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Advancing Social Protection in Cambodia – Independent joint evaluation

QUICK FACTS

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Administrative Office: DWT/CO-Bangkok

Technical Office: SOCPRO

Evaluation manager: Mohammad Mohebur Rahman, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, ILO-CO Dhaka

Evaluation consultants: Mel Cousins & Chey Tech

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Social protection, social security, UNICEF, ILO, social assistance, cash transfer, Cambodia.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure

The EU funded Advancing Social Protection in Cambodia (ASPC) project began implementation in February 2021 and ran until December 2024 with an approved budget of €5,598,535 over the four years. It is co-implemented by ILO and UNICEF, working in close collaboration with government stakeholders responsible for social protection, in particular the General Secretariat (GS) of the National Social Protection Council (NSPC); the National Social Security Fund (NSSF); the National Social Assistance Fund (NSAF) and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) in Cambodia.

The project goal is “at the end of the project, more women and men in Cambodia have access to more effective, efficient, accountable and sustainable gender-responsive social protection.” The project has three main intended outcomes.

Outcome 1 – A higher percentage of workers are covered by social security schemes

Outcome 2 - Increased inclusion and coverage of poor and vulnerable population in social assistance and complementary programmes promoting improved livelihoods and well-being

Outcome 3 – Social security organisations are strengthened with improved business processes and tools to increase coverage and quality of service to workers in the formal and informal sector.

Present situation of the project

In 2017, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) adopted a National Social Protection Policy Framework 2016 – 2025 (NSPPF), building on two main pillars: social security¹ and social assistance. To coordinate, monitor and evaluate the implementation of the NSPPF, a National Social Protection Council (NSPC) - chaired by the Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance (MEF) - and a General

¹ In this report we use the terms social security and social insurance to mean the same thing.

Secretariat (GS) based at the MEF were established. The goal of the NSPPF is to develop a strategic plan for the RGC “to ensure income security for all citizens, promote their welfare, strengthen social solidarity and maximize poverty alleviation impacts”.

Cambodia has had a fragmented and under-resourced social protection (SP) system, leading to an overall low coverage, both in terms of level of benefits and population coverage. Fragmentation, relatively low coverage and scope of the social assistance programmes led to a need for integration of existing programmes into a more effective system of service delivery and cash transfer administration. The COVID period saw a significant expansion in social assistance by the RGC and studies indicate that the COVID cash transfers helped the beneficiaries to cope with adverse income shocks and reduced poverty.

In order to support advancement of social protection in Cambodia, there was an urgent need to build capacities within Cambodia’s social protection institutions to handle the extension of social protection and increase the level of protection provided. Capacity building and technical support needed to be made in the key institutions in order for these agencies to be able to manage the increased expectation of providing better protection and the significant increase in persons covered by social protection.

Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is to ensure project accountability and learn from the experience of the project which is valuable for ILO constituents and key stakeholders. The evaluation does this by assessing the achievement of the project against its plan and identifying challenges and any external factors that may have affected the project and its implementation. The evaluation adopts the ILO’s Evaluation Guidelines as the basic evaluation framework and was conducted in accordance with OECD/DAC criteria—relevance,

	coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. It also assessed cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and disability inclusion.
Methodology of evaluation	The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data. Data collection included a desk review of project documents, and key informant interviews with stakeholders. A stakeholder workshop was also held to validate findings. The evaluation framework was based on ILO's Results-Based Management system and adhered to the UN Evaluation Group's ethical guidelines, ensuring representation, informed consent, and confidentiality throughout the process.
MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS	<p>Relevance In general, the project's objectives, design and approach respond to the needs, policies and priorities of all key stakeholders including the UN agencies, EU (funder), and RGC agencies. the project design addressed the basic economic and social needs of marginalized groups though its focus on improving both social security (i.e. social insurance) and social assistance for the informal sector (missing middle) and vulnerable groups.</p> <p>In general, the project design was appropriate and activities remained relevant throughout the implementation period. In particular, the project remained relevant to the RGC needs considering the changes in circumstances including the new 2023 government and post-COVID economic recovery. This reflected considerable stability in the RGC commitment to building social protection systems.</p> <p>Coherence The project brought together key UN agencies (ILO, UNICEF and UNDP) and other Development Partners -DPs (in particular Gret) and built on work which had been carried out such as the UNJP on social protection and the EU funded Social Protection and PFM project. The project also worked closely with Government agencies at national and local level</p>

both to implement ongoing reforms in social protection (e.g. supporting the establishment of the NSAF) and to support the development of a more coherent approach to social protection policy. The project supported UN coherence at a policy level, e.g. a joint response to NSPPF 2.0 and allowed individual agencies to focus on work in the areas of expertise.

Effectiveness In general, the project has been able to implement most of the outputs and activities and, in several areas, more than originally planned. The project has, for example, supported the increased coverage of workers covered by social protection schemes through the development and implementation of the voluntary health insurance scheme for self-employed workers. The project also supported increased inclusion and coverage in social assistance and social services, e.g. development and implementation of the Family Package.

In general, project management appears to have been effective. However, some respondents expressed the view that the core management team was too small and that this led to weaknesses in coordination between the UN agencies and to limited communication with the funder and generally limited public communication as to the achievements of the project.

Efficiency The total budget of the project was €5,598,535 (in addition to a PUNO contribution of €530,746). The details of expenditure have been provided in different formats and in a different currency to the original budget which makes it difficult for us to comment in any detail on the extent to which expenditure has (or has not) been in line with original plans. The activities of the project have very largely been delivered. There were some delays in different activities due to COVID, the 2023 general elections (and changes in counterpart staff) and, in some cases, due to difficulties in recruiting consultants.

These delays were largely outside the control of the project and by the end of the project activities have been delivered. Insofar as can be assessed, resources (funds, human resources, time, expertise etc.) been allocated strategically to achieve immediate objectives. As noted above, a larger that the core management team might have enhanced project financial management and the efficiency of its organizational and governance structure.

Impact The project has had a substantial impact in supporting system change both on policy, institutional capacity but also in terms of vulnerable groups. The project has largely achieved or exceeded the targets which it set in terms of increasing social security coverage and the numbers in receipt of social assistance cash payments (see chapter 4 below). The project achieved a target for outcome 1 of 2.6 million workers covered by social security schemes and exceeded a target of 1,161,070 of households included in the cash transfer programmes. The number on cash transfer programmes is 1,533,422 households, 32% higher than the original target. There are clear causal relationships between the activities of this project (and preceding UN work on social protection) and the outcomes achieved, e.g. the project worked closely with Gret and NSSF to support the design and implementation of the voluntary health insurance scheme for self-employed workers while the project also supported the design and implementation of cash supports, in particular the Family Package.

All agencies reported positively on the impact of capacity building work though detailed metrics are not available. The project has played an important role in working with GS-NSPC and other agencies to strengthen national social protection policy. The project has also had an Important impact on the ground, e.g. informal workers now included in social security

(‘missing middle’), and people receiving support through the Family Package (vulnerable).

Sustainability The project strategy scores high in terms of sustainability. The project outputs have reflected the needs of the RGC agencies and have been closely integrated into their policy and delivery systems. Unusually for a project of this size and duration, it is possible to identify concrete impacts (see above) in terms of numbers covered and in receipt of benefits which can be clearly linked to project activities. It seems very likely that the results achieved will be sustained beyond the project through the action of the RGC and other stakeholders. This arises from a range of factors:

- Building on existing work and partnerships – Both ILO and UNICEF have a long track record of working with the social protection agencies in Cambodia and have built up good working relationships.
- High quality inputs – In general respondents were very satisfied with the quality of inputs from the project both in terms of policy, administrative supports and capacity building
- Strong government commitment – Finally, and very importantly, there has been a very strong RGC commitment to the development of a more coherent social protection system and to working closely with DPs to draw on most relevant (‘best fit’) international practice.

The high level of government commitment enhances the extent to which RGC agencies can sustain activities independently. Agencies draw on development partners for technical assistance but are not dependent on them as in some countries. The project (and other DP work) has sought to enhance sustainability by focussing on capacity building and institutional strengthening and this is a strategy which should be continued in future work.

Visibility The project has contributed to the visibility of the EU at a national level and national stakeholders generally mentioned EU support without being asked about it. This builds on the support which the EU has already provided, e.g. Budget Support and SP & PFM project. There was less awareness of EU involvement at local levels as would be expected.

Cross-Cutting Issues The project was relevant to gender issues, and several specific activities promoted gender equality. This varied to some extent from one area to another. However, the project did support the social protection system in becoming more gender-responsive, e.g. social security for informal workers (c. 60% of those covered by the voluntary health insurance scheme are women) and the Family Package. The project also enhanced protection for vulnerable groups including people with disability (MoSVY) and low-income workers. In some areas, such as disability identification under outcome 2, disability inclusion was clearly integrated into project interventions though this varied from output to output.

The project did promote social dialogue to a certain extent and involved employers' organization and trade unions. However, it could not be said that these were central to the design or implementation of the project. The project was also relevant to ILO standards such as C-102 (social security) and formalization and, to this extent, the project did promote ILO Labour standards to a certain extent though it is again not clear that these standards formed a core part of the project's work. The project made significant contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1.3.1, which focuses on the proportion of the population covered by social protection systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main findings & Conclusions

1. Activities supported in the ASPC project need to be followed up by the UN agencies, e.g. registration of informal workers is obviously only a first step and considerable further work needs to be done to assess how this initiative develops and whether it needs to move towards a more mandatory approach. Similarly, NSAF will obviously require further capacity building support at national and provincial level.
2. Future projects should ensure adequate staffing for the core project team to support essential backstopping work, communications etc.
3. As suggested in the Evaluability Assessment, future projects should include more tools for measuring capacity improvements, e.g. pre training capacity needs and post-training evaluation and or follow up with participants. Projects should also include indicators for how the project has strengthened administrative efficiency and to measure service quality/delivery
4. ILO should consider a similar joint approach in future projects in Cambodia and in other countries in the region building on the experience of the UNJP (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Viet Nam) and the EU-Funded Social Protection of PFM programme (Cambodia).
5. Insofar as possible, such joint project should include more joint activities and joint outcomes as part of the project design. The detail of this would obviously depend on the particular issue but this would include ILO and the other UN agency (e.g. UNICEF) in jointly addressing and issue and carrying out joint activities in which both participated. One area to start with might include research on topics of shared interest.

Main lessons learned and good practices

LL.1 UN agencies (in conjunction with other Development Partners) can play an important role in supporting the development of a more

inclusive and gender and disability responsive social protection system.

GP.1 Bringing UN agencies (ILO, UNDP and UNICEF) together to work on social protection development in a coherent manner is a good practice