Social Protection as a 'Solar' System

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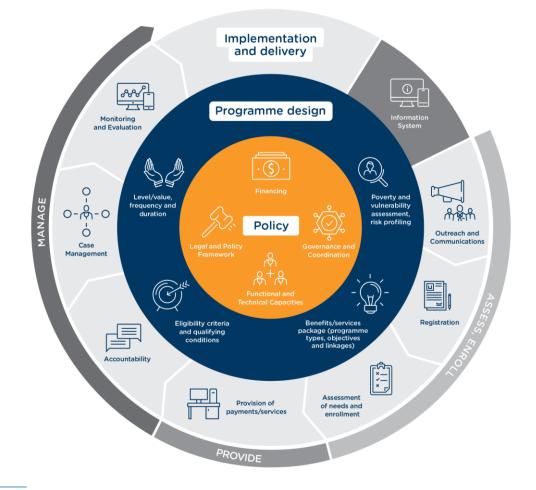# WHY A SYSTEM?

Social Protection practitioners, decision-makers and researchers have long been using the term 'system' when referring to social protection. There is extensive literature in this regard,[1] and indeed SDG 1.3 explicitly references "implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all". Why a system? Because a comprehensive approach to social protection requires more than just a *cohesively designed range of programmes* – across social assistance, social insurance, social services and labour market policies – to address different risks and vulnerabilities. It also requires a wide range of *actors* and *'building blocks'* to *work together* for desired results to be achieved across the Universal Social Protection (USP) key outcome areas: coverage, adequacy, comprehensiveness and sustainability. The fields of 'Systems Thinking' and 'Complexity' thus apply to social protection, as indeed to many other sectors[2]. It is only through strengthening every part of the system, while simultaneously understanding the relationships between component parts, that there can be systemic change and gains.

What better way to visualise this than referring to the main 'system' we think of when we close our eyes – the Solar System? None of the content within the visual is new (each component part is discussed extensively in sectoral literature). What is new is presenting it cohesively, simply – and visually.

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[1] Some of the key documents discussing Social Protection 'systems' and component parts include: World Bank (2012) '2012–2022 Social Protection and Labour Strategy: Resilience, Equity and Opportunity', and its accompanying background paper Robalino, D.A., Rawlings, L. and Walker, I. (2012), 'Building social protection and labor systems: Concepts and operational limitations'; UNICEF and World Bank (2013) 'Common Ground: UNICEF and World Bank Approaches to Building Social Protection Systems'; ISPA (2014) Inter-Agency Social Protection Assessments - Core Diagnostic Instrument (CODI); TRANSFORM learning initiative for building social protection floors in Africa; OECD (2018) Social Protection System Review: a toolkit; UNICEF (2019) Global social protection programme framework. (2021) Handbook on Social Protection Systems.

[2] Some of the key publications discussing the fields of 'Systems Thinking' and 'Complexity' include: Danny Burns, Stuart Worsley (2015) Navigating Complexity in International Development; David Byrne, Gillian Callaghan (2013) Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences: The state of the art; Hynes, W., Lees, M., & Müller, J. M. (2020) Systemic thinking for policy making. *OECD.*

THE 'BUILDING BLOCKS' – OUR STARS AND PLANETS

While the solar system visual is intended to be self-explanatory, the description below provides a little more detail:

At 'Policy level' (orange center) we have the key building blocks of social protection institutionalisation within government, aiming towards:

» Clarity of strategic vision in terms of social protection's objectives, functions, internal coherence and linkages with other sectors, ideally embedded in **legal and policy frameworks.**

» **Sustainable and domestic financing** sources, including secure future budget commitments in place.

» Established **governance arrangements and coordination mechanisms** – including dedicated ministries and/or agencies with clear mandates, roles and responsibilities. And coordinating bodies across all relevant crosscutting stakeholders at policy and operational levels – plus incentives for collaboration.

» Strong **technical and functional capacities** at all levels of administration – including the social worker workforce.

At 'Programme design level' (blue ring) we have the key building blocks of programme design. Decisions relating to these elements not only inform individual programme design, but also how the range of programmes within a system can best work together cohesively to maximise outcomes. This includes:

» Strong systems for **data-informed analysis** to underpin decision-making, including an understanding of changing patterns of poverty, vulnerability and emerging risks over time.

» Capacities to weigh trade-offs and translate these (evolving) insights into programmatic decisions on the most appropriate:

     a. **Benefits and service package** (→ affecting *comprehensiveness* of support): choice of programmes that best address different vulnerabilities and needs of different groups, with what key objectives and intentional linkages between these (e.g. eligibility for one entails eligibility for another, etc.).

     b. **Eligibility criteria and qualifying conditions** (→ affecting *coverage* of support): in other words, targeting design decisions, which are likely to differ across programmes and should encompass a focus on inclusion of those facing the highest barriers and most complex vulnerabilities.

     c. **Level, value, frequency and duration of support** (→ affecting *adequacy*).

At 'Implementation / delivery level' (outer grey ring), we have the key building blocks of programme administration. Sometimes described as 'delivery systems', these elements are the administrative functions necessary to deliver benefits or services to those in need, when in need. Most of these functions can be performed in an integrated way, serving multiple programmes, and include:

» **Outreach/communications/sensitisation activities,** to promote awareness of entitlements and procedures – on an ongoing basis and inclusive manner.

» **Registration**, to gather information on people's characteristics, needs, and conditions – ideally via continuous and on-demand processes.

» **Assessment of needs/conditions and enrolment,** to determine eligibility for different programmes based on each programme's different qualifying conditions and eligibility criteria. And to formalise the enrolment of eligible beneficiaries via notification and onboarding.

» **Provision of payments/services,** to deliver benefits or services to beneficiaries via channels and processes that cater to their different needs and preferences, while curbing potential for fraud.

» **Accountability mechanisms (e.g. grievance redressal),** to enable people to hold the state and service/benefit providers accountable. May include channels to complain, provide feedback, or appeal service/benefit provider's decisions, as well as processes for these to be responded to and addressed.

» **Case management** (also referred to as 'beneficiary operations management'), to manage the complexity of individuals' multidimensional needs (e.g. providing tailored guidance/ information/support while addressing case-specific issues) while also supporting beneficiaries in their interactions with programmes/services along the delivery chain (e.g. supporting compliance with conditionality/co-responsibility, ensuring information updates and possible programme exit, etc.) and facilitating referrals and linkages across programmes.

» **Monitoring and evaluation,** to measure – and iteratively improve – performance against agreed delivery standards and intended outcomes.

All these functions are increasingly underpinned by strong **digital information systems – at programme and integrated levels.

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