanmar, NEP = Nepal, PHI = Philippines, PRC = People's Republic of China, SRI = Sri Lanka, THA = Thailand, TIM = Timor-Leste, VIE = Viet Nam.

Source: World Bank. World Development Indicators.

up, given the time lag between data collection and publication, which is a real issue with internationally comparable datasets such as the World Bank's World Development Indicators and others.

On multidimensional poverty, which captures deprivations in health, education, and living standards based on 10 nonmonetary indicators, poverty rates range from less than 1% in Kazakhstan to 68% in Timor-Leste (Alkire et al. 2016). Although there is a strong positive correlation between rates of monetary and multidimensional poverty, Figure 5.2 shows that each indicator captures distinctly different notions of poverty. Countries with similar monetary poverty levels can differ considerably on nonmonetary deprivation. In both India and Mongolia, for example, a similar share of the population lives below the national (monetary) poverty line, but on multidimensional (nonmonetary) poverty, less than 10% of Mongolia's population is multidimensionally poor, against 54% in India.

Figure 5.2: Monetary versus Multidimensional Poverty, Latest Years



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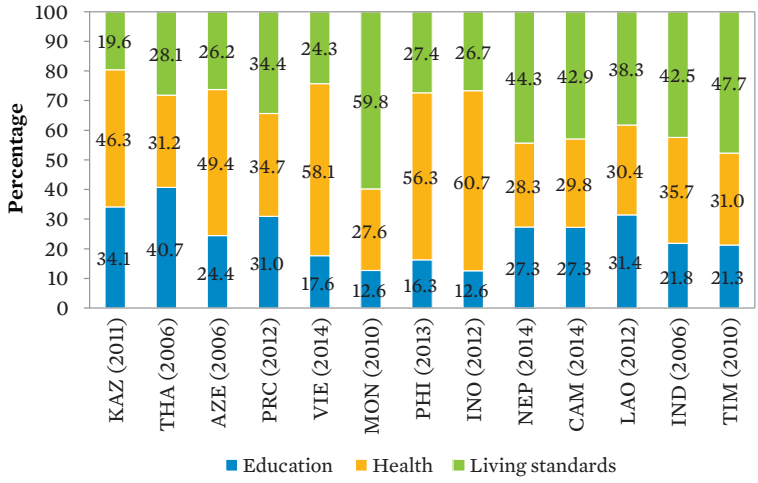
Note: No data for Malaysia.

Sources: Monetary poverty: World Bank. World Development Indicators; Multidimensional poverty: Alkire et al. (2016), except Myanmar and Sri Lanka: Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative Country Briefings.

This difference provides further evidence for the large heterogeneity of the countries in the region, resulting in different needs and challenges. Deprivations in education and health, for example, account for more than half of multidimensional poverty in most countries in the region (Figure 5.3).

Although the majority of the poor still live in rural areas, the number of poor in urban areas has increased in several Asian countries (ADB 2014). Urban poverty differs from rural poverty and is often more complex. Vulnerabilities relate to lack of appropriate housing, land, physical infrastructure, and access to services. Informality in urban areas is particularly high and income from work often volatile, which scarcely protects workers against poverty (ADB 2014).

Figure 5.3: Contribution of Dimensions to Multidimensional Poverty, Latest Years



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Note: No data for Malaysia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.

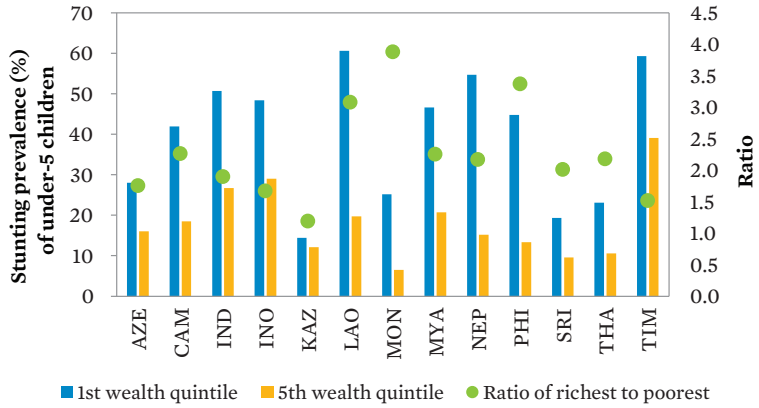
Source: Alkire et al. (2016).

Child malnutrition remains a concern for quite a few of the 16 focus countries. In Timor-Leste and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), over 49% of children under the age of 5 are stunted (UNICEF, World Bank, and WHO 2016). The prevalence of stunting among young children is much higher in poor households (Figure 5.4).

Despite the steady increase in average consumption and the subsequent decline in poverty rates, the situation of the remaining poor has scarcely improved. Fewer people have incomes below the poverty line, but the average distance of the poor to the poverty line has hardly narrowed (Ravallion 2016). This is confirmed by the average intensity of multidimensional deprivation, which ranges from 32% to 53% even in countries with very low multidimensional headcount rates (Alkire et al. 2016).[63]

[63] The average intensity of deprivation measures the average percentage of deprivations (over 10 weighted indicators) of those that are multidimensionally poor. It is the equivalent of the poverty gap rate, but only considers the poor and not the total population.

Figure 5.4: Stunting Disparities for Children Under-5, Latest Years



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Notes: Data ranging from 2010 to 2014. No data for the People's Republic of China, Malaysia, and Viet Nam.

Source: Alkire et al. (2016).

Flagship and Other Cash-Based Social Assistance Programs

Many countries have invested in social protection over the past decades, and social assistance programs have expanded rapidly.[64] Some of these programs belong to the world's largest programs by beneficiary numbers, such as the PRC's unconditional cash transfer program Di-Bao, targeted to the poor and reaching 75 million beneficiaries; Indonesia's BLSM[65] program providing unconditional cash transfers to 61 million; or the MGNREGA[66] public works program in India, which provides support to 58 million (World Bank 2015).

The Philippines' Pantawid[67] program, a conditional cash transfer program targeted at poor families with children, reaches 21% of the population, and Malaysia's BR1M,[68] an unconditional cash transfer for poor households, goes to 51% of the population (World Bank 2015).

[64] For an overview, see Annex 5.1.
[65] Bantuan Langsung Sementara Masyrakat.
[66] Mahatma Ghandi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.
[67] Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino.
[68] Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia.

At the other end of the spectrum are countries with no sizable cash-based social assistance programs, such as Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar. Being low-income, however, does not explain the absence of such programs. Low-income Nepal, for example, introduced its universal social pension in 1995 (though initially only for those 75 years and older). In 2014, the program had close to 1 million beneficiaries (World Bank 2015).

Providing income support to the elderly in the form of social pensions has become popular over the last 2 decades. Noncontributory income support programs for the elderly take different forms, ranging from social assistance programs targeted at poor households in general, to selective and universal social pensions (Barrientos 2012).

Beyond Nepal, countries with either universal or means-tested social pension schemes include India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the PRC, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam. The PRC is a particularly interesting case as its New Rural Social Pension program ties benefit receipt to the condition that the recipient's children contribute to the formal social insurance scheme. About 60% of people over 60 were a few years ago receiving payments from that program (ISSA 2013).

Income support for children is frequently provided in kind or in the form of education stipends. In-kind support, such as school feeding programs or fee waivers for education- or health-related services, is relatively common, with 11 of the 16 focus countries offering school feeding programs (World Bank 2015). Several countries provide cash-based scholarships for school-age children, sometimes merit-based and not necessarily targeted at vulnerable children. But these programs generally exclude young children and those not attending school.

Unconditional child grant programs are still rare. While Thailand is piloting a child grant for very young children, Mongolia is the only country with a universal child grant—the Child Money Program[69]—in which benefits are provided to every child up to the age of 18 (Onishi and Chuluun 2015). Kazakhstan provides a state allowance to children under 18 living in poor families. Over 600,000 children benefited from this program in 2012 (UNICEF 2015). Both Mongolia and Kazakhstan also have categorical social assistance transfers for families with

[69] The Child Money Program in Mongolia is currently distributed only to the poorest 60% of the children, but with the promise to pay retroactively to the remaining 40% once government finances allow. Although the Government of Mongolia has so far resisted pressures to introduce poverty targeting to the Child Money Program, the fragile economic situation necessitated postponing payments to the most affluent children.

many children. Nepal established a child grant to address the specific poverty and vulnerability of the Dalit, which takes a categorical approach to targeting in the poorest Karnali zone, and uses hybrid targeting (categorical and means-tested) in the rest of the country (Hagen-Zanker, Mallett, and Ghimire 2015).

Following the example of Latin America, several Asian countries have introduced conditional cash transfer programs for poor families with children. The Program Keluarga Harapan in Indonesia covered 6 million families in 2016, reaching 5% of the population and 11% of the poor. The program has recently been extended and includes families with elderly (aged 70 and above) and disabled household members (Gaol 2016). The Pantawid program in the Philippines reached 4.4 million households in 2015, among them over 10 million children (Mangahas 2016). The Bolsa da Mãe program in Timor-Leste provided cash transfers to 55,000 households in 2016 (Spantigati 2016).

Many general cash-based social assistance programs that target poor and vulnerable households may also benefit children and the elderly living in recipient households. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have targeted social assistance programs aimed at supporting extremely poor households. Azerbaijan's means-tested program provided support to 114,000 families in 2015, reaching close to half a million people (about 5% of the population), of whom almost 50% were below 18 (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection 2016). Kazakhstan's program is small, in 2016 providing means-tested support to 19,700 households, 54% of them in rural areas (Ministry of Healthcare 2016). The Government of Kazakhstan announced that this targeted social assistance program will become conditional for families with able-bodied household members, who will have to sign a "social contract" (Government of Kazakhstan 2016).

Income support for the working-age poor and vulnerable consists either of means-tested cash transfers (for example, Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan), categorical transfers to vulnerable groups such as the disabled (for instance, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam), or public works programs (such as the program under the MGNREGA Act in India). While MGNREGA is by far the largest, similar programs are available in some of the other focus countries, though they are either very small (Cambodia and Mongolia), only temporarily available (Kazakhstan), or are still in the pilot phase (Nepal).

Effectiveness of Existing Social Assistance Programs

Coverage, distribution, and adequacy are core outcome indicators for assessing programs' effectiveness. Coverage rates provide an indication of the horizontal

dimension, while benefit distribution and adequacy reflect achievements along the vertical dimension. Comparable information on the performance of social assistance schemes is scarce, however. The ASPIRE database hosted by the World Bank is the only database allowing for a cross-country comparison of performance indicators.[70] Its standardized indicators are derived from national household surveys and are updated regularly, but its limitations have to be kept in mind in cross-country use.

As the selection of programs covered by the data depends on the World Bank's definition of social assistance[71] and on the availability of program information in national surveys, results may differ from country-specific analyses and national reports. Moreover, data are not available for all countries or all indicators. And some of the data are quite old,[72] because household survey data are not collected regularly in all countries and often become available for analysis only with delay.

Coverage with social assistance—broadly defined—varies greatly (Figure 5.5).[73] While close to 100% of the population in Mongolia benefited from any form of social assistance in 2012,[74] only 17% of the population in India was covered in 2011. In other words, only 17% of the Indian population was living in a household where at least one household member benefited from any social assistance program, in cash or in kind.

Among the poorest 20% of the population per country, coverage rates exceeded 85% in Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, and Thailand. Some 40%–50% of the poorest quintile are social assistance beneficiaries in Kazakhstan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The situation changes considerably for cash transfers. While coverage rates among the poorest remain high in Azerbaijan, Malaysia, and Mongolia, they fall sharply in other countries: in Kazakhstan, Nepal, and Thailand, less than 5% of the population in the poorest quintile receives any form of cash transfer. As the figure indicates, this is not simply a matter of targeting, but an indication of program size in general. In Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam,

[70] http://datatopics.worldbank.org/aspire/. Unlike other databases, ASPIRE data are based on national household survey data. The Social Protection Index database of ADB relies on administrative data provided by national governments.

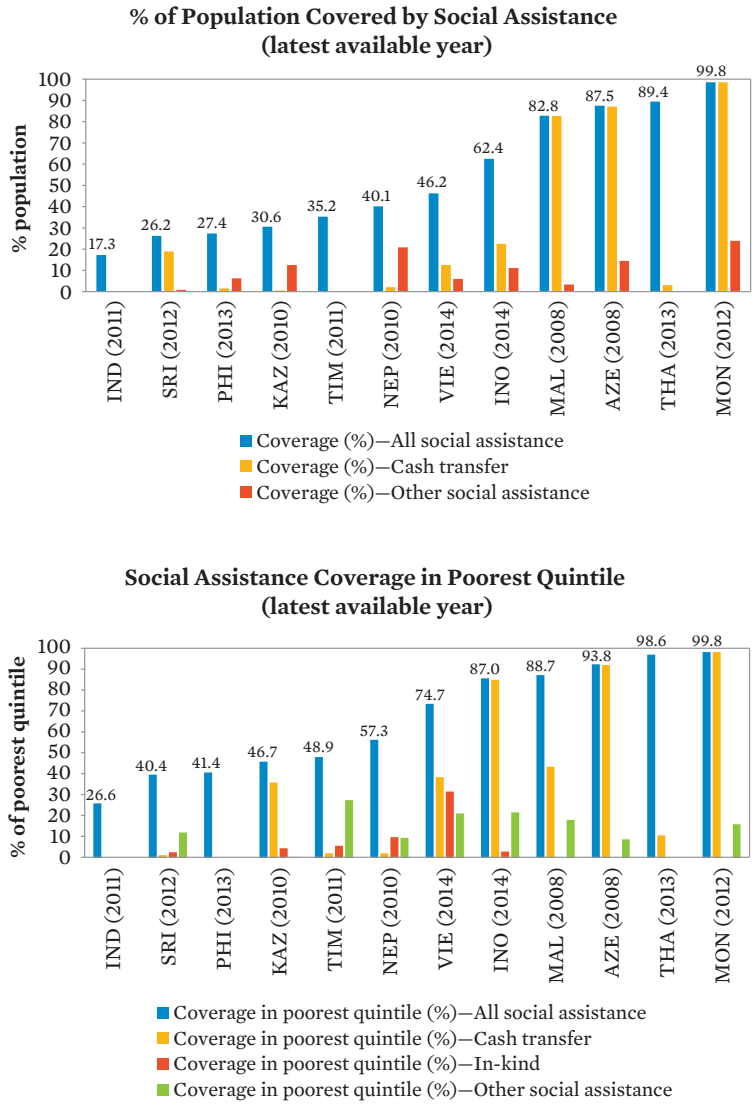
[71] Includes, in principle, any kind of social assistance programs (cash transfers, in-kind transfers, school feeding, public works, fee waivers, and others) for which data are available in national surveys (World Bank 2015).

[72] We only include focus countries with data not older than 2006.

[73] Note that coverage rates refer to the total population (or a subgroup thereof).

[74] The 100% coverage refers to 2012 when every citizen was receiving a transfer from the Human Development Fund, which was essentially a basic income. The policy changed in mid-2012, after which only children remained eligible.

Figure 5.5: Coverage of the Population (top) and of the Poor (bottom) with Social Assistance



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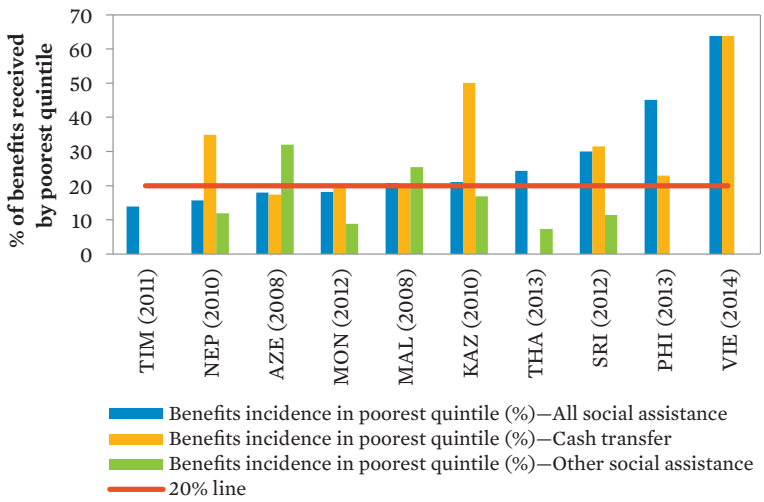
Source: Author's calculations based on data from ASPIRE.

coverage rates of cash transfers are also below 50%, all in all implying that many countries exclude large shares of the poor from their social assistance programs.

Nor is the distribution of benefits always pro-poor. In Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and Nepal—three of the seven countries for which we have information on the distribution of cash transfers—less than 20% of total transfers are distributed to the poorest quintile (Figure 5.6). In Azerbaijan, more than 80% of the poorest are cash transfer beneficiaries, yet they receive less than 20% of the money allocated. A similar situation is seen in Malaysia and Mongolia. The opposite pattern is seen in Kazakhstan, Nepal, and Viet Nam: despite low coverage rates of cash transfers among the poorest quintile, there is a progressive allocation of transfers.

These findings exemplify the inherent trade-off between inclusion and exclusion errors. Narrowly targeted social assistance systems, particularly those relying on individual needs assessments, often result in high exclusion errors, while countries with (partly) universal systems perform well on coverage, as the nonpoor are benefiting from the support as well.

Figure 5.6: Distribution of Cash Transfers to the Poor



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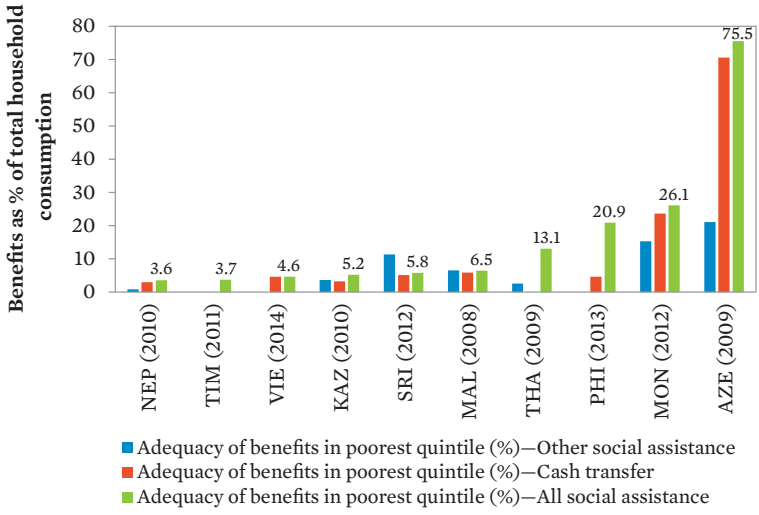
Source: Author's calculations based on data from ASPIRE.

The effectiveness of social assistance programs can be assessed by considering the transfer value in terms of total household consumption and the expected impact on poverty rates. On average, cash transfers account for 10% of poor households' consumption in low-income countries and 21% in lower middle-income countries (World Bank 2015). Unconditional cash transfer programs, such as social pensions or family allowances, are more generous than other types of cash transfer programs. Still, the average transfer size is far from enough to bring the extreme poor up to the international poverty line.

Overall, transfers cover about one-fifth of the amount needed to eradicate extreme poverty (World Bank 2015). Among the selected countries in Asia with comparable data, Azerbaijan stands out, as cash transfers account for 70% of household consumption among the poor (Figure 5.7). Mongolia is the only other country in our sample where the value of cash transfers exceeds 20% of poor households' consumption. In all other countries, the adequacy of the transfer value lags far behind, representing as little as 5% of average household

Figure 5.7: Share of Benefits in Total Household Consumption of the Poor



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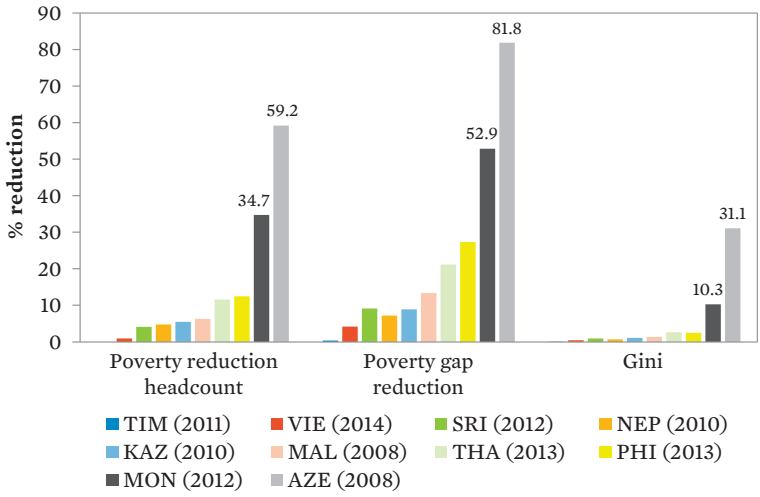
Source: Author's calculations based on data from ASPIRE.

consumption of the poorest quintile. Unsurprisingly, the poverty reduction effect of many social assistance programs is minimal.

Due to their relatively generous schemes or multiple programs, Azerbaijan and Mongolia also stand out on the poverty reduction effect of their social assistance schemes. If the international poverty line is used as a standard, poverty is eradicated by cash transfers in Azerbaijan, reduced by more than 80% in Mongolia, and by more than 60% in Malaysia. However, the level of extreme poverty is arguably low in these countries and little needs to be eradicated. Yet even if we define the bottom 20% of the population as poor,[75] Azerbaijan and Mongolia still stand out with a reduction of the poverty gap of 82% and 53%, respectively (Figure 5.8). Malaysia lags somewhat behind, probably because of the low benefit level relative to household consumption.

Figure 5.8: Poverty Reduction Effect



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Source: Author's calculations based on data from ASPIRE.

[75] This means anchoring the poverty rate of 20% in each country for comparative purposes. It also implies that the reduction of the poverty gap can be understood as the reduction of the gap of the poorest 20% due to the standardization of the poverty rate.

The data in this section have provided only a snapshot, and conclusions depend on the year or years with data. Azerbaijan and Mongolia exemplify this issue. Both are resource rich and depend heavily on revenues from the export of oil (Azerbaijan) and other natural resources (Mongolia). During good times, the countries expanded their support for the poor and vulnerable, but the decline in global commodity prices required them to cut back on social assistance spending, reducing the number of beneficiaries in both countries.

Closing the Social Assistance Gap

The right to social assistance, as part of social protection, has been progressively recognized and realized around the world during the last century. Social protection and a decent standard of living are human rights, entrenched in international agreements such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); or the ILO's Social Protection Floor Recommendation (ILO 2012). These agreements have been signed, ratified, or adopted by most countries of the world.

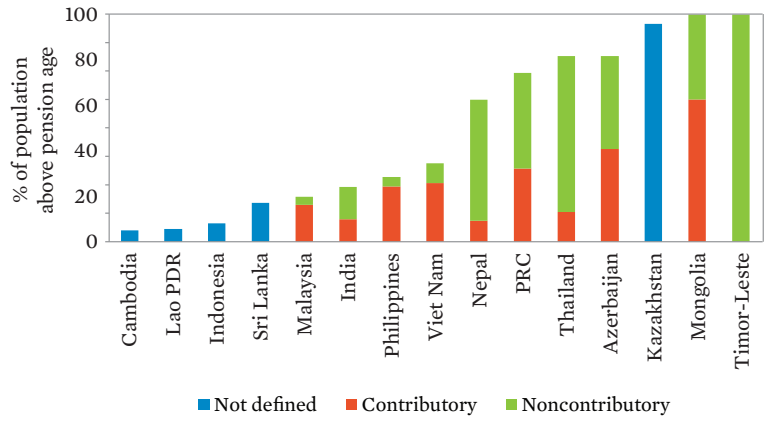
Such human rights-based approaches to social protection define the role of states and their citizens as duty-bearers and rights-holders (Piron 2004). And if social protection is a human right, therefore, it is a legal entitlement rather than a matter of charity, and is the responsibility of the state to provide it. At the 23rd ASEAN Summit in 2013, member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—including focus countries Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam—adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection (ASEAN Member States 2013).

With social assistance policies underperforming in most countries, simply allocating more money—though urgently needed—will not solve the problem. Hence, the question is how to move forward to close the social protection gap through 2030. A realistic approach starts by analyzing the portfolio of social assistance now provided and identifying those programs which are performing reasonably well and have the potential to be expanded, reformed, or both.

Basic Income Security for the Elderly

The policy context for the elderly population is probably the most promising among the three groups: the elderly, children, and working-age adults. In most

Figure 5.9: Pension Coverage



LAO = Lao People's Democratic Republic, PRC = People's Republic of China.
Notes: Data ranging from 2010 to 2012. "Not defined" means that no information is available on the distinction between contributory and noncontributory coverage.
Source: ILO (2014).

societies, the elderly are more likely considered to be deserving of government support, which makes policy choices in their favor more sustainable (Schüring and Gassmann 2016). Universal coverage of the population above pension age has already been achieved in Mongolia and Timor-Leste (Figure 5.9). Kazakhstan has close to 100% coverage, while the pension schemes in Azerbaijan, the PRC, and Thailand cover more than 70% of the population above the national pension age. In Nepal, the pension coverage rate also exceeds 60%. In all other focus countries, the majority of the elderly are not yet covered (ILO 2014).

Most countries rely on a mix of contributory and noncontributory pensions. Following the subsidiarity principle, the higher the coverage with social insurance pensions in a country, the lower the need for social pensions. Countries where the majority of the population works in the informal economy tend to have low contribution rates and thus low coverage rates. Moreover, statutory pensions can be small for those with an incomplete contribution history or low previous earnings. Social pensions can replace or complement the pension gap. They are also a means of redistributing from the young to the old and from the wealthier to the poor. The question is whether social pensions should be provided

universally (upper scenario) or targeted to the poor (lower scenario).[76] Universal social pensions have the advantage that they are relatively easy to manage and implement.

The design of social pension schemes offers a lot of flexibility. They can be tailored to the needs and resources of a country and adjusted over time. Most countries with social pensions use the universal approach, but some have narrowed eligibility by setting higher age limits or providing transfers only to those without any other pension entitlements, like Mongolia (Neuland 2016). Nepal went the other way, initially defining the eligibility age at 75, but later lowering it to 70.[77] The Philippines has also gradually lowered the pension age.

Timor-Leste provides a monthly pension to everybody aged 60 and older (or 18 and older in case of severe disability). Timor-Leste is particularly interesting because there is no contributory pension program—universal coverage is achieved solely by the noncontributory social pension. Other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam, offer means-tested social pensions to their elderly citizens.

Social pensions have the advantage of being politically more acceptable. They can also be effective in contexts with large international migration, which results in contribution gaps of current migrants and undermines intergenerational family support (Barrientos 2012).

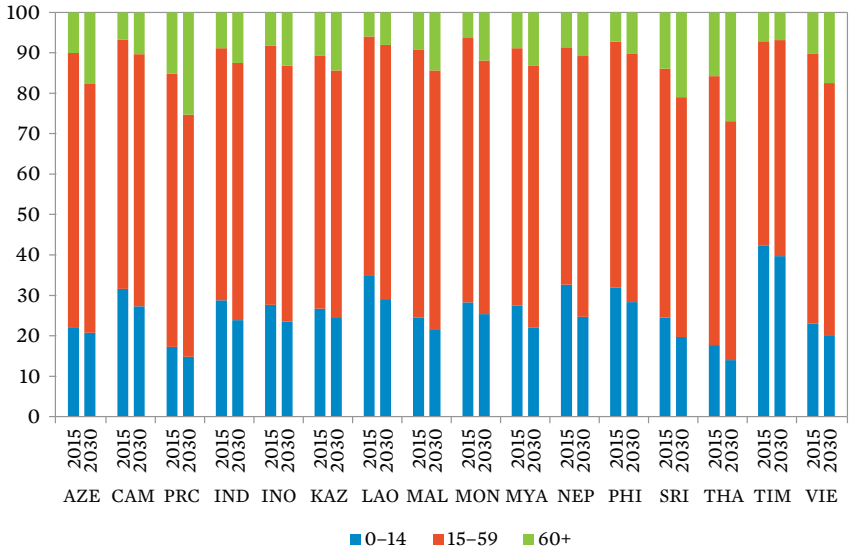
Concerns relate to sustainability given demographic trends (Figure 5.10). The financial requirements of social pensions provided to everybody aged 60 and above, as underlying the upper scenario, are particularly high in the PRC, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, where the share of people aged 60 and above in the population will likely exceed 20% by 2030 (UN DESA Population Division 2015). Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Mongolia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste, on the other hand, have a comparatively young population. The share of the elderly increases most rapidly in Viet Nam, Thailand, Mongolia, and Azerbaijan with growth rates of 70% and more through 2030.

Basic Income Security for Children

While the demographic dividend may work in favor of introducing and extending universal pensions in countries with a young population, it may work against

[76] See Chapter 1 for explanation on lower and upper scenarios.
[77] For Dalits and all residents of the Karnali region, the age limit is set at 60.

Figure 5.10: Expected Demographic Trends (%)



AZE = Azerbaijan, CAM = Cambodia, IND = India, INO = Indonesia, KAZ = Kazakhstan, LAO = Lao People's Democratic Republic, MAL = Malaysia, MON = Mongolia, MYA = Myanmar, NEP = Nepal, PHI = Philippines, PRC = People's Republic of China, SRI = Sri Lanka, THA = Thailand, TIM = Timor-Leste, VIE = Viet Nam.

Source: UN DESA Population Division (2015).

the universal protection of children as the potential number of beneficiaries is much higher. Because of the fiscal implications, governments in countries with a child and youth bulge may find universal cash transfers for children unattractive and unaffordable. Yet this is a rather shortsighted view given the importance of human capital for the economic development of a country and the future returns of investing in the development of children (Dietrich et al. 2016; Mideros, Gassmann, and Mohnen 2016).

Social assistance programs for children show great variation across countries. Among the 16 focus countries, only Mongolia has a universal child allowance for children up to 18.[78] At the other end of the spectrum are countries with purely poverty-targeted cash transfers, often in combination with conditionality. In between are countries that have a mix of different cash-based social assistance

[78] Although currently put on hold for the most affluent 40% of children.

programs for children, some categorical and some poverty targeted. Eligibility for a categorical transfer can refer to the age of the child, disability status, the presence of parents, household composition, or location, while the transfers for poor children depend on the living standard of the child's family.

Arguments against the introduction of universal child grants are mainly related to budget constraints and sometimes to the fear of increasing fertility rates. While there is no evidence for the latter argument (see, for example, Palermo et al. 2015), the financial argument is not that easily rejected. Particularly low-income countries are more likely to have a young population and generate at the same time less government revenue. A sequenced introduction of universal child grants, though, would still be feasible.

One option is to start with the very young children, as they are often the most vulnerable, and deprivations at a young age have detrimental consequences for later in life.[79] Over time, the eligible age can be increased. Thailand, for example, has chosen this strategy. In the pilot year, the government provided a monthly cash payment to 128,000 children born between October 2015 and September 2016 to poor and vulnerable families (Samson 2016). In 2016, the project was extended for 3 years, increasing the level of benefits and the number of beneficiaries (Chanmorchan et al. 2016).

Another option is to combine universal and targeted child grants. During the first years of life, for example, all children are eligible, while from a certain age transfers are targeted to poor children. Kazakhstan has taken this approach: it offers a universal birth grant, a universal benefit for children under 1 year, and a narrowly targeted[80] state allowance for children until 18 (ODI 2015). Targeting the state allowance to poor children may save costs in the short run, but, in the longer run, it may limit the country's economic growth potential and jeopardize the achievement of other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as universal education, if children are prevented from attending school due to lack of financial resources.

Basic Income Security for Working-Age Adults

Protecting working-age adults from poverty by providing them with basic income security is perhaps the hardest and most controversial policy discussion, unless it concerns a (severely) disabled or (chronically) ill person. Most countries

[79] For a recent overview, see Samson (2016).
[80] The eligibility threshold of the means test is an average per capita income of 60% of the subsistence minimum (ODI 2015).

have categorical social assistance programs, similar to social pensions, for adults incapable to work. Governments are reluctant to offer cash transfers to poor work-able adults. The common perception is that social assistance creates work disincentives and makes recipients welfare dependent, even though most empirical research from low- and middle-income countries refutes the argument (ILO 2010; Gassmann, François, and Trindade 2016; Gassmann and Trindade 2016). This may explain the popularity of public works programs, such as the MGNREGA program in India. The prevalence of public works program in the other 15 countries is, however, limited. Existing programs are either small in scope or are in essence community-based social programs.

Employment-guarantee programs, such as the one in India, have potential but also limitations, and might not always be the best option. Public works programs can help in middle-income countries that have been subject to a macroeconomic shock; in low-income countries, which mainly depend on agriculture and are exposed to regular weather shocks or seasonal variation; in post-conflict countries or otherwise fragile contexts; and in countries that have suffered from a natural disaster (Subbarao et al. 2013). Depending on the nature of the shock and the country context, public works programs may be temporary—or they may be there to stay.

Depending on the type of employment ("work") offered, which often involves heavy labor, not all groups can effectively participate. The prospects of moving from public works to regular work are also rarely bright. Yet public works programs have proven to be effective in crises, for example in the aftermath of conflict or natural emergencies. Public works programs are also effective when combined with other types of social assistance programs. Take the Ethiopian Productive Safety Net Program, which shows that public works programs can be supplemented with cash transfers and livelihood support, depending on the characteristics and needs of the beneficiary household.

Closing the Gap

If SDG Target 1.3 is to be achieved by 2030 and the social protection gap is to be closed, most of the 16 Asian countries have to step up their efforts and invest in effective and efficient social assistance schemes. The two main policy issues are to extend coverage and increase the level of transfers for adequate protection.

Azerbaijan, Malaysia, and Mongolia aside, cash transfers reach only a fraction of the poor. To reduce exclusion errors, countries need to gradually extend the eligibility criteria of existing programs. The nature of the extension depends on

the country and its current targeting system. Nepal, for example, could further lower the age after which the elderly are eligible for a social pension. Countries with means-tested cash transfers, such as Mongolia's food stamp program, the Philippines' Pantawid, or Indonesia's Program Keluarga Harapan, could consider raising the eligibility threshold to reach a larger share of the poorest households.

In most countries, the horizontal dimension of social protection needs to be broadened, as some groups are systematically excluded. Viet Nam, for example, which has a mix of categorical and means-based criteria, should consider including children under the age of 3, who are not covered by any social assistance scheme. Among the focus countries, coverage with social assistance programs of the urban poor is far lower than of the rural poor (Gentelini 2015), except for Azerbaijan and Mongolia, where urban coverage is higher or equal, respectively (World Bank 2015).

Some programs indeed focus only on the poor in rural areas, such as India's MGNREGA. The PRC has found a way to address the disparities between urban and rural areas, by operating two different subprograms of Di-Bao unconditional cash transfer program: one for urban and one for rural areas (ADB 2014). Another example is Viet Nam, where the eligibility threshold for the Regular Social Assistance is set at different levels for urban and rural households; and a multidimensional poverty component takes into account deprivations in housing, infrastructure, and services (Dutta 2016).

Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar have no sizable cash-based social assistance schemes yet. All three have small pilot-based programs, often financed with support from international donors. Cambodia and Myanmar have developed social protection strategies, which will guide implementation of national social assistance schemes. Myanmar's plans for protecting children are similar to Thailand's: start with the youngest children and extend assistance to other age groups gradually.

The second option—or rather necessity in many countries—is to increase benefit levels to improve the effectiveness of social assistance. As the analysis has shown, the poverty reduction impact of many cash transfer programs is weak: the contribution of cash transfers to total household consumption is significantly below 10% in most countries. However, increasing benefit levels requires additional resources. Governments will face the dilemma of whether to extend the horizontal dimension of basic income security or use the resources to strengthen the vertical dimension.

The Way Forward

Recent estimates indicate that the eradication of extreme poverty—lifting everybody to the international poverty line of $1.90 per day in 2011 purchasing power parity (PPP)—would require less than 1% of GDP in most of our 16 countries (Table 5.1). Closing the poverty gap up to $3.10 per day in 2011 PPP requires considerably more funds and exceeds the threshold of 3% of GDP in five countries (Cambodia, India, the Lao PDR, Nepal, and Timor-Leste) (Bierbaum et al. 2016). The lower and upper scenarios in Chapter 1 indicate the financial

Table 5.1: Estimated Costs of Closing the Income and Sustainable Development Goal-Related Gaps
(% of GDP)

	Income Gap[a]		SDG-Related Gap in 2030[b]	
Country	At $1.90	At $3.10	Lower	Upper
Azerbaijan	0.0	0.0	0.7	6.8
Cambodia	0.2	3.6	0.6	7.6
PRC	0.1	0.6	0.0	1.5
India	0.5	3.9	1.5	6.1
Indonesia	0.1	1.4	0.1	3.4
Kazakhstan	0.0	0.0	0.2	3.1
Lao PDR	1.2	6.0	0.8	4.6
Malaysia	0.0	0.0	0.1	6.0
Mongolia	0.0	0.1	0.2	5.4
Myanmar	...	...	2.1	8.4
Nepal	0.6	5.7	1.5	11.2
Philippines	0.3	2.2	0.2	3.9
Sri Lanka	0.0	0.5	0.0	2.2
Thailand	0.0	0.0	0.4	4.9
Timor-Leste	2.0	12.7	5.2	12.7
Viet Nam	0.1	0.8	0.6	6.6

... = no data, GDP = gross domestic product, Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic, PRC = People's Republic of China, SDG = Sustainable Development Goal.

[a] Based on international poverty lines in 2011 purchasing power parity.

[b] Only the social protection gap; indicates necessary expenditures in 2030 (see Chapter 1 for details).

Sources: Income gap: Bierbaum et al. (2016); SDG-related gap: Chapter 1 of this book.

resources needed to close the social assistance gap: lower closing the national poverty gap, upper assuming universal coverage of children and the elderly, and a minimum employment guarantee for unemployed working-age adults. Chapter 1 indicates that the costs for the lower scenario are low to moderate in most countries. The upper scenario, however, exceeds the financial means of countries such as Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Nepal, and Timor-Leste even over the longer term, but can guide the discussion of policy options.

The additional financial resources required to achieve the lower scenario seem moderate for most of our 16 focus countries (Table 5.1), but these estimates present, at best, a lower bound. The actual requirements might be far more, given the difficulty of identifying and targeting the extremely poor. The underlying assumption of perfect targeting is unlikely to be achieved, and neglects the allocation problem. Even the most effective poverty-targeted[81] social assistance programs have substantial exclusion errors. Therefore, an assessment of the required minimum resources needs to account for inclusion and exclusion errors, given the trade-off between the two types of errors, and would lead to a higher lower bound. If the lower scenario is to be achieved at all costs, countries would have to completely overhaul their approach, which could be detrimental in the long run and most probably prevent future change to the upper scenario, which reflects the idea of national social protection floors.

Theoretically, the lower scenario could be achieved by bundling all existing cash-based programs, including social pensions and other categorical programs, into one single poverty-targeted program. It would entail a move from individual transfers to family or household-based programs—"family packages."[82] Each family will be assessed as one unit. The family gap in relation to the poverty line then determines the level of the family transfer.

It is immediately evident that this option faces several obstacles. First, it requires a welfare indicator to be identified, one that accurately reflects a household's living standard. Given that the majority of the poor in our sample countries depend on subsistence agriculture or work in the informal sector, a standard or even verified means test assessing incomes and assets is infeasible.

[81] Poverty-targeted is used here as a general term and refers to targeting methods that apply to individual or household assessments of living standards to establish benefit eligibility, such as means tests, proxy means tests, or community-based assessments.

[82] One could argue that this violates human rights as such an approach would also affect individual rights of those receiving social pensions and disability allowances.

The next option is the use of proxy means tests, which several countries already use. However, as the word "proxy" says, these tests are only as accurate as the underlying data and methodology used to calibrate the test. Inclusion and exclusion errors are inevitable. Presupposing that exclusion errors are the main concern, raising the eligibility threshold above the poverty line may partly solve the issue and guarantee that a larger share of the poor are entitled to a transfer. A less invasive approach would be to keep existing categorical transfers as they are implemented now, but they would be part of the family assessment. Still, the targeting problem remains the same.

In the true spirit of national social protection floors and given the challenges of achieving the lower scenario, moving stepwise toward the second option (upper scenario) seems more promising. It allows countries to build on the systems already in place and gradually extend coverage and increase transfer levels. Several countries with relatively long-standing social protection systems can gain much by reforming them. *Consolidation* is a key word here. Mongolia, for example, has, besides the child grant program, more than 70 social assistance programs of which all but one (the food stamp program) are allocated on a categorical basis. The distribution of benefits for several of these programs is highly regressive (Onishi and Chuluun 2015).

Viet Nam is similar. Its social protection schemes are rather patchy. Many different laws and decrees govern the various programs and the responsibilities are spread over several ministries, such that some groups are quite well protected, while others are entirely excluded. Also common to socialist countries, programs do not necessarily target the poor and vulnerable, but are allocated based on "deservingness" or merit. Governments stand to gain a lot from thinking about *comprehensive* social protection systems, i.e., the protection offered by social insurance, social assistance, employment, and health policies.

Moving toward such systems requires appropriate country-based strategies. Many countries have formulated social protection strategies, either as stand-alone documents or as part of national poverty reduction strategies (World Bank 2015). But having a strategy is no guarantee of implementation as strategies are often guided by wishful thinking or—to put it more positively—embody a vision that will take many years to realize.

Particularly in countries with many different social assistance programs, institutions, agencies, and other entities at different administrative levels, the absence of strong coordination mechanisms or a lead agency leads to scattered, overlapping, and eventually costly but ineffective systems. Strengthening the

institutions involved in designing and running social assistance schemes and coordinating them can help implement policies better, including comprehensive management information systems. Social registries, as for example in Indonesia and the Philippines, contain information on potentially eligible individuals and households, and can be used to assign, administer, and monitor such schemes (World Bank 2015). Beneficiary registries, in contrast, are narrower in scope, as they focus on benefit recipients. Still, these systems are essential for monitoring and for potentially identifying benefit overlaps if the registry contains information on all programs.

Yet the question remains how to move forward, at this juncture where to start. In the spirit of social protection floors, extending the horizontal dimension would come first, after which the degree of protection can be improved. This argues for improving coverage before adequacy. But even then, which groups should be prioritized if the budget does not extend to serving all?

A policy analyst's perspective would first assess the degree of poverty and vulnerability of the different groups in the population and prioritize those most at risk. The policy maker, on the other hand, may consider the political economy and societal preferences that could lead to a different ordering. Both perspectives are relevant in the policy-making process and should guide the development of national social protection strategies on how to fill the social assistance gap. It requires regular analysis of the situation, which feeds into a broad-based social dialogue on each country's way forward.

A final word on data. Comparable data are hard to find, notably poverty rates for subgroups, and information on current social assistance spending and on the performance of social assistance programs. Hence, to appreciate to what extent the social protection gap is closing over time, more specific, accurate, and comparable data are needed.

Conclusions

Social assistance programs play an important role in comprehensive social protection systems if the horizontal dimension of the social protection floor is to be achieved. Cash-based programs especially are effective for ensuring basic income security for children, adults, and the elderly in need. Yet as the analysis has shown, most countries in the region are lagging behind on both coverage *and* adequacy.

Coverage gaps are grounded in several factors: lack of government-based national social assistance programs are still absent, as for example in Cambodia and Myanmar; needs exceeding the allocated financial resources in countries with relatively high poverty rates; or programs do not reach those in need. The last point may be due to inappropriate or narrow targeting methods leading to exclusion of the poor, or the absence of programs for certain groups.

Shortcomings in adequacy stem predominantly from insufficient budget allocations resulting in cash transfers that account for only a small share in overall household consumption. Moreover, social assistance cash transfers are rarely adjusted for increases in living costs, because laws do not include explicit regulations for that.[83]

Given administrative capacity requirements for and the problems of correctly identifying the poor through individual needs assessments, universal or categorical allocations of cash transfers are the preferred policy solution to close the social assistance gaps. Yet this first-best solution may not be financially or politically feasible. And so, based on the above analysis, the following recommendations emerge:

- Use smart targeting, excluding wealthy households;
- Sequence inclusion of additional groups over time;
- Raise eligibility thresholds of poverty-targeting to reduce exclusion errors;
- Consolidate existing social assistance programs and subsidies;
- Use social registries to strengthen the administration, monitoring, and evaluation of social assistance programs;
- Strengthen social insurance schemes and align eligibility rules and benefit levels with social assistance programs; and
- Improve the collection of accurate and comparable data on poverty and social assistance within and across countries to inform the policy dialogue with evidence.

Social assistance programs by themselves cannot close the protection gap or achieve the first SDG, but they can be very effective in supporting a country's development and the achievement of inclusive growth. Social assistance enables households to invest in human and physical capital, reducing inequality and the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

[83] National legislation governing social assistance policies is entirely lacking in some countries.

Yet for social assistance policies to be effective, governments should invest in the provision of services such as health, education, and infrastructure. Only then can demand strengthened by social assistance translate into better opportunities for the poor and vulnerable.

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Annex 5.1 Table: Overview of Social Assistance Programs in 16 Countries

	General Social Assistance			Social Assistance for Children			Social Assistance for the Active Aged			Social Assistance for the Elderly		
Country	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description
Azerbaijan	Targeted Social Assistance	548,663 (2012)[a]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	–	–	–	–	–	–	Old Age Social Allowance	1,290,000 (2016)[l]	Social Pension, pension-tested
Cambodia	–	–	–	CESSP Scholarship Program	...	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	–	–	–	–	–	–
PRC	Di-Bao	74,500,000 (2013)[a]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	Educational subsidies	...	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	–	–	–	Social Pension	...	Social Pension, universal
India	–	–	–	Janani Suraksha Yojana	7,301,654 (2014)[a]	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme	57,801,470 (2014)[a]	Employment guarantee	Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme	20,885,795 (2014)[a]	Social Pension, universal
Indonesia	Program Keluarga Harapan	6,000,000 families (2016)[b]	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	Scholarship for Poor Students	3,080,000 (2013)[a]	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	–	–	–	Asistensi Sosial Usia Lanjut	10,000 (2013)[m]	Social Pension, means-tested
Kazakhstan	Targeted Social Assistance	104,100 (2012)[a]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	State allowance	600,000 (2012)[s]	Targeted, cash transfer	"Road Map" Program	247,000 (2009)[a]	Public works	State Basic Pension	1,930,800 (2010)[n]	Social Pension, pension-tested

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Annex 5.1 Table *continued*

Country	General Social Assistance			Social Assistance for Children			Social Assistance for the Active Aged			Social Assistance for the Elderly		
	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description
Lao PDR	–	–	–	–	–	–	Poverty Reduction Fund	118,000 (2009)[a]	Public works	–	–	–
Malaysia	Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia	15,300,000 (2014)[a]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	School Assistance for Needy Children	...	...	–	–	–	Assistance to the Elderly	102,500 (2011)[o]	Social Pension, means-tested
Mongolia	Social Welfare Allowance	42,260 (2015)[c]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	Child Money Program	1,029,400 (2015)[g]	Universal child benefit	–	–	–	Social Welfare Pension	333,300 (2013)[p]	Social Pension, means-tested
Myanmar	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Nepal	–	–	–	Child Grant for Dalit Children	...	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	Karnali Employment Program	323,600 (2014)[a]	Public works	Old-Age Pension Scheme	1,046,273 (2015/16)[q]	Social Pension, means-tested
Philippines	–	–	–	Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program	4,400,000 households (2015)[h]	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	–	–	–	Tulong Para Kay Lolo at Lola	1,000,000 (2013)[a]	Social Pension, means-tested
Sri Lanka	Samurdhi Relief Program	1,572,104 (2011)[d]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	Grade C scholarship and bursaries program for school children	85,000 (2012)[a]	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	–	–	–	–	–	–

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Annex 5.1 Table *continued*

Country	General Social Assistance			Social Assistance for Children			Social Assistance for the Active Aged			Social Assistance for the Elderly		
	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description	Program Name	No. of Beneficiaries	Description
Thailand	Social Welfare Program	775,213 (2011)[e]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	Child Support Grant	128,000 (2016)[i]	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	Income generation activities	...	...	Old-Age Allowance	5,147,100 (2011)[e]	Social Pension, means-tested
Timor-Leste	–	–	–	Bolsa da Mãe	54,488 households (2016)[j]	Targeted, conditional cash transfer	Programa de emprego mao de obra intensivo	56,000 (2011)[k]	Public works	Transfers for the elderly	86,974 (2015)[r]	Social Pension, universal
Viet Nam	Regular Social Assistance under Decree 136/2013	1,000,000 (2012)[f]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	Decree 49 and Decree 74/2013	2,000,000 (2012)[f]	Targeted, unconditional cash transfer	Public Works Program for Poor Unemployed or Under-employed Laborers	...	...	Over 80 Allowance and Allowance for Older People	1,557,647 (2012)[f]	Social Pension, means-tested and pension-tested

– = not applicable (no such social assistance program in the country), ... = no data, Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic, PRC = People's Republic of China.

Notes: Nepal's Child Grant for Dalit Children is universal for Dalit children in the Karnali zone, and is categorically (targeted at Dalits) and means-tested in the rest of the country.

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ISBN 978-92-9261-290-0 (Print), 978-92-9261-291-7 (e-ISBN)
Publication Stock No. TCS178935-2
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.22617/TCS178935-2

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