



<Advancing Social Protection in Cambodia- Independent Midterm evaluation>

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QUICK FACTS

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Administrative Office: DWT/CO-Bangkok

Technical Office: *ILO Decent Work Team for East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific*

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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT	
Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure	<p>The project began implementation in February 2021 with an approved budget of €5,598,535 over 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). It aims to extend social protection coverage and quality of provisions (adequacy and quality of services) by improving operational capabilities of social protection institutions and the adaptability of existing schemes to the characteristics and needs of those working in the informal sector, with a particular focus on the expansion of social protection to the ‘missing middle’ and the vulnerable.</p>
Present situation of the project	<p>At the time of evaluation, the project had completed just over 2 years of its four year implementing period.</p>
Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation	<p>The specific objectives of the MTE were to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Assess the progress achieved with project implementation against project objectives and performance indicators adopted, and to identify and address any major obstacles that may have arisen; (2) Examine the current and future role of the project in contributing towards generating system change across the Cambodia’s social protection systems, and draw lessons learned and identify good practices from the two years of the project’s intervention; (3) Propose recommendations to inform modifications of the project to increase its relevance and validity of design, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact orientation, and sustainability, in the remaining period <p>The evaluation covered the first two full years of project implementation – 2021 and 2022 – and includes some information relevant to recently initiated work during the first 3-4 months of 2023.</p> <p>The MTE will provide information to the UN partners ILO and UNICEF and Government counterparts, including especially the GS- NSPC, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY), the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), and the Ministry of Economy and Planning (MoEP). Findings are also relevant to social partners, including INGOs and NGOs involved in other social protection projects such as the FIRST project, led by OXFAM; employer organisations such as the Cambodian Federation of Employers (CAMFEBA), and worker organisations and trade unions such as the Association of Transportation and Informal Workers and Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association. Findings are intended to inform the European Union – the donor for this and other social protection projects in Cambodia.</p>
Methodology of evaluation	<p>The evaluation took a mixed-method approach, using quantitative and qualitative data available through document review, and qualitative primary data. It also took a primarily theory based approach, since this offered learning about causation and causal</p>

steps that would be relevant to the formative objectives of an evaluation at this mid-term stage. A Theory of Change had been reconstructed as part of the Evaluability Assessment process which was used as a guiding framework for understanding the project and expected causal chain. The evaluation also prioritised a gender responsive approach, aiming to fully incorporate study methods to address UNSWAP gender equality procedures. Evaluation criteria for cross cutting issues, and evaluation questions included a specific stand-alone inquiry about advancing gender equality, and a collaborative approach was taken wherever possible to engaged stakeholders, including rights holders, in the process. Altogether 62 documents were reviewed and 74 respondents were consulted in primary data collection involving an EA-focussed and an MTE-focussed stage.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Key findings of the MTE include the following:

Relevance: Finding 1: Project objectives are broadly relevant and reflect the priorities of the government to extend social protection to its target groups of vulnerable populations for SA and informal workers, who represent the large ‘missing middle’ for SS. The project also fits well with the broader agendas of all the core institutions- ILO, UNICEF and the RGC in the form of its SP institutions NSAF, NSSF and GS-NSPC. However, it does not stand to (and did not aim to) support the government to reach all relevant groups within the project lifetime: coverage of social security in particular remains at the beginning of a long road in terms of outreach to ‘difficult’ sectors of informal workers such as farmers and ‘daily wage labour’ construction workers.

Validity of design: Finding 2: The MTE has added detail to several of the risks to the project strategy and logical framework identified through the Evaluability Assessment. This includes concerns about the number of procedural steps necessary in relation to the project timeline not accounted for in project design, reflected in the still pending adoption of the necessary legislations for mandatory SS schemes; an absence of concrete plans for large scale advocacy supporting the voluntary registrations of dependents of registered workers; a continued risk, despite improvements, that health service quality concerns that may be a barrier to the success of voluntary registration; and a risk that compulsory registration of micro enterprises, even when all the sub-legislation is approved, may not be immediately enforced. Further work is need to understand how registration will work for some groups; at the same time there may be relatively low-risk groups of self-employed who could be concurrently targeted in order to help develop a ‘norming’ of NSSF membership .

Coherence: Finding 3: Social protection in Cambodia has been a very active space with several players over the last decade: with the establishment of government institutions NSSF and NSAF, the rapid roll out of a large scale CT response to Covid-19 and the launching of various SP mechanisms. Structures have also been put in place for system coordination, including the GS-NSPC and a number of focused working groups, and ASPC has advocated for a one-SP approach. The project has seen a number of specific collaborations. However, ILO and UNICEF still have a tendency to work on SP in loosely coordinated silos. This has to be carefully addressed and monitored so the potential synergies between SS and SA, which are now emerging more clearly in part due to the project’s work, are not missed.

Effectiveness: Finding 4: Unless legislation for the compulsory expansion of social security to dependents of members of the NSSF is secured and implemented quickly, Outcome 1 is unlikely to achieve the targets set within the remaining 18-months of the

project. Outcome 2 has exceeded targets when emergency CTs are considered together with routine ones; but efforts to separate out these types of response needs to be made for a clear picture of progress. Institutional strengthening objectives for SA folded into Outcome 2 have also made tangible progress. Outcome 3 for institutional strengthening for SS met significant challenge in 2022, partly due to the fact that some of the direct TA support had been cancelled because it was determined as outside the scope of the project and/or outside the area of the ILO's technical competency. Progress in rolling out 3 of the 4 remaining outputs is only expected from 2023. Progress has been made which is relevant to these outputs e.g. by NSPC, but ILO's role in supporting this is unclear.

Effectiveness: Finding 5: Qualitative data suggests that furthering the projects objectives would be supported by more focus on creating *flexible* contributory mechanisms to accommodate the self-employed; attention to creating incentives and communications to attract voluntary (or compulsory) contribution from self-employed; and continued articulation of the wider vision of the contribution of social security to national interests in order to underpin the delicate formalization processes envisaged.

Efficiency: Finding 6: The most significant limiting factor on the achievement of outcomes is the limited timeframe of the project and additional steps likely necessary, rather than limited financial or human resources. However, particular challenges with progress under Outcomes 1 and 3, mean that anticipated technical staff budget, which was weighted to the early project stages, may now need extension for the further technical inputs still needed to pursue outcomes.

Finding 7: The 3-way configuration of SP support that the EU has brought into being has brought identifiable benefits in specific respects, including creating leverage for the engagement of CSOs in the SP architecture; and through enabling ILO and UNICEF to contribute their distinct expertise. ILO and UNICEF's combined advocacy has also contributed to a new NSPPF which conceptualises SS and SA in harmonisation. However, the opportunity to actively synergise SS and SA through operation as a joint UN project team – has not yet been taken up; as these opportunities are now emerging it will be important to focus here.

Sustainability: Finding 8: The project has taken a strong sustainability approach in that it works at the level of evolving and supporting policy, and developing the knowledge base to inform this process. It has also taken a strong line on consistently supporting the evolution of the key social protection institutions: the GS-NSPC, the NSSF, and the newly established NSAF. While this contribution is significant, it is not by itself sufficient to the ongoing, long-term process of creating a fully sustainable SP system and this has not been the expectation from the Project; the pending transition from an emphasis on emergency cash transfers to the routine dimensions of social assistance, and further development of the interoperability of the IT / monitoring systems will be key parts of this.

Impact Orientation: Finding 9: The project has used different approaches to strengthening institutional capacity for developing an SP system which will continue to drive towards impact at scale using in-house skills. These have included direct trainings and consultative workshops as well as skills building for essential decision-making tools. While these are likely to have contributed to the potential for more progress towards impact, at least in the short term, sustainable systems for following up the effectiveness of capacity strengthening activities, and of institutionalizing the continued

acquisition of key skills and knowledge transfer are not comprehensive yet. Developing a longer-term institutional and capacity building development plan could strengthen this approach to achieving impact.

Cross cutting issues: Finding 10: While ASPC has an intrinsic focus on vulnerable groups through its focus on informal workers, and on groups in need of social assistance, there are a number of systemic ways in which its approach to gender equality and inclusion could be strengthened. These include systematic monitoring which makes disaggregation by gender more visible, and disaggregation by gender AND other vulnerabilities available; evaluation approaches which set out to uncover gender-relevant information; and more systematic, consistently integrated and critical approaches to issues such as gender labour market segregation and the gendered implications of formalization process which diminish workplace flexibility.

Cross Cutting Issues: Finding 11: The project's continued technical support to the Government to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and post-Covid recovery, has demonstrated flexibility, adaptability, and a commitment to supporting government priorities. This support has contributed to the RGC's initiatives to protect poor and vulnerable households from the impact of inflation and flooding in the context of post-Covid economic challenges. To some extent, these initiatives have detracted project resources and focus from - and therefore caused delays to - the main tasks of supporting routinized SA and SS in the interests of a longer term economic resilience which will include further formalization and contribution-based social protection.

Conclusions

For Social Security, the expansions have proceeded more slowly than anticipated by the design of the project – for the scaled up level of registrations that the project envisaged, there is still a long way to go. This is partly due to weaknesses in the project design and partly due to government priorities and issues related to the wider context of economic recovery. The challenge is now to find ways to support the RGC to move assertively and confidently to achieve its stated objectives of expanding the coverage of contributory SP mechanisms. Several strategies are evident. First, open reflection on continuing economic challenges related to the post-Covid and climate-change affected context would be productive to gain clarity on the role of this environment in slowing progress on business registrations and therefore employee registrations with NSSF. Therefore continuing to make the case for how expanded contribution-based social security is supportive of the wider pursuit of economic resilience and national development will be important. Taking action to support implementing the NSSF communications strategy to attract voluntary or compulsory contributions from self-employed groups and from dependents of current NSSF members and strengthened advocacy for legislation on compulsory coverage of dependents of NSSF members could hasten scale-up in the longer term.

For Social Assistance, the challenge lies in successfully making the transition from the emergency support which has dominated SA for the last few years, to more routinized and reliable support schemes allow vulnerable people to plan and therefore to strategize to move out of poverty - and potentially into labour market based contributory protection schemes. While the RGC has a commitment to making the transition to the Family Package during 2024, it will be important for the ASPC to continue to find ways to closely support it as the wider project of closing the missing

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middle gap will take much longer. Immediate ways to support the process include methods to clearly separate out monitoring data on emergency and routinized schemes, so that the relative progress in each format becomes more visible.

For both ILO and UNICEF an important mode going forward will be building and acting on synergies between the pillars. The bottleneck for SA in making the transition from emergency to routine assistance has much in common with the bottleneck facing progress with SS. Finding ways of working on these challenges together, more clearly demonstrating how to operationalise a harmonised approach to SP will be productive. For instance, how vulnerable groups can / will be able to get the right support to move into positions which are [newly] covered by SS schemes will contribute to the evolving conception in the GS-NSPC of a harmonized SP system. Further disaggregated information on the situations of vulnerable groups, including the impacts of intersectionality, will be needed. Carefully making visible disaggregated monitoring data by gender and by other vulnerabilities will support this. It may also involve generating information on how individuals supported through emergency and routine SA are or are not connected to any of the self-employed sectors which are the focus on new work to register these groups into NSSF.

To strengthen the gender equality approach, there is a clear opportunity as the reviewed NSPPF comes into play, to take a more proactive approach to supporting the NSSF, NSAF and GS-NSPC to achieve the integration called for. This means systematically supporting steps towards making gender disaggregated data visible in both SA and SS monitoring systems, as well as intersectional data. It also means supporting more systematically gender-critical approaches to analysing labour market sectors, (especially e.g. gender segregation and its relation to gender wage gaps, and therefore the contributory power of workers), formalization processes which should avoid creating less flexibility if they are to be gender equal; and a recognition of the role and value of unpaid care work in the overall economy.

The overall objective of ASPC is to [support RGC to] create a system in which more women and men in Cambodia have access to more effective, efficient, accountable and sustainable gender-responsive social protection. While the project does not explicitly set out to complete this evolution, it is important to maintain a picture of where the project fits into the wider pictures: – both of a fully inclusive SP system; and of the several contributing stakeholders to this desired evolution. With this in mind, it is essential to acknowledge that ASPC will not yet meet the needs of all relevant groups (of workers; of vulnerable people) and therefore to calibrate this project with a conception of what will remain to be done after the close of the project in approximately 18 months – such as continuing to develop creative schemes that meet the particular challenges of certain types of self-employed and otherwise vulnerable people. Slow progress in actual coverage achieved by Outcome 1 makes it particularly important to carefully clarify what will be achieved in the remaining timeframe of ASPC; what will remain to be completed to achieve the overall objective; and what timeframe might be required for this. It also means a clear focus on how best to support government capacity renewal in the long term; and continued work to support the institutionalisation of NSAF in particular.

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As the SP institutions continue to work towards harmonization of SS and SA, and towards interoperability of the data systems supporting this, coherence among supporting stakeholders will continue to be a priority - but equally, working towards clear understanding of the linkages (from beneficiary perspective) between emergency SA schemes, routinized SA schemes and SS coverage will be key. This may include stronger advocacy with NSSF for how SS can and should be oriented towards creating a more integrated social protection system with built-in resilience among vulnerable work sectors to diminish the need for [emergency] SA, as well as how to protect vulnerable populations who are not able to work, including children – which is a highly relevant issues for both SA and SS systems.

The project has also arrived at an important moment where the ‘in-principle’ linkages between SP and SA are beginning to become increasing evident in the expanding objectives and design of new schemes. In the new ‘routine’ mode for SA, opportunities such as focusing SA for skills development into areas which can generate SS coverage through voluntary or compulsory contribution are becoming more obvious. In addition, a key structural element of the NSPPF 2030 is the life risk of individuals, rather than the separate pillars of SA and SS. The project will be in a better position to take up these opportunities for synergising their work if the two pillars take care to work in close collaboration with all key stakeholders and with each other as the SP system progresses. Creating an optimally integrated / harmonised SP system will involve synchronised work from stakeholders, including project managers in ASPC.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main findings & Conclusions

Recommendation 1: Priorities for ILO. ILO should undertake a candid review of the timeline available to ASPC; the causal steps necessary to achieve objectives; and realistic targets. This should include assessing potential for a No Cost Extension; planning for what actions can be taken within the original timeframe; and what actions might take place within the framework of an extension. Second, ILO should take action as soon as possible to support implementing the NSSF communications strategy to attract voluntary (or, where relevant, compulsory) contributions from self-employed groups and the dependents of NSSF contributing members through public and social media. Third, the NSSF should develop promotional materials, containing the key information on how to register, eligibility criteria and procedural steps, and including the benefits members can expect to receive. ASPC could support the capacity of NSSF staff to develop these materials, which should complement the active registration campaigns as recommended in the communications strategy.

Fourth, ILO should continue to advocate for progress with amendments to legislation for extending health insurance to dependents of the NSSF’s registered members via compulsory contribution as a preferred option. For compulsory contributions for dependents of members, much groundwork is in place but action has been hesitant, creating a bottleneck. Releasing this bottleneck will require advocacy with the NSSF and GS-NSPC, which should indeed continue but will take time.

Meanwhile, the shorter-term option for voluntary contributions via the pending Sub-Decree - mainly aimed at facilitating voluntary contributions for the self-employed but with some option to include employee dependents - should be carefully promoted as this route shows some promise for more immediate progress within the timeframe of ASPC. This means 1) prioritizing support to the adoption, approval and implementation of the *pending* Sub-Decree on the extension of social security (health insurance, and

pension) to self-employed/own-account workers – and including dependents of NSSF members - though voluntary contributions; alongside support to the recently initiated one-year pilot scheme health insurance scheme for select self-employment sectors and then 2) promoting and disseminating information about this opportunity via the communications strategy implementation and 3) agreeing annual targets for dependents' enrolments through this option and tracking these.

Recommendation 2: Priorities for UNICEF: UNICEF should collaborate with the GS-NSPC, and NSAF in making the separated data for Emergency CTs and the Routine CTs more distinct, visible and available for ASPC project monitoring and reporting, as well as more broadly for NSAF and GS-NSPC – where necessary - to gauge the progress made on routine CT coverage. Supporting the integration of a separate approach to routine and shock-response schemes in the M&E handbook for SP could be part of this. Second, UNICEF should continue to seek opportunities to support ongoing work to develop and promote the integration of MIS system/or data-sharing platform into the Single National Registry of the Social Protection's Beneficiaries. This can work through the development of the integrated social assistance ICT platform linking data from all CTs, and APIs linking CTs with the Registry to contribute to GS-NSPC's creation of this Registry and its platform, so that data are available in other government ministries and institutions, including NSSF.

Following successful completion of the current Digitalization Project/SP-ID Project, including the imminent roll out of the CamDX, there is an opportunity to maintain momentum on implementing the agenda of the data collection modules and APIs to support the Cash-Plus development options.

Recommendation 3: for UNICEF and ILO together. In the context of the NSPPF 2030 life cycle approach, which provides a framework for synergising SA and SS, UNICEF and ILO should take action and opportunities to strengthen visibility of the linkages between SA and SS through more explicitly joint work by ILO and UNICEF. This should include continuing to explore potential linkages in the TVET Cash Transfer scheme; the expansion of the cash transfer for pregnant women and children to garment workers. It might also include designing referral schemes so that information on SA and SS is available to all (to be discussed with GS-NSPC), and seeking new resources to facilitate developing such linkages.

It might also include more open reflection on how current post-Covid economic challenges including inflation and climate change effects have dampening effect on expanding SS registrations at the same time as fixing SA efforts in emergency mode. There is therefore a clear mutual benefit to getting beyond the bottleneck in SS – including by advocacy on where and how SS is linked to SA through improving economic resilience by providing protection at specified critical points, especially for vulnerable groups; and how routine SA schemes linking livelihood skills and cash support can / could be linked to new opportunities for SS coverage in key sectors. It might also include further consideration of the potential linkages between SS and ongoing SA for those groups who cannot work, such as children, people with severe disability, and the very elderly.

Recommendation 4: A stronger gender approach. In the immediate term, ILO and UNICEF should work with the social protection institutions to make gender disaggregation consistently visible and available in SA and SS monitoring systems, and therefore also in ASPC project reporting data. While this disaggregation is available in

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the SP M&E framework, any remaining gaps in disaggregation, for instance in some SA schemes, should be filled.

In the medium term, ILO and UNICEF should support consistent capacity of those monitoring systems to make data available on intersectionality– including gender and disability; and gender and vulnerable groups used for ID Poor classification.

They should also work with the social protection institutions to support stronger gender integration in line with the reviewed NSPPF, when it is made available. This could include developing a gender strategy, or specific gender-related actions, to translate the gender dimensions of the NSPPF into an operational process. It should include an approach/ strategy to counter gender segregation in labour markets when there are opportunities through the SP system; and to maintaining flexibility in the process of labour market formalization in the interests of not closing this formal sector off from those who also have care responsibilities. It should also include special consideration of the gender dimensions of poor and near-poor profiles, including of the large number of female headed households among this group.

Recommendation 5: A sustainable capacity renewal approach. UNICEF and ILO should continue to support the further institutional strengthening of NSAF; NSSF and GS-NSPC including with a long term strategy on how skills can be maintained and renewed internally. Consider supporting the development of a long-term institutional strengthening and capacity renewal plan for NSSF and NSAF and coordinated by GS-NSPC where there are capacity needs in common or to support schemes which are intentionally harmonised. For NSAF, this means continuing to work on the organizational development plan and the Family Package costing which aims to make capacity building more structured and sustainable. An institutional strengthening and capacity renewal plan for NSSF could be separately developed, with a role for GS-NSPC in planning common elements, and with the purpose of sustainability and continuation of the mechanisms and tools or good practices and lessons learnt etc., and a mechanism for allocating government financial resources to this end. Clear annual activity targets along with an appropriate budget allocation should be set for NSSF's and NSAF's training and outreach activities.

Main lessons learned and good practices

Lesson Learned: A stronger approach to Theory of Change development at the design stage would have benefited the project implementation and will still be beneficial in the remaining timeframe. The reconstructed Theory of Change should be reviewed during the second half of the project and before final evaluation. A theory of change was developed at the project design stage, but the causal dynamic was not very clearly expressed in the visual version or the narrative accompanying it.

One challenge for the ToC is that the project aims to give strategic support for the government-led evolution (expansion and improved targeting) of the SP system as a whole. Thus in principle the project –specific ToC sits within a broader (and longer) vision of the evolving social protection system in general. Although beyond the scope of this ASPC project itself, in principle the ToC for this project should be envisioned as embedded in a broader change process relating to an evolution of the whole social protection system, most likely based on the (revised) NSPPF

As the current process of both EA and MTE has revealed, some causal steps were missing in the plan at the outset, which mean there is some risk the expected outcomes will not be achieved. Challenges in the line of causation expressed in project design has

meant that there are ‘gaps’ – for instance in allowing time for the procedural steps necessary for developing and then implementing new legislation.

A clear approach to reviewing the current (reconstructed) ToC by the project partners going forward will strengthen the sense of how targets are to be achieved and how long this will take, and therefore help to design the project’s final months, including any no cost extension planned. It will also clarify thinking on the relation of the capacity building / institutional strengthening initiatives to project outcomes within this project timeframe – i.e. which capacity inputs (if any) are necessary steps for achieving the objectives of this project; and which capacity inputs are implemented in the interests of sustainability / impact orientation beyond the scope of this immediate project.

For this project, resources needed for embedding current ToC among partners; and for revisiting current ToC before / during inception period for final evaluation. In future, upfront investment in (participatory) ToC development focusing on causal processes will be beneficial.

Good Practice: The project has taken a strong sustainability approach through its strong integration of inputs to strengthen internal capacity for developing and sustaining social security schemes, alongside targeted technical assistance to move the developing schemes forward.

The project is taking place at a key stage in the establishment of the key SP institutions NSAF and NSSF. Giving support at these early stages of creating the organisational architecture and skills for both has been productive to support a sustained approach to SP. In other contexts, recognising optimal timing for capacity strengthening at the early stages of institutional development is key to effecting this good practice.

This approach has combined specialist TA in positions such as for the development of systems for data interoperability with skills building inputs to work towards internal sustainability for important specialisms such as actuarial skills.

While this work has yet to be fully written into a comprehensive plan for capacity renewal, there is some early evidence that it is contributing to tangible results which promise to have long lasting effects. These include

- 1) Allowing for the development of opportunities for linkage between Social Assistance and Social Security schemes;
- 2) Developing in-house skills for high level advice and risk assessment for social security schemes;
- 3) Embedding an evidence based approach to the design of different components of the extension of SP to new worker groups.

This approach has potential for other ILO country programmes where social security systems have begun to rapidly develop, such as in middle income and high middle-income countries.

This approach is contributing to DWCP’s Outcome 2.1 “Social Protection System operates in a sustainable, transparent, coordinated well-administered and equitable manner.”