



Engaging Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Social Partners in Social Protection

Lessons Learnt from a Cross-Country Analysis

SPaN
Supporting people through crisis

Guidance Package on Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus

This Brief forms a contribution to the European Commission Guidance Package on Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (SPaN), complementing Operational Note 3 on Stakeholders.¹ The study draws primarily on experiences of the ‘Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management’ programme (SP-PFM), an EU-funded initiative implemented jointly by the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors (GCSPF).² The findings should be useful for development and humanitarian partners and governments working in the fields of social protection, disaster risk management and humanitarian response.

Key Lessons

- ▶ Ensuring that people are aware of their rights and have the capacity to claim them is one of the most important first steps towards developing social protection. A more knowledgeable and engaged civil society will enhance accountability and can bring about improvements in social protection design and delivery.
- ▶ Strong evidence is one of the main building blocks of successful advocacy. Understanding a governments’ policy decision-making process is also critical for knowing when engagement can be most effective.
- ▶ Alliances between CSOs and social partners (trade unions and employers’ organisations) can greatly enhance engagement with governments, providing a holistic approach to strengthening contributory and non-contributory social protection.
- ▶ CSOs and social partners need to ensure they have the relevant technical skills, particularly on public finance management, to engage effectively with governments.

1. Key Stakeholders in Social Protection and Shock Response

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)³ and social partners (trade unions and employers’ organisations) are important development actors. They can contribute to policy development through dialogue and advocacy and are often appreciated for their experience, expertise, quick and flexible responses, and their role in enhancing accountability. They are also valued for their ability to identify new as well as longstanding obstacles to social, economic and democratic development and for their capacity to innovate, elaborate and implement solutions.

The ILO International Labour Standards on Social Security acknowledge the importance of tripartite participation with representative organisations of employers and workers, as well as consultation with other relevant and representative organisations of persons concerned in developing and administering social protection systems.⁴ The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is also clear on the need for all development actors, including CSOs, to engage in implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strengthened global partnership for achieving SDG 17 (revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development) is meant to involve all levels of government, the private sector and civil society, among others, in a whole-of-society approach to SDG achievement. Furthermore, CSOs and social partners play a crucial role in facilitating people’s participation and the pursuit of accountability. In this sense, they also are critical to

achieving SDG 16 (promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies).⁵ In addition, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit Grand Bargain Commitments highlighted CSOs as key partners in relation to humanitarian action. Workstream Two of the agreement is dedicated to increasing support and funding for local and national actors, particularly in recognition of their role as first responders to many crises.⁶

Broadly speaking, the engagement of CSOs and social partners in social protection can be grouped according to the following three levels:⁷

Figure 1:
Levels of participation



2. Cross-Country Analysis of CSO and Social Partner Engagement in Social Protection

2.1 Supporting programme development and implementation

CSOs and social partners have a critical role to play in ensuring their members are aware of their rights to social protection and are supported to claim them. In Nepal, through traditional and social media, over 725,000 citizens were made aware of social protection schemes via an EU-funded programme linking Social Protection and Public Finance Management.⁹ **Alongside other efforts, this contributed to a 160 per cent increase in the number of workers registered in the Social Security Fund between 2019–2022, and a 45 per cent increase in the number of employers.** Furthermore, INSPiR Nepal – part of the International Network for Social Protection Rights – campaigned for the vertical and horizontal expansion of the child nutrition grant, supported the Government’s National Dialogue on Anticipatory Humanitarian Action, and – following a government decision to discontinue cash transfers for single women (under the age of 60) and people with partial disabilities – also coordinated an advocacy campaign on behalf of 50 national NGOs to have the decisions successfully reversed.¹⁰

In Uganda, a study highlighted the barriers faced by employers to comply with the social security regulations and laws. Using the results and recommendations of the study, the Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE) reached out to 500 of their private sector members to comply with the payment of social contributions to the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) through talk shows and social media platforms. **As a result of this awareness-raising campaign, NSSF registration amongst FUE members increased by 25 per cent.**¹¹

Since 2011, the law in Togo has extended social security to workers in the informal sector, although many are still not registered. The *Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale* (CNSS) – the social security administration body – has lacked a clear strategy to resolve this gap and has struggled to understand the realities, needs and expectations of workers in the informal economy. In parallel, workers have also lacked awareness of what the social security system is, what its benefits are, and how to access them. Development partners have helped bridge this gap by providing a platform for workers’ organisations to come together and reach a consensus amongst members concerning short and long-term measures focused on health and pensions that can be taken forward with the CNSS.¹²

KEY LESSON:

Awareness is crucial

Ensuring that people are aware of their rights and have the capacity to claim them is perhaps the most important first step towards developing social protection in any context. In many cases, people and employers may not even be aware that social protection programmes exist, or that they have the right to benefit from them, and may lack knowledge on how to access them. Increased demand may also catalyse improvements in supply, with governments pressured to strengthen social protection provision for citizens. Strong public institutions and quality services can also be critical for building citizen trust in social protection systems, particularly for contributory schemes.

CASE STUDIES:

Supporting Government Responses to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role CSOs and social partners can play in supporting national social protection responses to crisis. For example, in **Thailand**, FIT – a network of 23,000 informal workers across the country – provided relief support alongside supporting informal workers to access the government cash grant programme. The SAVE network in **India**, comprised of 900 community-based volunteers, partnered with district government relief efforts, playing a vital role in informing communities about the timing of the distribution of government relief supplies. Meanwhile, the social protection response to COVID-19 in **Indonesia** used networks of organisations of persons with disabilities (PWDs) to administer surveys through local health cadres, community rehabilitation teams, self-help cadres and subdistrict staff to identify PWDs and integrate their information into national databases. Individuals were also supported to receive identification documents and assistive devices to allow them to access social protection.¹³ These kinds of partnerships with government can greatly enhance accountability and grievance redress as affected communities are given a mechanism to be heard, something which is particularly important in areas where there is limited state presence/capacity.

2.2 Strengthening the evidence base

Data and evidence are critical tools for CSOs and social partners to make their case to governments on social protection issues. Echoing the key lesson above, recent studies from Cambodia¹⁴, Nepal¹⁵ and Uganda¹⁶ have all highlighted issues around awareness and understanding of social protection amongst citizens and even government officials. In Cambodia, joint research commissioned by CSOs and trade unions also identified the need to simplify registration and contribution payment mechanisms, for flexible payment modalities, and for the development of a policy framework for female workers.¹⁷ Due to the lack of understanding of social protection in Nepal, beneficiaries have been unaware of schemes, unable to cross administrative hurdles, and have been hesitant to raise complaints about programmes in case benefits were withdrawn, due to the fact that many believed support was being provided on a charitable basis as opposed to being an entitlement and right. The same report also identified specific access challenges to assistance for PWDs.¹⁸

A 2020 report by HelpAge Uganda focused on generating information regarding good practices as well as key challenges for CSOs and trade unions to effectively engage in social protection and public finance management. It found that **successful engagement in policy processes required good timing in the development cycle and that it was important to target specific decision makers.** However, it also highlighted that **technical capacities, particularly on public finance management, needed to be increased** amongst CSOs and trade unions to ensure they can engage meaningfully with the government.¹⁹

Research conducted by SP&PFM on the **multiplier effect of social protection expenditure** in Cabo Verde, Ecuador, Malawi, Mexico, Nepal, Pakistan, Paraguay and Viet Nam found that most countries experienced multipliers between 1 and 3.²⁰ These results echoed previous research conducted in 2021 by the International Trade Union Confederation, which also showed the positive impact of social protection investment on economic growth. Such data can be extremely useful for making the economic case for investing in social protection.²¹

KEY LESSON:

A strong evidence base helps to maximise advocacy efforts

Strong evidence is one of the most important building blocks for the success of social protection awareness creation and advocacy. Adding to this, understanding a governments' policy decision-making process is also critical for knowing when advocacy can be most effective. This includes formal rules and procedures as stated by law, but also informal, behind-the-scenes practices that exist outside the official process. In theory, the earlier the engagement the better, as once an issue has been put on the political agenda and positions begin to form, it can be much harder to push for change. As shown by the experiences of COVID-19 in this paper, plus more broadly, crises often present an opportunity to push for enhancement of the social protection system including increasing coverage and sustainability of support.

2.3 Shaping government policies

In Cambodia, Nepal and Senegal, development partners have supported initiatives that harness the collective strengths of CSOs and social partners towards shaping government policies on social protection. In Cambodia, a CSO-Trade Union Network has some 30 members representing formal and informal workers, farmers, women, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and youth. It functions as a coordinating body to develop and align advocacy approaches towards the government on social protection. The objectives of the network are further amplified by the 'SP4ALL' CSO initiative, coordinated by Oxfam. Having a unified voice is particularly timely as Oxfam has been nominated to sit on the newly formed National Development Partners' Working Group, one of the highest forums in the country for discussing social protection policy. The network has supported the government on the draft Social Protection Law, providing feedback on more than thirty articles related to accessibility, inclusiveness, clarity and transparency of the draft law, plus their experiences and understanding of constituents' needs.²³ In late 2022, the government also identified the extension of social protection to informal workers as a priority, an issue on which CSOs and trade unions had been campaigning for some time. Informants attribute this success to the constructive, non-combative approach taken which has helped build trust amongst the various stakeholders. However, **technical capacity remains a challenge**, particularly with regards to the specifics of public finance management as well **as identifying the most appropriate times in the budget cycle to engage with decision-makers.**²⁴

In Nepal, there has been a joint initiative between the International Trade Union Confederation - Nepal Affiliated Council (ITUC-NAC) and the Social Protection Civil Society Network (SPCSN). Within this, the ITUC-NAC focuses on contributory social protection and the SPCSN on the non-contributory side. This joint undertaking has significantly improved coherent policy advocacy across all stakeholders and their engagement with the government. The focus has been mainly on child allowances, universal health care, pensions, and informal workers, and has included the innovative targeting of political parties in order to include social protection recommendations within their manifestos. CSO and trade union advocacy has also contributed to the following: provisions for incorporating informal, self-employed and migrant workers into the contribution-based social security programme; revising the Prime Minister's Employment Programme framework; reducing the age of entitlement for the senior citizen allowance from 70 to 68 years; expanding the child nutrition grant to other areas; and providing ID cards for low-income workers and poor families, allowing them to access fair price shops and subsidised goods. Stakeholders have also contributed to the ongoing development of the new national Integrated Social Protection Framework.²⁵

In Senegal, 25 CSOs and trade unions came together to enhance advocacy with central and local government for the sustainable funding of social protection programmes. These include programmes for rural workers and those in the informal economy, persons with disabilities and the elderly. To support this advocacy the collective developed two position papers, including a memorandum to the executive of the country's 14 administrative regions to raise awareness of the need for better consideration of social protection issues in the national budget, and a Charter of Commitment for local authorities to ensure adequate financing of social protection, with specific consideration for gender and disability.²⁶ Furthermore, workers and employers' representatives are members of the High Council for Social Dialogue and are represented with CSOs in the Social Budget Monitoring Observatory. Through these forums, CSOs and social partners have been able to advocate for increased social protection funding and contribute to the governance and accountability of the sector. Examples of success include their advocacy to the drafting of the new Social Security Code; transfer of part of the fuel subsidies to the national programme of family benefits; and strengthening community-based identification mechanisms of vulnerable households in the single national register.²⁷

A steering committee was formed in Uganda drawing on key actors from civil society including the Social Protection Platform Uganda (active since 2007 with the goal of providing a harmonised, well-articulated voice by civil society) and the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group (CSBAG), which has a strong focus on public finance management. **It has proven important to work with forums like CSBAG who have the capacity to engage with the government on technical issues related to budgeting for social protection.** Advocacy throughout 2021 has also contributed to extending the senior citizens grant by issuing ID cards for the elderly, as well as improving data quality. Limited progress has been made though on increasing the value of the allowance itself and lowering the age of entitlement from 80 years.²⁸

KEY LESSON:

Building alliances brings benefits

In many contexts, CSOs have traditionally worked on the non-contributory side of social protection while social partners tend to work on the contributory, but separately. As alliances are needed within these groups, they are also needed between the two sides so that a holistic, unified, and informed position can be presented to governments.

CROSS-CUTTING LESSON:

The greater the capacity, the more meaningful the contribution

Whilst often strong on the technical aspects of their own programming, for example disability, gender, age, etc., CSOs and social partners may lack the skills to meaningfully engage with governments on the technicalities of policy development, particularly public finance management. Capacity building is required to ensure that CSOs and social partners can not only raise issues of concern but can also go further and work constructively with ministries, including Ministries of Finance, to find solutions. This will also enable CSOs and social partners to explain government decisions to their members more clearly, including difficult issues such as taxation.²⁹

Endnotes

1. The SPaN Guidance Package is available [here](#).
2. More information on the programme available [here](#). Given the timing of SP-PFM programme, most examples relate to the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples from other contexts, including more acute humanitarian crises, are integrated where appropriate.
3. Whilst there are numerous definitions, for the purposes of this paper the term 'CSOs' will refer to social development partners such as local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations, and community-based organisations that have an organised structure and mission and are typically registered entities and groups.
4. ILO (2012) Social Protection Recommendation, No.202.
5. OECD (2020) Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society. The Development Dimension. OECD Publishing, Paris. [Link](#).
6. Inter-Agency Standing Committee (no date) 'About the Grand Bargain.' [Link](#).
7. Adapted from Arnstein, S. (1969) A Ladder of Citizen Participation. Journal of the American Planning Association, Vol. 35, No. 4, cited in the Citizens Handbook. [Link](#).
8. Analytical framework adapted from UNICEF (2019) Programme Guidance: Strengthening Shock Responsive Social Protection Systems. [Link](#).
9. We Social Movement, Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors (2022) Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management, Progress Report 2022, Nepal.
10. Ibid.
11. Respondent feedback.
12. SP-PFM (2021) Appendix 20, Togo. Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management, Second Progress Report, January-December 2021. [Link](#).
13. Cabot-Venton, C. (2021) Direct support to local actors: considerations for donors. Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 Expert Advice Service (SPACE), DAI Global, UK. [Link](#).
14. Dash, T.R. (2022) Study Report on Contributory Capacity of Informal Economy Workers to National Social Security Fund. Oxfam, Cambodia. [Link](#).
15. The Purple Group (2022) The Status of Social Protection: A Baseline Study. Social Protection Civil Society Network (SPCSN) & Children-Women in Social Service and Human Rights (CWISH). [Link](#).
16. HelpAge Uganda (2020) Good Practices, Learning Demands and Challenges for Civil Society Organizations and Trade Unions to Actively and Effectively Participate in Social Protection and Public Finance Management Processes in Uganda. Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors and HelpAge Uganda. [Link](#).
17. Dash, T.R (2022).
18. The Purple Group (2022).
19. HelpAge Uganda (2020).
20. The SP-PFM research on 'Multiplier effects of social protection benefits' was undertaken in collaboration with the Fundação Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas (FIPE). The research focuses on measuring the impact of changes in the composition and magnitude of different types of social protection expenditure and revenue collection on domestic demand and growth, using a Structural Vector Autoregression (VAR) simulation. [Link](#).
21. International Trade Union Confederation (2021) Investments in social protection and their impacts on economic growth. [Link](#).
22. ILO and SP-PFM (2023) 'Cambodia.' [Link](#).
23. Respondent interview.
24. We Social Movement, Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors (2022) Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management, Progress Report 2022, Nepal.
25. SP-PFM (2021) Appendix 9, Senegal. Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management, Second Progress Report January-December 2021. [Link](#).
26. Respondent interview.
27. Respondent interview.
28. The SP-PFM programme has developed online training materials which can be found [here](#).



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