Social protection and climate change – an evidence based overview

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of how social protection and climate change interplay and apply in practical terms is growing, and shows that they are closely interlinked. It is noted by the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) that "Policy mixes that include weather and health insurance, social protection and adaptive social safety nets [...] can reduce vulnerability and exposure of human systems."[1]

This brief presents evidence-based information for an increased understanding of the linkages between social protection and climate change, especially how social protection can contribute to resilience, adaptation to climate change and environmental sustainability. In turn, this information can facilitate informed decision-making on possibilities for interconnected support for enhanced impact for Sida's target groups.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection plays a key role in enhancing the well-being and resilience of individuals and communities by providing assistance and safeguarding against risks and vulnerabilities.[2] Social protection contributes to poverty reduction, human capital formation, resilience, reduction of vulnerability, food security and securing human rights.[3] It supports structural transformation, allowing people to better manage risks and providing a safety net for those who are not sufficiently equipped to adapt to the changing circumstances.[4]

Social protection schemes[5] support individuals and households through both non-contributory[6] transfers in cash, vouchers, or in-kind (for example, school feeding) and contributory schemes. In contributory schemes, participants make regular payments that will cover costs related to life-course events such as pensions, unemployment, sickness or injury and health insurance.[7]

1 IPCC, 2023
2 IPCC, 2021; Sengupta and Costella, 2023
3 Carter et al., 2019
4 Kangasniemi et al., 2020
5 The schemes can be sorted under: social assistance, e.g. cash transfer, social insurance, e.g. employment-linked pension, or informal social protection, e.g. community-based social protection.
6 The full amount paid by the provider.
7 Barrientos, 2010; Carter et al., 2019

EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Human activities have unequivocally caused global warming and climate change has already led to widespread adverse impacts as well as related losses and damages to nature and people.[8] It is the most critical challenge globally for social development and human security.[9] Evidence on the impact of climate change is extensive, with the IPCC[10] having a key role in collecting and assessing the science.

People living in poverty and vulnerability are disproportionately affected by climate change impacts, and low- and middle-income countries are particularly at risk from the physical consequences. Adapting to climate change entails substantial costs and risks that poor and vulnerable rural populations cannot afford.[11] As a result, the adoption of climate adaptation and mitigation practices is often quite low. Especially women and girls have fewer opportunities and capacities for adaptation in comparison to men and boys.[12] Evidently, gender sensitivity, justice-based adaptation approaches and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems reduce vulnerability and increase resilience.[13]

Current state

- Less than half (47 per cent) of the global population is effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit (such as old age-, child- or disability grants).[14]
- There is a significant disparity in peoples' access to social protection with approximately 85 per cent covered in Europe, 60 per cent in Latin America, 45 per cent in Asia and less than 20 per cent in Africa.[15] Children, people with disabilities and informal workers are often excluded.[16]
- About 3.4 billion people live in areas that are highly vulnerable to climate change.[17]
- The countries with the lowest social protection coverage are, in general, the ones most vulnerable to climate change.[18]

8 IPCC, 2023
9 Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2022
10 IPCC, 2021
11 Sitko et al., 2023
12 IPCC, 2021
13 IPCC, 2023
14 ILO, 2021
15 ILO, 2021
16 ILOSTAT, 2021
17 FAO, 2023; IPCC, 2023; WHO, 2023
18 ILO, 2021

The impacts of climate change may exacerbate conflict and instability, leading to displacement, migration and further vulnerability.[19]

The overall transformation to a carbon-free economy also includes risks of economic disturbance, resulting in social and economic impacts that will adversely affect the poor and vulnerable.[20]

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE INTERPLAY

Development actors are increasingly framing their social protection and climate change convergence within their different mandates, and global commitments are slowy forming.

Today the growing evidence base and the current policy debate primarily concern how social protection can contribute to increased adaptation to climate change.[21] Lessons learned from COVID-19 and other large scale shocks are used to show that governments with social protection systems in place are able to reach out to those affected by the crisis on time. Also, social protection is increasingly being recognised in the wider climate response to development, such as the green transition, where a just labour market transition can simultaneously promote climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Importance of the linkages

Climate change is a "driver of change" that will influence the future trajectory and increase pressure on the protection agenda[22], which entails that the two domains cannot be addressed separately.

At the policy level and in programming, despite its potential as a policy response to climate change, the integration of social protection policies and schemes within the climate policy agenda is currently limited.[23]

Social protection is significantly underrepresented in National Determined Contributions (NDCs).[24,25] When mentioned, it is mostly related to anticipating or absorbing the impact of shocks, and rarely mentioning "social protection systems". Resource needs are not specified, and there are seldom funds allocated to specific and relative actions. The inclusion of social protection in National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and National Adaptation Programme of Actions (NAPA) is also considered low.[26] Incorporating social protection into strategies provides opportunities for adaptation responses.[27]

19 Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2022; Silchenko and Murray, 2023
20 Costella and McCord, 2023
21 Robles and Rossel, 2022; Costella et al., 2023
22 Tenzing, 2019
23 Costella et al., 2023
24 Of the 162 NDCs, only 51 NDCs mention social protection at least once.
25 Dahlet and Crumpler, 2023
26 No review of NAPAs found.
27 IPCC, 2023

National Programmes and Plans

- Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are national climate pledges under the Paris Agreement to adapt to climate impacts and ensure sufficient finance to support these efforts.
- National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) entails a process that seeks to identify medium- and long-term adaptation needs.
- National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) is a plan submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by least developed countries.

In social protection policies, climate change is only recently appearing.[28] One underlying factor is that practice around social protection and climate change focuses on the role of social protection and/or humanitarian cash response programmes for managing shocks and disasters, missing the slow onset events such as sea level rise, land degradation, and loss of biodiversity.[29]

A broader and more nuanced understanding is needed of the ways in which climate change not only increases but also changes the nature of the risks social protection typically deals with, and importantly, how social protection systems can respond to them. This can improve policymaking and shift the current way of addressing social protection and climate change in silos.[30]

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING OF SOCIAL PROTECTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE INTERPLAY

This section presents a conceptual framing of the interphase between social protection and climate change, especially on how climate change influences the risks that social protection can mitigate and how social protection has the potential to reduce the impacts of climat shocks. In turn, it can help build peoples' climate resilience.[31]

Risk is one essential connection point between climate and social protection. From a climate change perspective and according to the IPCC: "risk provides a framework for understanding the increasingly severe, interconnected, and often irreversible impacts of climate change on ecosystems, biodiversity, and human systems[32]; [...] and how to best reduce [their] adverse consequences".[33] Climate change risks have

28 Sengupta and Dahlet, 2023
29 Aleksandrova, 2019
30 Costella et al., 2023
31 Costella et al., 2023 is the most comprehensive review, thus being used as the principle source. The section is a shortened and adapted version of the review.
32 The human system includes socioeconomic settings and all human activities through policies, measures, or practices that influence climate change.
33 IPCC, 2022; Costella et al., 2023

increasingly included local factors such as exposure and vulnerability, whereas earlier focusing on direct increase in climate hazards.[34] It means that risks are not only caused by physical changes in the climate system but also by how societies manage risks in general.[35]

From the social protection perspective, reducing a person's or a household's susceptibility to poverty and deprivation is the main objective of lowering risk from climate change and other hazards.[36]

Figure 1 visualises how social protection functions relate to different categories of risk drivers from climate change (D1-D3). There are not only direct risks from climate change. Climate change responses also entail risks. Emission reduction measures can, for example, lead to fewer job opportunities and a loss of income for people and communities that depend on high-emitting industries.

Social protection can address the impact of extreme events on households and individuals by reducing income poverty, thus decreasing vulnerability (i. centred column). More specifically, regular cash transfers can improve the coping mechanisms for climate shocks. This is evident for example from social protection programmes in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda, even if mitigating effects of climate change was not the main objective of the programmes.[37] Another way is to maintain households' incomes in response to climate-related shocks (ii). It is well practiced (e.g. direct income transfer) and often associated with humanitarian operations and disaster risk reductions.

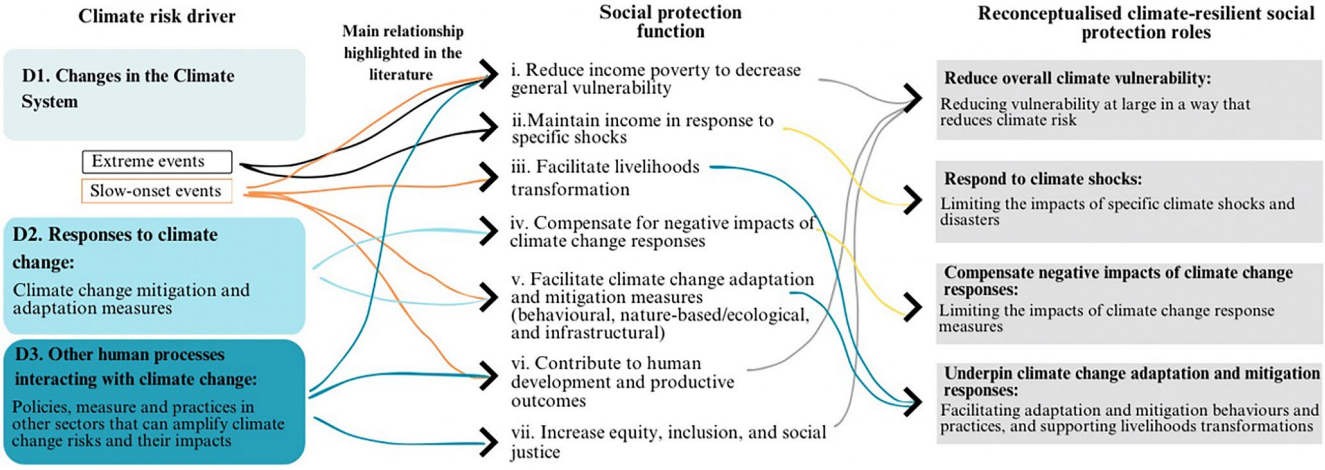

Figure 1. Relationships between risk categories of climate change and social protection functions for climate change. The right hand column is conceptually clustering the climate-resilience social protection roles into main areas. (Costella et al., 2023)

34 Costella et al., 2023; Aalst et al., 2008
35 Costella and McCord, 2023.
36 Barrientos and Hulme, 2008
37 Ulrichs et al., 2019

The climate change responses that entail risks, such as the above-mentioned loss of employment, can be offset by social protection functions (iv). This area of compensation for the negative impacts of climate change response is new with little evidence of its application.[38] Social protection can also enhance climate change adaptations if linked to supplementary programming or conditionalties. These include public works programmes or Payment for Environmental Services that support and incentivise natural resource management and disaster risk reduction. In a similar way, it is argued that social protection could trigger individual behaviours that reduce emissions or increase sinks of greenhouse gas emissions, for example, by incentivising people to protect ecosystem functions or engage in greening activities.[39]

The perspective of social justice is central in the climate change discourse[40] (vii). Those living in poverty may be less able to prepare for or respond to extreme events. These are the people who will suffer the most from the negative impacts of climate change as well as being the people who have contributed the least to climate change. [41]

Vulnerable people at risk are made more vulnerable by climate change. It implies that people do not have access to the financial resources and institutional capacity to adapt or to recover from loss and damage due to their high exposure and low adaptive capacity.[42] The key contribution of social protection to climate resilience development are: to reduce overall climate vulnerability; respond to climate chocks; compensate for negative impacts of climate change responses; and strengthen climate change adaptation and mitigation responses.[43]

AT PROGRAMME LEVEL

Integrating climate risk into the national social protection frameworks is an element of building the capacity of countries to protect vulnerable populations from the adverse impacts of climate change. It aims to enhance the adaptive capacity of households by combining elements of social protection, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation.

Social protection interventions have the capacity to buffer not only the impacts of climate-related disasters on households livelihoods, food security, and assets[44] but may also be a vehicle for long-term change and development.[45]

38 Costella et al., 2023
39 Costella and McCord, 2023
40 Solórzano and Cárdenes, 2019
41 Preston et al., 2014
42 UNFCCC, 2022; Aleksandrova, 2019a
43 Costella et al., 2023
44 Béné, 2011; Solórzano and Cárdenes, 2019
45 Aleksandrova, 2019

Social protection and climate change approaches

Various approaches for linking social protection with climate risk and vice versa are increasingly piloted or used in practice.[46] These include Adaptive Social Protection[47], Climate-Responsive Social Protection[48], Shock-responsive Social Protection[49], and Forecast-based Action to social protection.[50] Anticipatory action[51] is frequently an integrated part of these approaches.

The inclusion of measures for people affected by climate change into a national social protection system to better adapt social protection to various shocks is referred to as Adaptive Social Protection. This response approach (preparing, coping, and adapting to shocks) is also applied more widely, beyond climate change.[52]

There is evidence that the social protection contribution builds anticipatory capacity[53] particularly where programmes have evolved to include contingency plans and financing as part of a stronger preparedness system.[54]

Forecast-based Action comprises standard operating procedures and ensuring funding for social protection beneficiaries (and non-beneficiaries) more predictably and reliably.[55] It aims to build a replicable mechanism for anticipatory action to strengthen both the individual and the social protection system, to implement shock-responsive social protection, and support improved anticipation and mitigation of climate shocks.[56]

The Shock-responsive Social Protection approach encompasses the adaptation of social protection programmes and systems to cope with changes in context and demand following large-scale shocks that affect a large proportion of a population simultaneously. It includes links to climate risk information, DRR, and loss and damage.[57]

A problem faced in social protection programming is the limited data on climate and hazard vulnerability and exposure of people. This leaves decision-makers with information that either comes too late, does not capture the full breadth of risk analyses, or cannot be communicated effectively.[58]

46 Aleksandrova et al., 2023
47 Davies et al., 2008
48 Kuriakose et al., 2013
49 Obrien et al., 2018
50 Costella et al., 2017
51 Costella et al., 2017
52 Bowen et al., 2020
53 FAO, 2023; Bharadwaj et al., 2023
54 Costella et al., 2017
55 Sengupta and Bailey, 2022
56 Costello et al., 2017
57 O'Brien et al., 2018; European Commission, 2019
58 Shafee and Zapata, 2023

Adopting and expanding climate change programmes that promote social protection schemes and ensure linkages with governmental social protection systems can enhance and strengthen the potential effects of climate change adaptation and increase the effects of social protection.[59] Incorporation of social protection as a tool within climate risk management strategies offers an entry point.[60]

ADDRESSING LOSS AND DAMAGE

The loss and damage policy discourse has been centred around rapid onset risks,[61] but the perspective is expanding. The Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage[62] under UNFCCC, promotes a comprehensive and integrated approach towards climate change impact.[63] Research indicates that social protection systems should be linked to broader environmental and development processes through sectoral policies and objectives to avoid, minimise, and address residual loss and damage.[64] These sectoral policies, such as agriculture, land rights, and urban development policies are relevant to the integration of long-term climate risk management into social protection.[65]

As disasters caused by climate change become more severe, governments responsible for the protection of their people cannot limit themselves to emergency measures and should establish sustainably designed social protection systems.

The agreement to operationalise a loss and damage fund at COP28 was a milestone for developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change.[66] One of the key objectives of the Loss and Damage Fund will be to help strengthen the resilience of people particularly affected by climate change.[67]

COOPERATION FOR BREAKING SILOS

To enhance collaboration and break the silos of climate change and social protection, the development of a common vision is considered essential. It needs to be underpinned with financing and a space for collaboration to enable strategic integration and coordination across sectors and between actors at all levels (local, national, and global).[68]

For example, the Working Group on Social Protection and Climate Change of the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (USP2030) serves as a knowledge-sharing platform and fosters interdisciplinary cooperation, highlighting the integral role of social protection in climate action.[69]

Sida can play an important role through incentives that encourage coordinated investments, planning and implementation.

FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

The financial constraints for both social protection[70] and climate change adaptation[71] are severe. There is a need to:
i) increase domestic funding for social protection to increasingly cover climate vulnerability;
ii) promote anticipatory action by earmarking contingency budgets; and
iii) increase access to international climate finance for social protection.[72] One specific proposal is to ensure categorical transfers to poorer populations (certain geographical areas or groups) within countries to ensure support for the most vulnerable and to reduce poverty.[73]

KEY MESSAGES

- Challenges remain to effectively achieve policy coherence between climate change and social protection.
- There is a growing understanding of the role social protection plays, when reducing vulnerability as income poverty falls, in addressing climate change risks.[74] However, social protection needs to be considered as a tool to address long-term adaptation needs and not only shocks from climate change.
- Integrating climate action objectives into social protection policies and incorporating social protection as a tool within climate risk management strategies offers entry points for synergizing efforts.
- Cooperation and partnership are essential across sectors to reach an integrated approach to social protection and climate change.

59 Tenzing, 2019
60 Sengupta and Bailey, 2022
61 Aleksandrova and Costella, 2021
62 In 2013, this mechanism was established to address loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change.
63 UNFCCC, 2023
64 Aleksandrova, 2019a
65 Aleksandrova and Costella, 2021
66 UNFCCC, 2022a
67 Kaltenborn, 2023
68 Costella et al., 2021
69 Formed at COP26
70 To guarantee a basic level of social security, lower- and middle income countries would need to invest an additional US$ 362.9 billion per year, equivalent to 5.1 per cent of GDP. Low-income countries would need to invest an additional US$ 77.9 billion, equivalent to 15.9 per cent of their GDP. ILO, 2021
71 The finance gap for climate change adaptation is estimated at US$194-366 billion per year. UNEP, 2023
72 Sitko et al., 2023; Kaltenborn, 2023
73 Evans et al., 2023
74 See section "Conceptual framing of social protection and climate change interplay"

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