



► Social Protection in Action: Building Social Protection Floors for All

2022

Lao People's Democratic Republic and Cambodia: Child and family grants

Summary

Recognizing the urgent need to give children the best start into life, the Governments of Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic have recently focused on introducing support to children and their families through social protection systems. Whereas in the past support for children centred around education and healthcare services, both Governments are now increasingly investing in social protection cash benefits.

In Cambodia, the Government introduced its main child grant programme, the National Cash Transfer Programme for Pregnant Women and Children, in 2019. The programme seeks to ease the financial barriers to the uptake of essential health care services and promote better nutrition among pregnant women and children in poor households; ultimately, it aims to promote human capital development.

Prior to the introduction of this national programme, various smaller-scale child and family grants, often in pilot form and with nutrition and health focus, were implemented.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Mother and Early Childhood Grant (MECG) pilot was launched recently and is one of the Government's main social welfare programmes, which it aims to eventually scaling up nationwide. The pilot delivers an integrated package of support, consisting of a cash transfer, referrals to health, legal and social services, and behaviour change communication to pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under the age of one year.

Cambodia's and Lao PDR's child grants contribute to the provision of basic income security for children, as mandated by the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202). Through these schemes, both countries have also put in practice several guiding principles of the Recommendation. The study explains more specifically how the countries aim to achieve "universality of protection, based on social solidarity" and have implemented these schemes through "progressive realization, including by setting targets and time frames".

Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)

SDG 1.3 aims to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030, achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

Social protection floors (SPFs) guarantee access to essential health care and basic income security for children, persons of working age and older persons.

187 countries have adopted the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202), to achieve universal

social protection. This note presents a successful country experience of expanding social protection.

The experiences of Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic are in line with the guiding principles of Recommendation No. 202.

Main Lessons Learned

- The majority of child and family (pilot) programmes in both countries have a nutrition and health focus, typically linking the cash transfers to additional services and/or behaviour change communication, with programmes often targeted at pregnant and lactating women and their children. Hence, the programmes recognize the potential of realizing impact during the “first 1,000 days” window of opportunity.
- Child and family grants were initially primarily funded and managed by donors and were designed as pilots, which are important in their own right but often limited in their time period and coverage. Substantial advocacy efforts to build a social protection floor for child and family benefits have helped such pilot programmes to reach scale and ensure national ownership, with them being increasingly funded from domestic sources.
- The increased recognition of the relevance of social protection for children and families also reflects both Governments’ efforts to develop and implement holistic policy frameworks that better address children and families’ needs.
- With support from partners, national social protection strategies and frameworks for children and families have been developed and capacities to design and implement such programmes are being built.

Context

Despite significant progress in poverty reduction, human development indicators remain low, with the human development index for Cambodia at 0.59 and for the Lao People’s Democratic Republic at 0.61 – both lower than the average of 0.67 for the East Asia and Pacific region. Nutrition is a particular challenge for human development and the development of children in both countries. In Cambodia, one in three children under the age of 5 is stunted. Likewise, malnutrition rates among children under the age of 5 in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic are among the highest in the region, with 33 per cent of children being stunted – more than 50 per cent in some provinces. Poverty, social exclusion and gender disparities are the main determinants of a child’s nutritional status, with children from the poorest quintile more than twice as likely to be stunted compared to those in the richest quintile.

Ensuring that children have the best possible start in life is a critical priority as deprivations in early childhood affect a child’s potential and development throughout life. Recognizing this, Cambodia and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic recently expanded social protection for children and their families. Both Governments are now aiming to provide more comprehensive support to their populations, in particular children from early ages. This increasingly takes the form of social protection benefits integrated with social services, such as counselling, birth registration and access to healthcare, among others.

Social protection policy frameworks

These developments are firmly grounded in national social protection strategies and frameworks that are focused on rendering social protection more inclusive and integrated, with the ultimate objective of realizing the right to social protection for all. In Cambodia, social protection has gained renewed attention since the release of the National Social Protection Strategy in 2011 and the subsequent National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) for 2016–2025, which guides social protection priorities and focuses on enhancing support through social assistance and improving social security systems. As part of the social assistance pillar, protection shall be provided to citizens living below and near the poverty line, with special emphasis on children and pregnant women, people with disabilities and the elderly.

In the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Government is working towards implementing its first National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) 2025, which builds on the Government’s commitment to universal social protection coverage by building a much-needed social protection floor that protects all Lao people from socioeconomic shocks, environmental disasters, and vulnerabilities. The NSPS identifies nine social welfare programmes to be implemented in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in order to protect people from vulnerabilities; the Mother and Early Childhood Grant is one of these nine programmes.

Child and family grants

To address the prevailing vulnerabilities faced by children and families, Cambodia and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic recently introduced a range of child- and family-

focused social protection programmes – particularly cash transfers.

Cambodia

In 2019, the Government of Cambodia, through the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY), introduced its most recent child grant, the National Cash Transfer Programme for Pregnant Women and Children. Through the provision of cash transfers, the programme seeks to ease the financial barriers to the uptake of essential healthcare services and promote better nutrition among pregnant women and children living in poor households. It provides them with cash transfers conditional on visits to health centres, such as for antenatal and postnatal care and institutional delivery.

Before the introduction of the national cash transfer programme, smaller-scale pilots in Cambodia had demonstrated the potential of cash grants to substantially enhance the well-being of children and their families. However, they were donor-driven and ad hoc and time-bound interventions with limited coverage.

Lao People's Democratic Republic

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the MCEG pilot was launched recently under the leadership of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare as part of a joint initiative between the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), ILO and the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). The pilot aims to deliver an integrated package of a monthly cash transfer of 150,000 Laotian kip (US\$16), referrals for antenatal and postnatal check-ups, birth registration support and behaviour change communication to at least 1,400 pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under the age of 1. The pilot is implemented in the two southern provinces of Attapeu and Savannakhet and will be gradually expanded to other parts of the country. The MCEG aims to reduce poverty, enhance nutritional outcomes, reduce socio-economic inequalities and improve gender equality. It also seeks to establish delivery systems, including grievance redressal mechanisms, management information systems and monitoring systems, that can be used for other social protection programmes in the future. It further seeks to provide lessons and experiences that can help the Government to plan, design and implement social protection programmes for other vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities and elderly people.

In addition, the Reducing Rural Poverty and Malnutrition Project was launched in 2020 under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, with support from the World Bank. As part of this programme, nutrition-sensitive cash transfers are delivered to poor and near-poor families with pregnant women and children under 2. The cash grants amount to 140,000 Laotian kip (US\$15) per household and have been rolled out to date in 881 villages in 12 districts of four northern provinces – Phongsaly, Oudomxay, Huaphanh and Xiengkhuang – all of which have levels of childhood stunting above the national average.

These two recently rolled-out programmes were preceded by other donor-supported child and family grants that achieved only limited coverage.

Strengthening systems along the way

With both countries increasingly investing in social protection, efforts are not adequately focusing on strengthening coordination, delivery and financing mechanisms.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, a UN joint programme of the ILO, UNICEF and the United Nations Capital Development Fund supports the Mother and Early Childhood Grant through the piloting and proof of concept of the programme. The MCEG pilot will involve setting up the delivery, monitoring and information management systems, which can potentially be used for other social protection programmes in future.

Also in Cambodia, support has focused on strengthening social protection systems for children and their families. At policy level, UNICEF is currently working with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation and the National Social Protection Council (NSPC) to develop the Family Package Policy, which is being developed in line with the NSPPF objective to integrate social assistance programmes in the country and offer an integrated package of assistance to families and children. In addition to priority areas for support, the policy presents a financing strategy that aims to streamline financing mechanisms and thereby render the different types of assistance under the package more financially sustainable.

UNICEF also supported the Government in the roll-out of the National Cash Transfer Programme for Pregnant

Women and Children. In this process, the capacity of the Government to deliver such services has been assessed and strengthened. For instance, an institutional capacity assessment of MoSVY to deliver social assistance in Cambodia was conducted and a corresponding capacity development plan to address the identified gaps was drafted to strengthen the capacities of the MoSVY.

Way forward

In Cambodia, the Family Package Policy is currently in draft form and has yet to be submitted to the Executive Committee of the NSPC. The policy is expected to ensure that in the future, social assistance comprehensively covers Cambodian families' needs over the life cycle, enabling them to overcome poverty and deprivation and invest in human capital in order to accelerate sustainable growth and inclusive development. The policy is also likely to foster more effective and efficient delivery of social assistance by streamlining processes and eliminating overlaps. Furthermore, it strives to establish the necessary linkages between social protection and complementary social services in order to maximize the effectiveness and impacts of social protection investments.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, apart from the MECG's implementation and nationwide roll out after the pilot, the Government is preparing the next steps for introducing other social assistance programmes specified under the NSPS, prioritizing vulnerable groups such as persons with disability, unexploded ordnance survivors and gender-based violence victims. Hence, based on lessons learned and newly established systems from the MECG and with technical assistance from its partners, the Government is in the process of setting up the national social protection system as stipulated in the NSPS. In line with the NSPS, the Government will also need to explore innovative and sustainable financing approaches and mechanisms in order to move away from short-term, donor-funded programmes towards a longer-term strategy on the financing of the sector.

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