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KOMUNITI



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2nd Regional Social Policy Conference East Asia and Pacific

Prioritizing Investments in Children in a Changing Region

22-23 October 2024
Kuching, Sarawak,
Malaysia

Conference Report



Pusat Penyelidikan Kesejahteraan Sosial
Social Wellbeing Research Centre
(SWRC)



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Background

In an era marked by megatrends that bring on accelerated transitions and evolving social dynamics, the imperative to invest in children as a strategic pathway toward human capital development has never been more apparent. As outlined by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in its Economic Outlook 2024, The East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region, known for its diverse cultures, economies, and demographics, is currently exposed to five megatrends:

1. **Climate change:** Climate change poses significant challenges to the Asia-Pacific region, impacting fiscal policies and economic stability. Rising temperatures and extreme weather events erode productivity, reduce agricultural yields, and increase the frequency of diseases. These factors lower fiscal revenues and necessitate higher government expenditures for disaster recovery, climate adaptation, and green infrastructure. Additionally, climate-induced inflation, stemming from supply chain disruptions and the adoption of green technologies, increases borrowing costs for governments.
2. **Digitalization:** Technological advancements and digitalization revolutionize economic sectors and public fiscal management. New industries, such as digital trade and data commoditization, emerge, while traditional sectors decline. These changes demand innovative tax policies to capture revenues from intangible assets and cross-border transactions. Digital tools also enhance fiscal efficiency, transparency, and effectiveness, but disparities in access to technology highlight the need for equitable policy implementation across countries.
3. **Demographic shifts:** The region faces rapid population aging due to declining birth rates and increased longevity. This shift strains fiscal systems as fewer workers support a growing elderly population, reducing income tax revenues and rising expenditures on pensions and health care. Aging also affects inflation dynamics and public debt sustainability, complicating fiscal planning. Strategic policies are needed to maintain productivity, integrate older individuals into the workforce, and sustain social security systems.

4. **Urbanization:** Urbanization accelerates demands for infrastructure, housing, and public services, creating fiscal pressures on governments. However, it also offers opportunities for economic growth and innovation if managed effectively at the local level (i.e. Child Friendly Cities Initiative). Policymakers must address challenges such as urban sprawl, pollution, and inequality while ensuring equitable access to essential services.

5. **Intensified inequalities:** Rising income inequality and disparities in access to resources and opportunities are exacerbated by other megatrends like climate change and digitalization. Vulnerable populations face challenges such as inadequate social protection and limited participation in economic opportunities. Fiscal policies must prioritize inclusivity, ensuring equitable access to education, healthcare, and social security to mitigate the adverse effects of these inequalities.

Jointly organized by UNICEF and Social Wellbeing Research Centre (SWRC) at Universiti Malaya, in collaboration with the Ministry of Women, Early Childhood, and Community Wellbeing Development (KPWK) Sarawak, the **Regional Social Policy Conference, East Asia and Pacific (RSPC-EAP) 2024** provides a crucial platform for stakeholders to explore the vital role of social protection in addressing these megatrends. The conference aims to explore innovative solutions being implemented in the region, foster regional networks for mutual learning, and facilitate experience sharing and peer support as countries work to design new approaches and enhance existing systems.

Building upon these megatrends, the RSPC-EAP 2024 elucidates the importance of investing in children and advancing inclusive policies in mitigating the macroeconomic consequences of these emerging megatrends in the region. Underpinning this regional dialogue is the recognition of the interconnectedness between demographic trends, child-sensitive inclusive social policies, and economic productivity. Strategic investments in children today lay the foundation for a future workforce that is skilled, healthy, and adaptable to evolving modern labor markets characterized by rapid changes in skills requirements, including those induced by digitalization.

By prioritizing investment in children, countries can ensure that future generations are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities to drive innovation, productivity, and sustainable economic growth. Further, inclusive policies that promote universal access fundamental rights and rights for children (as outlined under the Convention of the Rights of the Child) such as education, health, social protection, and family support play a pivotal role in unlocking the productive potential of children from diverse backgrounds and contribute to economic prosperity and social wellbeing. By removing barriers to participation in wider opportunities, countries can harness the untapped talent and potential of all citizens, thereby bolstering productivity and resilience in the face of a rapidly changing context.

Hence, the conference seeks to achieve the following specific objectives to harness the collective wisdom, experiences, and innovations of EAP countries to advance the agenda of promoting the actualization of the rights of all children:

1. **Facilitate Mutual Learning:** Create an interactive platform for policymakers, development partners, and practitioners from EAP countries to exchange insights and experiences on adapting investments to a changing environment. Participants will explore innovative solutions to tackle the challenges of demographic aging.
2. **Showcase Best Practices:** Showcase exemplary initiatives, programs, and policies implemented by EAP countries to promote investment in children and inclusive policies. Through expert presentations, panel discussions, and interactive sessions, participants will have the opportunity to learn about successful interventions and innovative strategies that have demonstrated positive impacts on children's outcomes in the context of demographic transitions.
3. **Realize Cross-Country Collaboration:** Facilitate cross-country collaboration and knowledge sharing among EAP countries to replicate and adapt successful practices in investing in children. By highlighting effective approaches and scalable interventions, the conference seeks to inspire collaborative partnerships and collective action toward advancing the agenda of inclusivity in the region.

4. **Identify Regional Priorities:** Identify common challenges, emerging trends, and regional priorities in strategically positioning investments in children amidst rapid demographic aging. Participants will collectively identify key areas for action and innovation, informing regional agendas and policy dialogues on child-focused social protection and development.

5. **Build and Strengthen Networks:** Discuss common areas in peer groups where new ideas are discussed, challenges are brought for solution generation and lessons learned are shared. Common interests will allow for stronger peer support beyond the conference as the regional social protection network continues to be strengthened through continued interaction.

The RSPC-EAP took place in Kuching, Sarawak Malaysia on 22–23 October 2024. Participants included policymakers, including government officials, who are involved in policy development and implementation in EAP countries. Practitioners, including program managers, researchers, and experts in demography, childhood development, public finance, social protection, disaster risk management, and climate change adaptation, were also invited. They contributed by sharing their insights and experiences from the region. Summary of the panel presentations from each topic of the conference is provided in this report.



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SETTING THE SCENE:

INVESTING IN CHILDREN AMIDST A POLYCRISIS: NAVIGATING GLOBAL MEGATRENDS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Andrea Rossi, Regional Adviser Social Policy, and Economic Analysis - East Asia and Pacific at UNICEF

The concept of a [polycrisis](#) refers to a situation where multiple, interconnected crises compound each other. Polycrisis holds significant relevance in the context of the East Asia-Pacific region (Figure 1). The region faces a complex web of vulnerabilities, from economic challenges to environmental pressures, geopolitical tensions, social inequalities, and health crises, all of which can interact in unpredictable ways and impact households. [Understanding this interdependence is crucial for developing effective responses](#) that address the root causes of these challenges rather than their symptoms.

Figure 1: A polycrisis impact



Key Highlights:

The Importance of Investing in Children

The demographic shift necessitates a focus on children who will eventually **shoulder the financial burdens** of pensions and social services. It is imperative to protect and invest in children now to maximize their potential and ensure that no child is left behind. The long-term sustainability of our social systems depends on the well-being and empowerment of the younger generation.

The Role of Social Protection

Social protection systems play a vital role in empowering households to address crises effectively. By reinforcing the **multidimensional impact of social protection**, the resilience of families and communities can be enhanced. Cash transfers serve as a primary tool in social protection, offering immediate relief to vulnerable populations, particularly during crises. Efforts should focus on enhancing the **multiplier effect** of these transfers while preventing project fragmentation. Expanding social protection measures must also prioritize inclusivity to ensure marginalized communities, especially those in **informal sectors**, are not excluded. This calls for a shift from rigid bureaucratic models toward flexible, adaptive systems that can withstand future shocks. While technology can strengthen social protection efforts, it should complement, rather than replace the essential human interaction that fosters trust and community resilience.

Lessons Learned from Recent Crises

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided valuable lessons on social protection. Despite the expansion of beneficiaries and benefits, there has been a significant gap in human resources, leading to inadequate needs assessments. The return to bureaucratic aid models and conditionalities has often neglected the specific needs of children and marginalized communities. As such, key lessons include:

- The need for flexibility and adaptability in social protection systems.
- The importance of prioritizing children and vulnerable groups in policy responses.

- The necessity of learning from past mistakes to avoid reverting to ineffective models.

Figure 2: Live births and prediction for women from 1950 to 2100

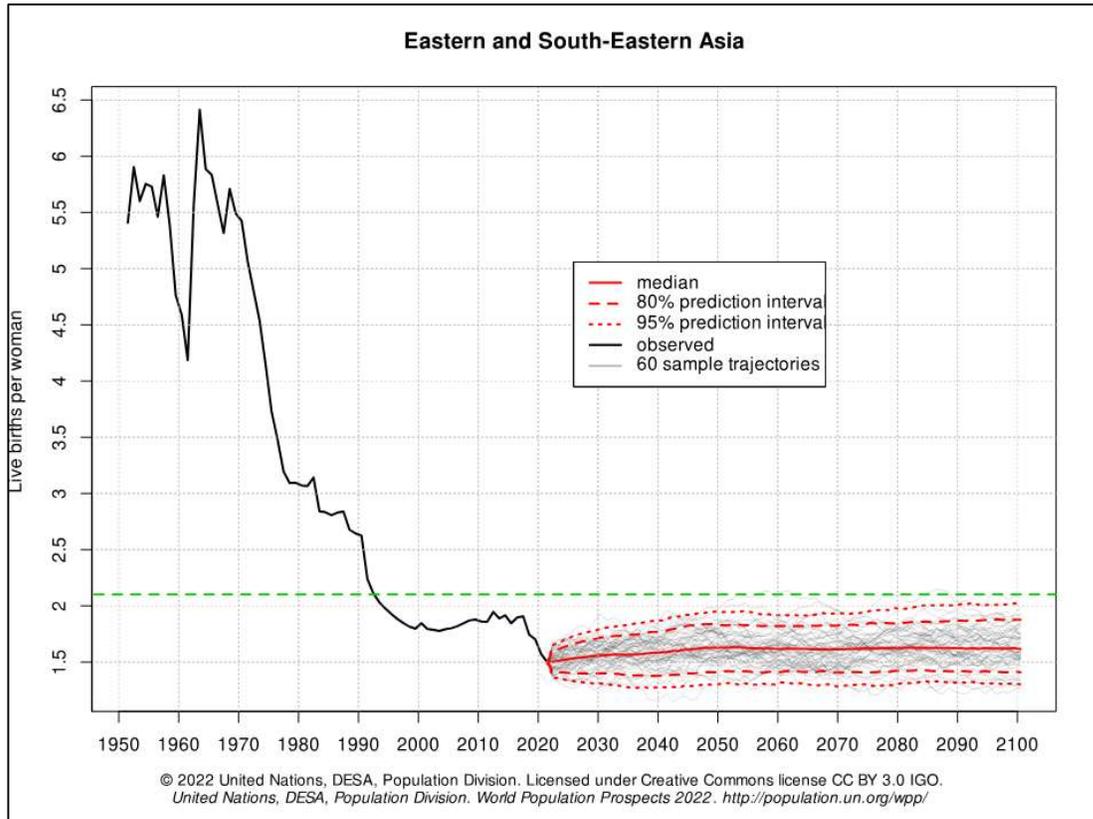
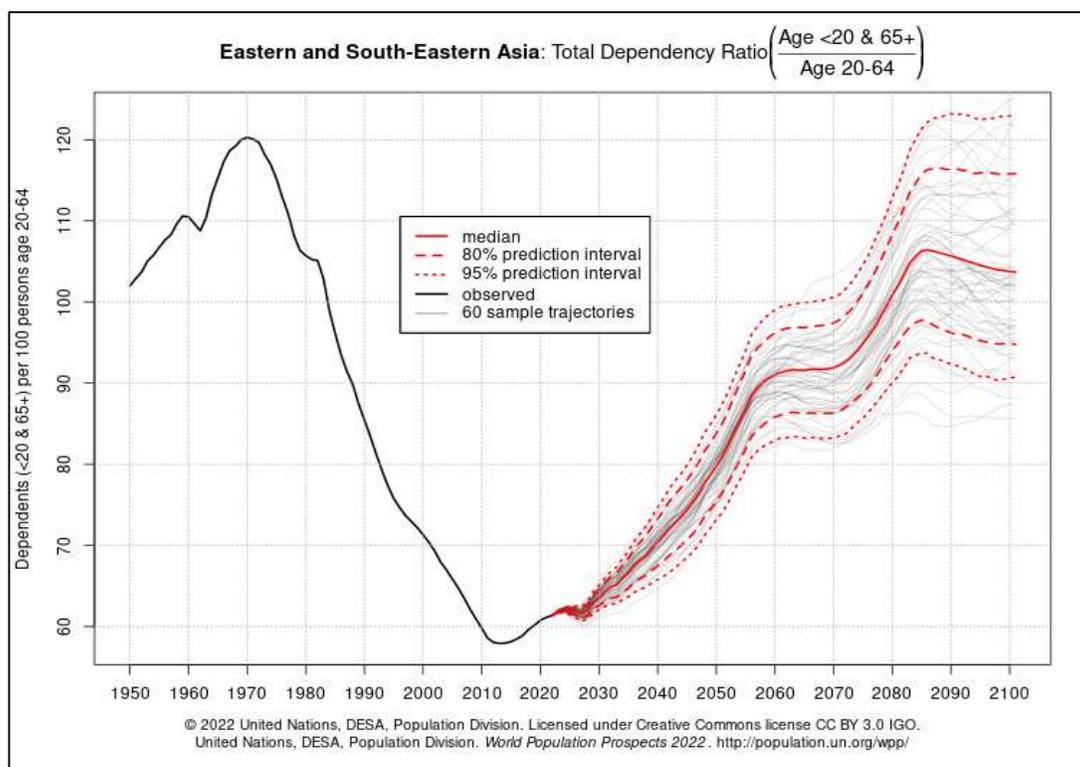


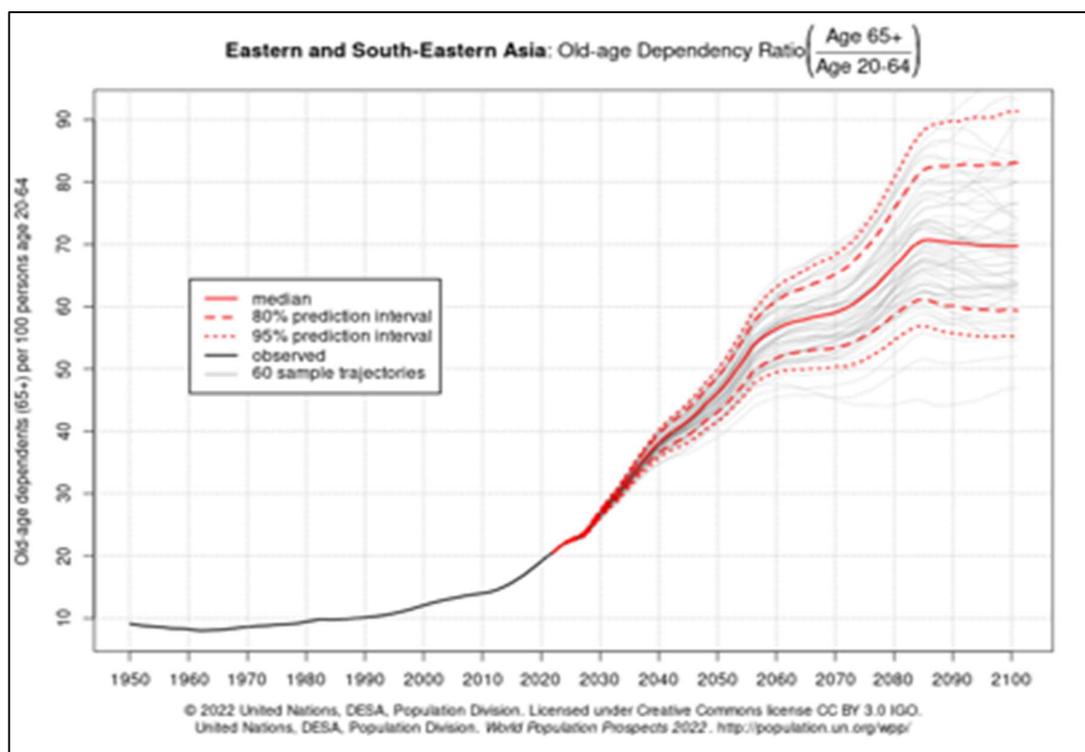
Figure 2 illustrates the steady decline in fertility rates starting from 1960, which has resulted in a continuous decrease in the number of children over the decades. The graph highlights that this downward trend is expected to persist, with projections indicating that by the year 2050, the number of children will have decreased to approximately half of the levels seen in 1975. This significant reduction underscores the long-term impact of declining fertility on population dynamics, with potential implications for social structures, economic growth, and future demographic challenges.

Figure 3: Total dependency ratio



Following this, Figure 3 demonstrates the rising total dependency ratio, which reflects the combined effects of declining birth rates and increased life expectancy. This shift means that, in the coming decades, each working individual will bear a greater burden of supporting non-working individuals, such as children and elderly people. Specifically, a child who is 5 years old today will face nearly double the support burden by the time they enter the workforce, as shown in the projection. This increasing dependency ratio is a direct consequence of demographic changes, where fewer younger individuals will be available to support an aging population (Figure 4). In line with this trend, Figure 4 highlights that public spending on healthcare is expected to double between 2015 and 2050, driven by the growing demand for services due to the aging population. These shifts pose significant challenges for economies, social systems, and public services, particularly in terms of workforce sustainability and healthcare funding.

Figure 4: Old-age dependency ratio in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia



Forethoughts: What Needs to be Done?

- **Promote dynamic and flexible social protection systems.** National social protection systems should be dynamic and flexible, addressing the specific challenges of aging societies while prioritizing investments in children.
- **Inclusive and gender-responsive policies.** Additionally, policies must be inclusive and gender-responsive, accommodating the unique needs of women and families to foster a supportive environment for children.
- **Foster sustainable financing mechanisms and promote intergenerational responsibility.** Meanwhile, sustainable financing mechanisms are essential to secure long-term success in social protection initiatives on top of promoting intergenerational responsibility to foster balanced resource allocation that supports both children and the elderly.

- **Strengthening partnerships and enhancing coordination within the social policy network** will help create a more effective response to the complex challenges of the polycrisis.

*“The children that we saw in the morning; each of them will have to take care of double the number of people that we are taking care of today. This is important as it reflects the increase of tax and the work that they need to do.” - **Andrea Rossi, UNICEF***



SESSION 1:

AGEING TRENDS IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC: CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD FOR SOCIAL POLICIES

EXPERT PRESENTERS/DISCUSSANTS

[Expert Presentation 1: Rapid Population Aging and Changing Intergenerational Transfer Patterns in Selected Asian Countries](#)

Professor Naohiro Ogawa, Visiting Fellow Asian Development Bank Institute (ADB)

[Expert Presentation 2](#)

Ms. Jatuporn Rojanaparnich, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security

[Panel Discussion](#)

MODERATOR:

Professor Datuk Norma Mansor, Director Social Wellbeing Research Centre (SWRC), Universiti Malaya (UM)

DISCUSSANTS:

1. **Mr. Chua Choon Hwa**, Deputy Secretary General, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM), Malaysia
 2. **Mr. Jiapeng Chen**, Deputy Director General, Population and Development Research Centre, China
-

As the global population continues to age, the Asia-Pacific region is projected to experience the most significant increase in the number of older citizens. By 2050, the population aged 60 and above is expected to nearly double reaching to 1.2 billion, or about one-quarter of the total population in the region (ADB, 2024). This demographic shift is anticipated to result in a substantial increase in the demand for pension systems, welfare programs, and healthcare services. While the full impact of this transition is already being experienced by some East Asia-Pacific (EAP) countries, others are advancing through different stages of aging. The sharing of knowledge from nations that are further along in managing these challenges has been recognized as valuable for those still in the preparatory phase.

Key Highlights:

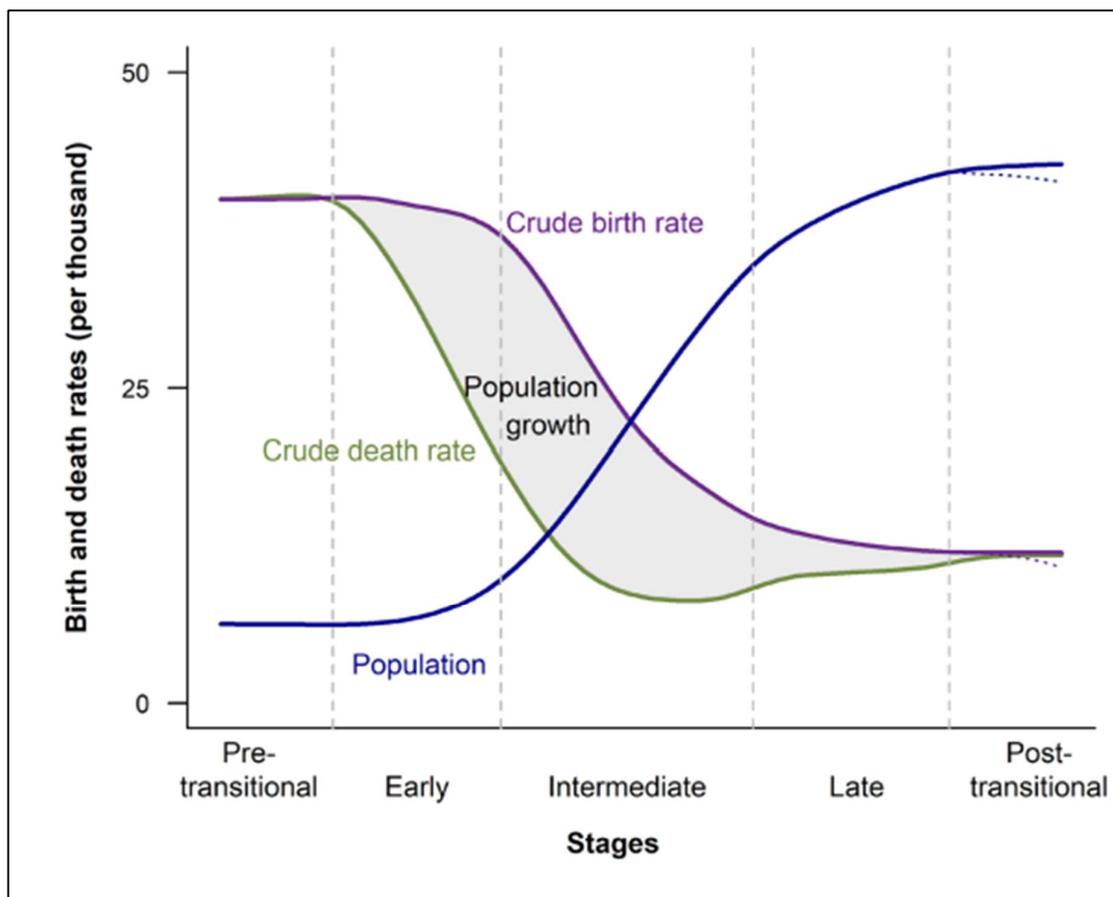
Aging populations and their associated economic, social, and policy challenges have emerged as critical issues across East Asia and the Pacific. This phenomenon is largely driven by significant shifts in fertility rates, improvements in mortality, and the dynamics of intergenerational transfers. These trends, while common globally, have unfolded with distinct regional characteristics, particularly in Asia, where rapid demographic transitions have necessitated urgent and innovative responses.

Drivers of Aging: Fertility and Mortality Transitions

Two pivotal factors underpin the aging process: the reduction in **fertility rates** and the **improvement in longevity** as shown in Figure 5. Historically, the 1950s marked a period when only 5% of the elderly population resided in countries with low fertility. Today, this figure exceeds 80%, with China and India contributing substantially to this transition. Fertility reductions have been driven by several factors, including urbanization, improved education (especially for women), and access to reproductive healthcare. Simultaneously, longevity improvements which initially targeted reducing child mortality through advances in healthcare, vaccination, and sanitation has shifted focus over time to enhancing life expectancy among the elderly, enabled by breakthroughs in medical treatments, chronic disease management, and preventive care.

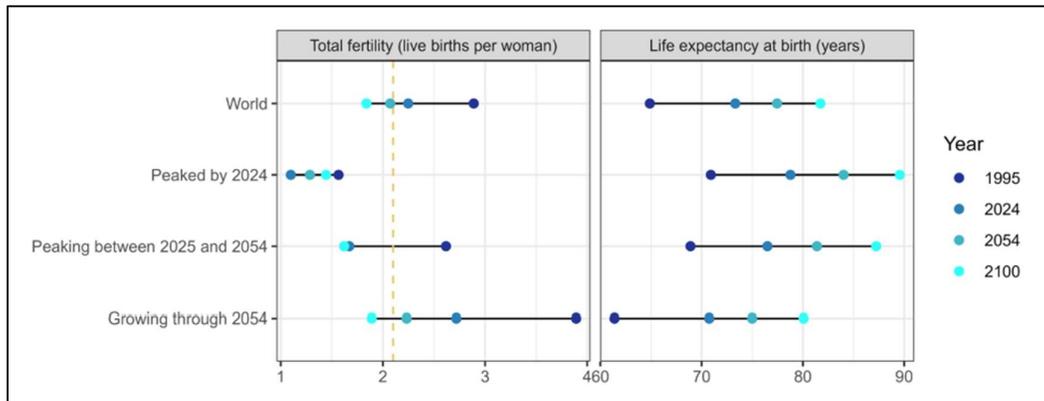
The average life expectancy in East Asia and the Pacific now stands at 75 years old. However, this increase in longevity has accelerated the growth of the elderly population to the extent that the number of elderly persons exceeded the number of children in Asia as early as 2000. This demographic shift as shown in Figure 5 has significant implications for economic structures, public policy, and familial support systems, requiring a re-evaluation of how societies manage intergenerational dependencies.

Figure 5: Schematic representation of the demographic shift



Source: United Nations (2024). World Population Prospects 2024

Figure 6: Total fertility and life expectancy at birth, globally and for countries and areas in three groups by the timing of the peak in population size, estimates for 1995 and projections (medium scenario), 2024, 2054, and 2100.

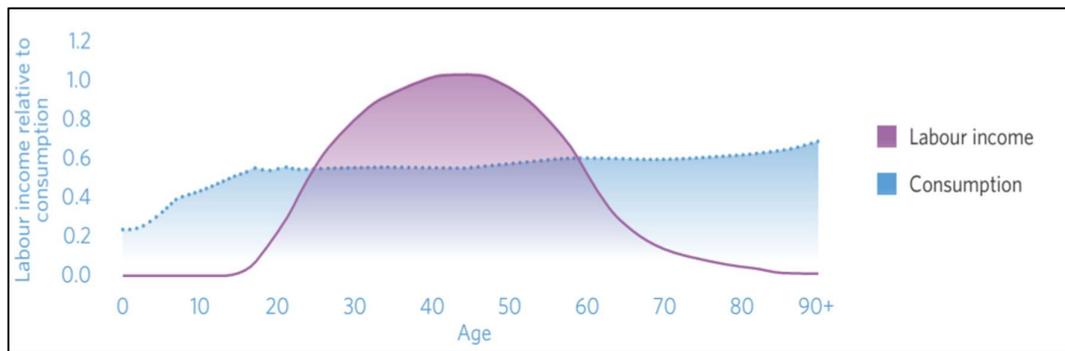


Source: United Nations (2024). World Population Prospects 2024

National Transfer Accounts (NTA): A Global Framework for Addressing Aging

Efforts to navigate the challenges posed by aging populations have been bolstered by the National Transfer Accounts (NTA) project. Established approximately two decades ago, this initiative spans over 100 countries worldwide, including 25 in Asia. The NTA framework provides detailed insights into the age profiles of labour income and consumption, enabling a quantitative understanding of how economic surpluses generated by labour income is redistributed to fund consumption needs across different age groups (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Economic Life-cycle Model (Age profile of labour income and consumption)



Source: United Nations Population Fund (2024) National Transfer Accounts: Generational Economy of Population Ageing

Intergenerational Transfers and Economic Implications

In many countries across East Asia and Pacific, middle-aged adults are the primary contributors to economic redistribution. They support both younger generations (children) and older generations (elderly parents) through labor income. Meanwhile, elderly individuals often rely on their accumulated assets, or governments intervention to bridge the gap through social programs and public transfers.

The experience of Japan provides valuable lessons where the data from Japan's NTA shows significant changes in consumption profiles over recent decades. Since 2000, the introduction of Long-Term Care Insurance has substantially increased elderly consumption levels. Retrospectively, children benefited from financial support from both their parents and the government, while the elderly predominantly relied on their own savings until the age of 64. However, over the last two decades, Japanese elderly have increasingly depended on government programs until the age of 84, after which familial support resumes. This insight equips policymakers to develop more effective strategies to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by demographic transitions.

Spending on Children: Regional Comparisons

A critical aspect of **intergenerational dynamics** is the allocation of resources to children. In Asia, parents prioritize spending on their children as driven by **cultural norms** that emphasize educational and professional success. In China and Taiwan, approximately 60-70% of household expenses are directed toward children. In contrast, Sweden and France exhibit significantly lower out-of-pocket expenditures on children, at 3% and 5%, respectively. This stark difference reflects the broader societal and policy frameworks in these regions, where robust public welfare systems reduce the financial burden on families.

Shifting Values and Familial Support Systems

Japan's demographic shifts have been accompanied by significant changes in **cultural attitudes** toward familial support. In the 1950s, most parents expected to rely on their children in old age, but this decreased following the establishment of comprehensive social security systems. By the 1980s, Japanese young adults' willingness to care for elderly parents had fallen dramatically to 20% from 80% in the 1960s. These changes reflect the complex relationship between evolving cultural values, economic pressures, and public policy. As long-term care costs rise, Japan shifted its focus to **home- and community-based care models**, aiming to balance the needs of the elderly with the sustainability of its healthcare system which is an approach that could serve as a model for other aging nations.

Demographic Dividends: Opportunities and Challenges

The concept of demographic dividends provides a useful framework for understanding the economic implications of population aging. Three key demographic dividends have been identified:

1. **Natural Dividend:** The natural dividend is associated with fertility rates and the balance between producers and consumers. It becomes positive when the growth rate of effective producers exceeds that of effective consumers, enabling societies to benefit from an economic surplus.
2. **Capital Dividend:** The capital dividend emphasizes the accumulation of financial resources, such as pensions, to support aging populations. This dividend highlights the importance of savings and investment in mitigating the economic impact of population aging.
3. **Health Dividend:** The health dividend focuses on the overall health and cognitive functioning of elderly individuals, which directly influences their productivity, independence, and quality of life.

Measuring Cognitive Function and Nutritional Status

In assessing the health and well-being of aging populations, cognitive function serves as a critical metric. The average cognitive-adjusted dependency ratio (CADR) for the five selected Asian countries is 0.17, with Japan has the highest score at 0.22 and India has the lowest score at 0.10. While height is often used as an indicator of nutritional status, more precise measurements, such as shin length (the distance from the knee to the ankle), have been identified as reliable alternatives. These measurements provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of nutrition on physical and cognitive health.

Global Health Metrics: Insights from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) Project

The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) project has been instrumental in advancing understanding of aging-related health outcomes. Since its inception in 1998, the GBD has collected data from 240 countries, tracking disease prevalence by age and sex. The project employs Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) to quantify the health conditions of populations. GBD data reveals that Japanese elderly aged 76 exhibit health outcomes equivalent to those of the global population aged 65.

Despite Japan's aging population, its health-adjusted dependency ratio suggests a "younger" demographic profile compared to countries like Russia, the United States and India. These findings highlight the potential for countries to benefit from increased investments in healthcare, particularly in preventative and geriatric care.

Key Points from Thailand

With over 13 million citizens aged 60 and above as of 2024, comprising 21% of the population, Thailand is actively addressing the challenges of its aging population. This figure is expected to rise to 30% by 2036, classifying Thailand as a super-aged society. Key efforts by Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to address this issue include legislative measures like the [Act on the Elderly \(2003\)](#) and the [3rd National Long-term Plan on the Elderly \(2023-2037\)](#), which emphasize active and healthy aging, improving care infrastructure, community-based support, and elder employment.

Following this, the implementation involves national and provincial agencies as well as community facilities such as Centres for Quality-of-Life Development and Career Promotion for Older Persons, Elderly Schools, Volunteers and Elderly Clubs. Additionally, the National Health Security Office has introduced the "[30-Baht Get Treatment Anywhere](#)" campaign to enhance healthcare accessibility under the Universal Coverage Scheme, ensuring equitable treatment regardless of location. Further, policies promoting community-based care and age-friendly services have been implemented to address mental health concerns and reduce social isolation, aiming to support the overall well-being of the elderly. The Prime Minister's policy statement underscores the commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for vulnerable groups, including older persons. Additional measures include encouraging the employment of older individuals and establishing the [Human Security Emergency Management Centre \(HuSEC\)](#) to address crises impacting the elderly. These efforts aim to support older persons in living with dignity, security, and towards full participation in society.

Thailand's "5 by 5 Let's Turn the Tide" in April 2024 serve as a policy tackling the demographic challenges while balancing social inclusion with economic growth and environmental sustainability. As illustrated in Figure 8, the five key pillars include:

1. Strengthening skills of working-age groups to ensure their job and income security;
2. Mobilizing proper resources to develop children and youth;
3. Empowering older persons by utilising their potential in workforce;
4. Turning disabilities into productivity; and
5. Creating better ecosystem to strengthen family ties and ensuring secure environment to encourage the younger generations in having families.

Figure 8: '5 by 5' Let's Turn the Tide by Thailand



Key Points from Malaysia

Malaysia is undergoing significant demographic changes, marked by a sharp decline in fertility rates from an average of 5.0 children per woman in the 1970s to 1.7 in 2020. This transition highlights a societal shift toward smaller family sizes and fewer children, driven by factors such as urbanization, improved access to education, and changing economic priorities.

These changes have far-reaching implications for the country's population structure, labour force, and social support systems, necessitating proactive policies to address emerging challenges associated with an aging population and a shrinking workforce. Comprehensive policies introduced by the Government include the [National Policy for Older Persons](#), strategic planning by the [Malaysian Social Protection Council \(MYSPC\)](#), and initiatives under the [Ekonomi Madani framework](#), which focus on creating a sustainable social security system, promoting workforce inclusivity, and preparing for demographic shifts.

In parallel, life expectancy has risen significantly, from 63.6 years in 1970 to 75.6 years in 2020. This increase in life expectancy is indicative of advances in healthcare, sanitation and living standards, which have helped Malaysians live longer and healthier lives. The life expectancy of women in Malaysia has steadily increased, with average lifespan surpassing 78 years old, compared to around 72 years in the 1980s. This trend underscores the importance of addressing the needs of an aging female population, including access to healthcare, financial security, and social support systems, to ensure quality of life in later years.

However, these changes have also placed pressure on the country's social support systems, particularly as the population ages and the number of older persons increases relative to the working-age population. To address the challenges posed by an aging population, the Malaysian government has implemented several key policies and initiatives aimed at improving the well-being of older persons. One of the most significant is the [National Aging Committee](#), which is chaired by the Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM) and encompasses nine other ministries. This committee is tasked with addressing issues related to health, social well-being, education, employment, the economy, the environment, and spiritual needs, all of which are crucial for creating an age-friendly society.

Moving forward, social protection related policy revisions include adjusting the retirement age and arranging a flexible working environment to allow older people to continue in the workforce and prioritizing care-economy to alignment women participation in the workforce. By focusing on workforce inclusivity, the care economy, and long-term social security planning, Malaysia can ensure that it remains a prosperous and equitable society, capable of supporting its aging population while also creating opportunities for future generations.

Key Points from China

By 2030, China is projected to become a super-aged society with over 20% of its population aged 65 and older, which is 40 years ahead of the global average. Actions taken by China, includes the [Healthy China 2030](#) strategic policy, introduced in 2016 with a subsequent implementation plan in 2019, focusing on equitable access and outcomes in health and healthcare, healthcare systems transformation, technology and innovation, and environmental and climate sustainability.

Other alternatives include having at [least one facility for disabled care services per province](#), annual health check-ups provided for the elderly, and elderly health and integrated medical and elderly care services being added to basic public health service projects. In China, [Smart Elderly Care](#), which leverages on technology, mobile devices, and application systems, has been developed for the assessment of disabled elderly individuals. This approach is particularly important as China's elderly population grows rapidly, and the availability of family caregivers decreases due to urbanization and changing family structures. By prioritizing care for seniors, China aims to create a more sustainable, inclusive society that benefits all age groups.



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SESSION 2:

BUILDING INCLUSIVE AND AGE-SENSITIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

EXPERT PRESENTERS/DISCUSSANTS

[Introduction: Background issues and recent developments in EAP context](#)

Dr Juanita Vasquez Escallon, Chief of Social Policy, UNICEF Malaysia

[Expert Presentation – Universal-based Approach to Social Protection](#)

Ms. Grace Chynoweth, Director of Welfare Services, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Cook Islands

[Panel Discussion](#)

MODERATOR:

Ms. Patrizia Di Giovanni, UNICEF Representative, Timor-Leste

DISCUSSANTS:

1. **Ms. Gemma B. Gabuya**, Director of the Director IV and National Program Manager of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), Department of Social Welfare, Philippines
 2. **Mr. Chomyaeng Phengthongsawat**, Director General of Department of Policy for Devotees, Disabilities, and Elderly People at the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Lao PDR
 3. **Mr. Sothy Ear**, National Social Protection Council, Cambodia
 4. **Mr. Xinda Zhao**, Department of Benefit Securities, National Healthcare Security Administration, China
-

Social protection is widely recognized as a fundamental necessity and a human right, with substantial evidence showing its significant return on investment in fostering sustainable and resilient economies. To ensure no one is left behind, **it is crucial to prioritize inclusivity that supports individuals across all age groups.** This includes providing universal support for every child, recognizing that different groups may require tailored assistance. **Publicly provided family policies that enhance income security and promote the well-being of children throughout their life cycle** are essential for creating a more equitable and resilient society.

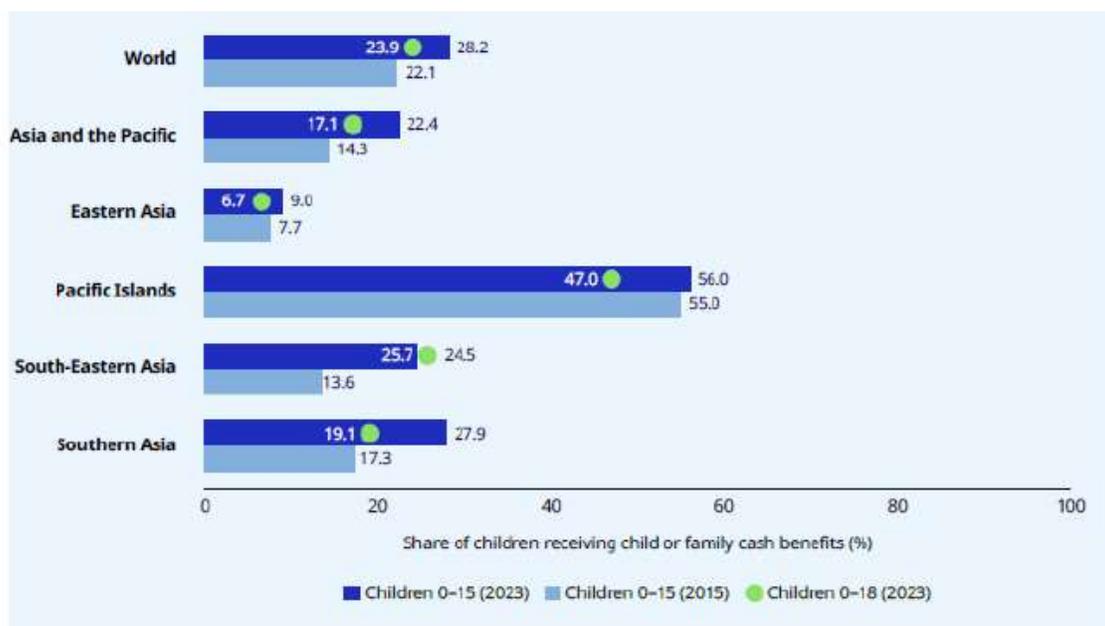
However, while some nations have made strides toward achieving comprehensive social protection systems, others progress at a slower pace. This session explored various models of extending social protection systems to reach more people, with a focus on the most vulnerable populations, ensuring equitable access and support across all age groups. This thematic session presented country experiences and lessons for an inclusive social protection system such as the universal-based social protection models from the Cook Islands, the framework of ‘Social Protection House’ from Cambodia, and the Disability Grant Plus from Lao PDR as well as China ‘s Universal health coverage (UHC).

Expert Presentation 1 Highlights: Background Issues and Recent Developments in EAP Context

The presentation emphasized the critical need for inclusive social protection systems specifically designed for children in the East Asia and Pacific region. It highlighted that despite some advancements in social welfare initiatives, a significant portion of children—approximately one-third to one-fourth—remains uncovered by existing social protection frameworks (Figure 9). This gap is also particularly pronounced among older adolescents, who often fall through the cracks of current systems. The Pacific Islands were noted as an exception, where coverage is comparatively better.

The discussion underscored the importance of ensuring that every child, especially those requiring additional support due to socioeconomic challenges, disabilities, or other vulnerabilities, receives the necessary assistance to thrive and develop to their full potential.

Figure 9: SDG indicator 1.31 on effective coverage for children and families: share of children receiving child or family cash benefits, aged 0-15 years (2015 and 2023) and aged 0-18 years (2023), by region and subregion (percentage)



Source: ILO modelled estimates, 2024; World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ISSA Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILOSTAT; national sources

A key focus was placed on the role of publicly provided family policies that enhance income security and promote the overall well-being of children throughout their life cycle. The presentation advocated for a [comprehensive approach to social protection that not only addresses immediate needs](#)—such as food security, healthcare, and education—but also fosters long-term development and resilience.

This includes extending protections to pregnant women, which is crucial for improving prenatal and postnatal health outcomes for both mothers and their babies. The inadequacies in this area were highlighted as a significant concern that needs to be addressed to ensure better health for future generations. By prioritizing maternal and child health, societies can lay a strong foundation for the well-being of children from the very beginning of their lives.

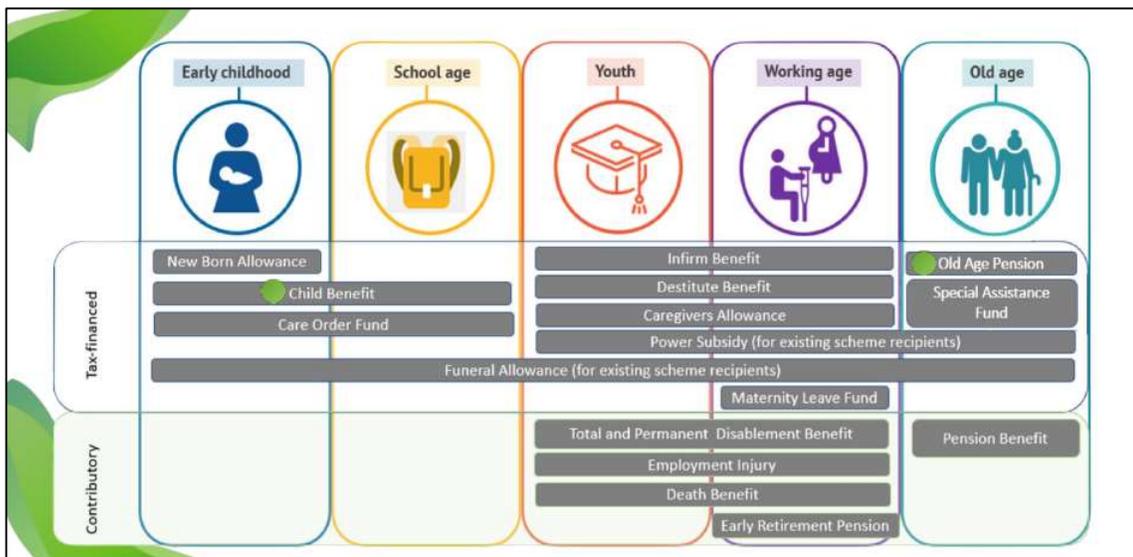
The insights shared reinforced the commitment to leaving no child behind in the pursuit of a more equitable future. It was emphasized that inclusive social protection is not merely a safety net but a fundamental right that can significantly alter the life trajectories of children. By investing in social protection systems, societies can create a more equitable environment where all children have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances. The presentation illustrated how [effective social protection can empower children, reduce poverty, and promote social inclusion, ultimately contributing to stronger, more resilient communities.](#)

The presentation called for a concerted effort to enhance the coverage and adequacy of social protection measures across the region. This involves not only expanding existing programs but also ensuring that they are effectively targeted to reach the most vulnerable populations, including marginalized groups and those living in remote areas. The need for collaboration among governments, NGOs, and international organizations was highlighted as essential for developing robust social protection systems that can adapt to the evolving needs of children and families in the region. By fostering partnerships and sharing best practices, stakeholders can work together to create a more inclusive and responsive social protection landscape that truly meets the needs of all children.

Expert Presentation 2 Highlights: Universal-Based Approach to Social Protection

The session focused on the significant advancements and opportunities in social protection within the Cook Islands, highlighting the national goal of achieving well-being for all citizens. The discussion underscored the importance of social protection as a priority for reducing poverty and hardship, emphasizing that cash assistance is essential for meeting basic needs. By providing a safety net during economic challenges, social protection not only alleviates immediate financial stress but also fosters long-term economic resilience among families. This approach is crucial for building a more equitable society where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive.

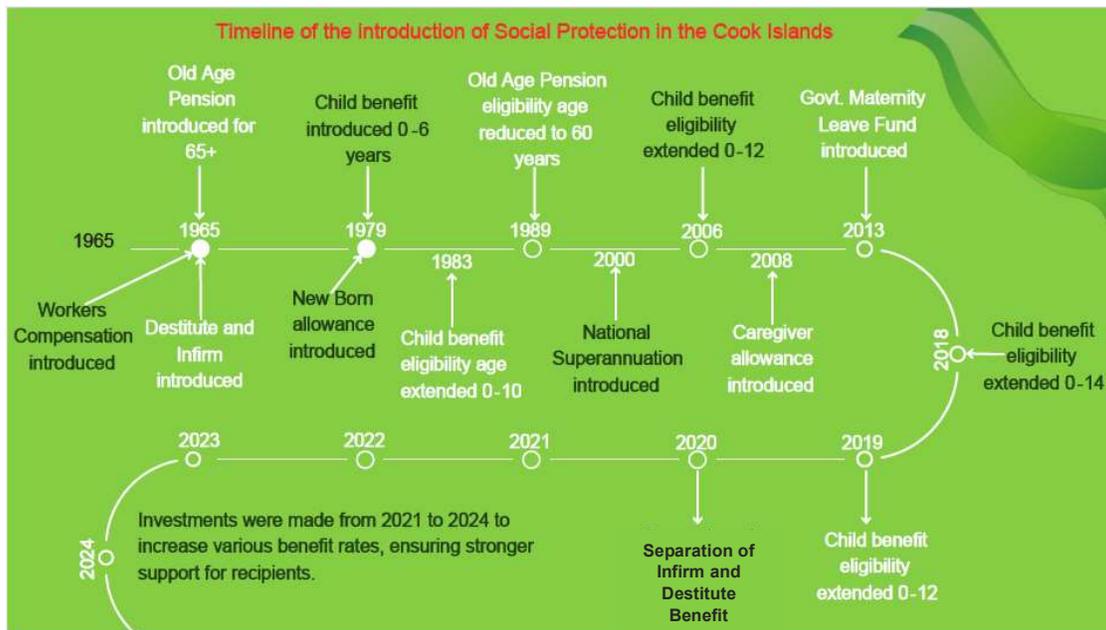
Figure 10: Overview of social protection system in Cook Islands



A key aspect of the presentation was the expansion of childcare services and subsidies aimed at making early childhood care more affordable for working parents, particularly for children aged 0-3 years through the Newborn Allowance (Figure 10). This initiative is part of a broader strategy to enhance family support systems and ensure that children receive the necessary care and education during their formative years. The emphasis on food security was also notable, as [social welfare benefits significantly improve access to better quality food for beneficiaries](#).

This improvement not only enhances the nutritional status of families but also enables their participation in community events, thereby fostering social cohesion and reducing financial stress.

Figure 11: Timeline of the introduction of social protection in the Cook Islands



The historical timeline of social protection measures in the Cook Islands was presented, illustrating the evolution of benefits such as the extension of child benefit eligibility and the introduction of various allowances, including maternity leave and caregiver support (Figure 11). These developments reflect a commitment to addressing the diverse needs of the population and ensuring that social protection systems are responsive to changing circumstances across the life cycle. The presentation highlighted the importance of continuous investment in social protection, with public investments made from 2021 to 2024 aimed at increasing benefit rates and addressing the inadequacies reported by minority groups regarding their basic needs.

The Cook Islands' experience offers valuable lessons in designing and implementing effective social protection systems. Universal benefits have proven to be particularly impactful, demonstrating that broad and inclusive programs can significantly reduce poverty and inequality. Universal access ensures that no one is excluded due to administrative barriers or stigmatization, fostering a sense of equality and shared responsibility. Community engagement has been another critical factor in the success of these programs. By involving local communities in the design and implementation processes, the government ensures that programs address real needs and are culturally relevant. This [participatory approach also increases recipient satisfaction and political buy-in, creating a strong foundation for sustained investment](#). A clear policy framework provides direction and purpose, aligning social protection efforts with national development goals. Flexibility is equally important; social protection systems must be adaptable to external shocks such as natural disasters, pandemics, or economic downturns, ensuring they remain effective in a rapidly changing world. Viewing social protection as an investment in human capital further underscores its importance. By improving individual wellbeing, these programs contribute to broader economic growth and social stability, creating a virtuous cycle of development.

The session concluded with a call for a more inclusive and age-sensitive social protection framework that fosters well-being for all citizens. It was emphasized that effective social protection systems must be adaptable and responsive to the unique challenges faced by different demographic groups, including children, the elderly, and marginalized communities. By prioritizing inclusivity and collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations, the Cook Islands can build a robust social protection system that not only meets the immediate needs of its citizens but also promotes long-term social and economic development. This holistic approach is essential for creating a resilient society where everyone can achieve their full potential.

Key Points from Philippines

The presentation focused on the strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing the inclusion of vulnerable groups within the framework of Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) in the Philippines (Figure 12). A significant aspect of the discussion was the introduction of a standardized targeting system under Republic Act 11310, which aims to improve the identification of beneficiaries. This system is designed to ensure that assistance reaches those who need it most, particularly the poor and near-poor households. By refining the targeting process, the program seeks to minimize errors of exclusion and inclusion, thereby maximizing the impact of social protection efforts.

Figure 12: Inclusion approach within the Philippines CCT

Inclusion Approach within the Philippines CCT		
		
Considerations	RCCT	MCCT
Targeting and Registration	Identified through the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (NHTS-PR) Done by enumerators	MCCT Intake Sheet or enrollment form to cover Indigenous Peoples, and displaced persons through the MCCT Intake Sheet or enrollment form
Conditionalities for New Beneficiaries	Waived program conditions for 2 months to receive grants	Waived program conditions for 5 months to receive grants
Support Services	Cash grants for health and education	Cash grants plus specialized support like livelihood assistance, shelter assistance, cash-for-work, and access to services
Caseload	1:800	1:50 for Homeless Street Families 1:300 for Indigenous Peoples
Family Development Session	Sessions on Core Competencies: Education, Health, Financial Literacy and Family	Community Sessions on Core Competencies and Specialized Modules for Indigenous Peoples
Database	Pantawid Pamilya Information System (PPIS)	MCCT Information System

In addition to improved targeting, the presentation highlighted the implementation of enhanced support services, such as social case management and community organizing approaches. These services are crucial for providing tailored assistance to families in need, addressing not only their financial requirements but also their social and emotional well-being. [The focus on community engagement is particularly important, as it fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among beneficiaries, enabling them to actively participate in the development of their own solutions.](#)

This holistic approach recognizes that financial assistance alone is insufficient; comprehensive support is necessary to facilitate sustainable improvements in the lives of vulnerable populations. The discussion also addressed significant challenges faced by the program, including the inconsistent availability of support services and compliance barriers that prevent beneficiaries from accessing aid. These challenges can lead to frustration and disillusionment among recipients, undermining the overall effectiveness of the program. Additionally, exclusion errors arising from misalignment in community-based monitoring systems were identified as a critical issue that needs to be addressed. By acknowledging these challenges, the presentation underscored the [importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation of the program to ensure that it remains responsive to the needs of its beneficiaries.](#)

Finally, the presentation shared inspiring success stories of individuals who have transitioned from being beneficiaries to advocates for humanitarian causes, illustrating the transformative potential of the program. These narratives serve as powerful reminders of the impact that effective social protection can have on individuals and communities. The emphasis on ongoing adjustments and collaborative efforts highlights the necessity of a dynamic approach to social protection, ensuring that it effectively reaches and uplifts all vulnerable populations. By fostering a more inclusive social protection landscape, the program aims to create lasting change and empower individuals to break the cycle of poverty.

Key Points from Lao PDR

The presentation provided a detailed overview of the implementation of a "Disability Inclusive Social Protection" initiative, which is part of a broader effort to strengthen the Child Protection System (Figure 13). This initiative aims to address the unique challenges faced by families with disabled children by providing financial support and incentives for their inclusion in social welfare systems. By recognizing the specific needs of these families, the program seeks to ensure that individuals with disabilities are not left behind in the pursuit of social equity and inclusion.

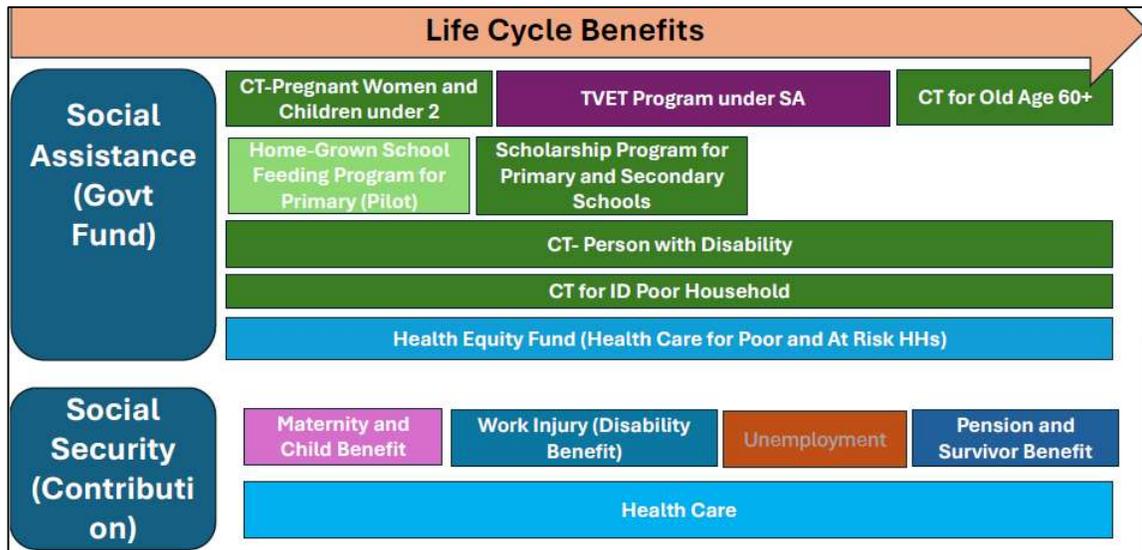
The presentation underscored the necessity of addressing these barriers through increased advocacy, resource allocation, and capacity-building efforts. By fostering a better understanding of disability issues among stakeholders, the program can enhance its effectiveness and ensure that it meets the needs of the most vulnerable populations.

Finally, the presentation proposed innovative financing mechanisms, such as pooled funds, to sustain disability interventions and called for the development of a Master Plan for a Disabilities Information Management system. This strategic approach aims to create a more coordinated and comprehensive framework for disability inclusion within social protection systems. By integrating data-driven decision-making and multi-sectoral collaboration, the initiative seeks to ensure that social protection systems are truly inclusive and responsive to the needs of persons with disabilities. The emphasis on a holistic and sustainable approach highlights the commitment to building a more equitable society where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can access the support and resources they need to thrive.

Key Points from Cambodia

The presentation outlined the architecture of a national social protection system through a life cycle approach, emphasizing the importance of addressing the diverse needs of the population at different stages of life. This comprehensive framework includes seven essential components: Maternity and Childhood, Health Care, Occupational Risks, Unemployment, Shelter, Disability, and Old Age and Survivors. By integrating these components, the system aims to provide a holistic safety net that supports individuals and families throughout their lives, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of social welfare.

Figure 14. Life cycle benefits of social assistance programs and social security contributions in Cambodia



A key focus of the discussion was the targeting of vulnerable groups, particularly those identified as ID Poor households and individuals with disabilities. Tailored programs, such as cash transfers for pregnant women and children under two years old, scholarships for primary and secondary school students, and cash transfer initiatives for the elderly aged 60 and above, were highlighted as critical interventions. These targeted programs are designed to address the specific needs of the most vulnerable populations, providing them with the necessary resources to improve their living conditions and access essential services (Figure 14).

The presentation also emphasized the importance of free healthcare access for poor and at-risk households, facilitated through initiatives like the Health Equity Fund. This fund aims to [eliminate financial barriers to healthcare, ensuring that vulnerable populations receive the medical attention they need without incurring crippling costs.](#)

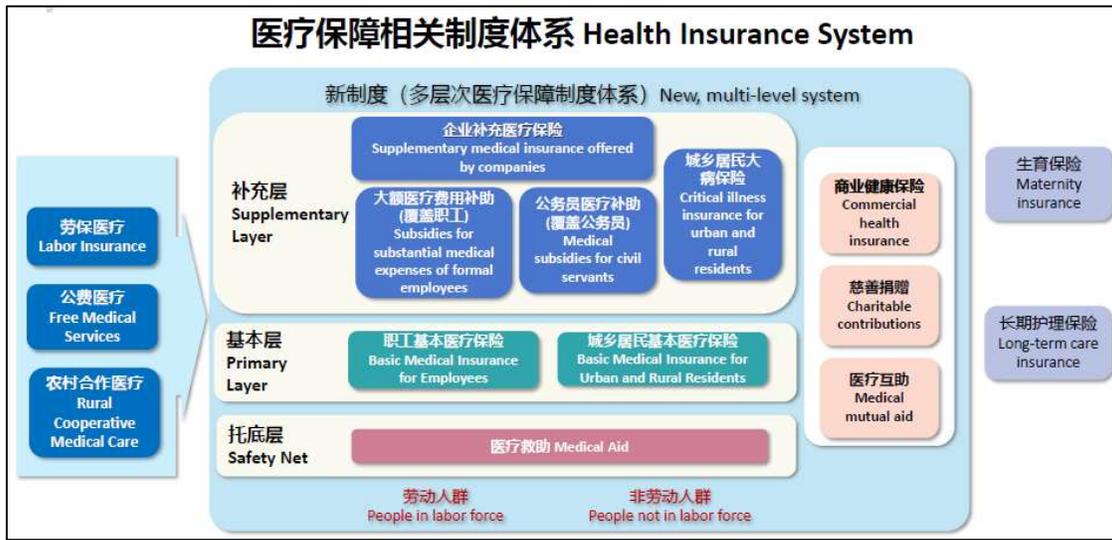
Additionally, the Home-Grown School Feeding Program was discussed as a means to improve nutrition for primary school children, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and educational outcomes. These initiatives reflect a commitment to promoting health equity and improving the quality of life for disadvantaged groups.

Furthermore, the presentation underscored the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation of social protection programs to ensure their effectiveness and responsiveness to changing needs. By adopting a life cycle approach, the system can better address the evolving challenges faced by individuals and families over time. The emphasis on stakeholder involvement and community engagement is crucial for fostering a sense of ownership and ensuring that social protection measures are aligned with the realities of those they aim to serve. This collaborative approach is essential for building a resilient and inclusive social protection framework that can effectively respond to the diverse needs of the population.

Key Points from China

The presentation provided an in-depth overview of the advancements and practices within a national health insurance system, highlighting its commitment to universal health coverage. A significant focus was placed on the period from 2018 to 2020, during which substantial efforts were made to lift individuals out of poverty through subsidies that facilitated their participation in basic medical insurance. This initiative successfully reduced out-of-pocket medical expenses for millions, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted financial support in improving healthcare access for vulnerable populations (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Overview of health insurance system in China



The discussion emphasized the impressive outcomes achieved during this period, with approximately 230 million individuals benefiting from subsidies that enabled them to participate in the health insurance program. This initiative not only alleviated financial burdens but also played a crucial role in preventing households from falling into poverty due to medical expenses. The presentation highlighted the importance of such financial mechanisms in promoting health equity and ensuring that all individuals, can access necessary medical care without facing insurmountable costs.

Figure 16: Contribution rate for basic medical insurance for residents in China



In addition to the subsidies, the presentation detailed the comprehensive coverage provided under the basic medical insurance, which includes outpatient treatment for chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes (Figure 16). This aspect of the health insurance system is vital for addressing the long-term health needs of the population, particularly for those with chronic conditions that require ongoing management. By ensuring that these individuals receive the necessary medical attention, the system contributes to improved health outcomes and enhances the overall quality of life for beneficiaries.

The ongoing efforts in 2023 were also highlighted, showcasing the continued commitment to expanding healthcare access and support for vulnerable populations. With nationwide medical aid expenditures reaching significant levels, the system aims to provide subsidies to millions of individuals, reinforcing the importance of financial assistance in facilitating healthcare access. The presentation underscored the necessity of maintaining and enhancing these support mechanisms to ensure that the health insurance system remains responsive to the needs of the population, ultimately fostering a healthier and more resilient society.



SESSION 3:

GENDER AND FAMILY LIFE IN SOCIAL POLICIES

EXPERT PRESENTERS/DISCUSSANTS

Introduction and Expert Presentation 1

Ms. Sinta Satriana, Social Policy Specialist, UNICEF East Asia, and the Pacific Office (EAPRO)

Expert Presentation 2

Ms. Daixin Li, Economic Analysis Specialist, UNICEF China on Family Friendly Index & **Ms. Peilin Li**, Associate Researcher, Population and Development Research Center, China

Panel Discussion

MODERATOR:

Dr Juanita Vasquez Escallon, Chief of Social Policy, UNICEF Malaysia

DISCUSSANTS:

1. **Ms. Lee Min Hui**, Gender Consultant, UNFPA
 2. **Mr. Pham Ngoc Dung**, Head of Social Assistance Division, Social Protection Department, Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Vietnam
 3. **Mr. Karim**, Associate Policy Planner, Ministry of National Development Planning, Indonesia
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In the East Asia and Pacific region, gender disparities in social protection systems are significant barriers to equitable opportunities for families, particularly for women and marginalized groups. Many women, especially in rural areas, face limited access to social protection benefits while shouldering caregiving responsibilities. Anecdotes from local communities illustrate how these women often forgo employment, leading to economic dependency and increased vulnerability. Despite policy commitments to gender equality, gaps in accessibility and effectiveness persist, leaving many without the necessary support.

Gender-sensitive social protection measures, such as cash assistance and inclusive insurance schemes, are crucial for addressing these disparities. In Indonesia, cash transfer programs aimed at low-income families have [empowered women to invest in their children's education and health, breaking the poverty cycle](#). These measures enhance family stability and promote gender equity by recognizing women's contributions in caregiving roles.

Indonesia's integration of care work into national development agendas [highlights the importance of valuing caregiving in social policy](#). Local initiatives improving access to affordable childcare have allowed women to return to work, boosting household incomes and local economies. Similarly, China's Family Development Index promotes shared parenting responsibilities, with families reporting increased engagement from both mothers and fathers in childcare. Malaysia's labor market features, particularly maternity benefits and flexible work arrangements, highlight the crucial role of an inclusive social protection system in supporting women's ability to balance work and caregiving responsibilities. These policies not only alleviate the stress that working women face but also contribute to long-term improvements in their overall quality of life.

Expert Presentation 1 Highlights: A Gender-Responsive Framework for Transformative Social Protection

The critical need for gender-responsive social protection systems is underscored as a means to **address the pervasive inequalities faced by women and gender minorities**. The stark reality is that only 15% of analysed social protection programs explicitly incorporate objectives related to gender equality, revealing a significant disconnect between policy intentions and actual outcomes. This gap results in women encountering unique barriers, such as lower labor participation rates, which severely limit their access to essential social insurance and old-age savings. By failing to adequately address these disparities, current programs inadvertently perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, necessitating urgent reforms to ensure that social protection frameworks are inclusive and equitable.

Moreover, existing cash transfer programs often impose conditionalities that disproportionately burden women. These programs typically require women to fulfil specific obligations, such as ensuring their children attend school or receive health check-ups, while men frequently escape such responsibilities. This dynamic not only exacerbates time poverty for working women but also undermines the intended benefits of these initiatives. To create a more effective social protection system, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach that recognizes the specific vulnerabilities of women and actively seeks to dismantle harmful gender norms and relations. Such a shift is vital for fostering genuine empowerment and improving overall social equity.

Figure 17. Gender integration continuum framework



A transformative approach to social protection policies that prioritizes gender considerations at every level of design and implementation is essential (Figure 17). By generating robust evidence to inform policy changes, stakeholders can ensure that social protection systems effectively address the needs of women and marginalized groups. This commitment to gender-responsive programming goes beyond mere equity; it is crucial for attaining broader social development goals. As such, the call for ongoing advocacy and reform is imperative to create social protection mechanisms that genuinely support all individuals, thereby contributing to a more just and equitable society.

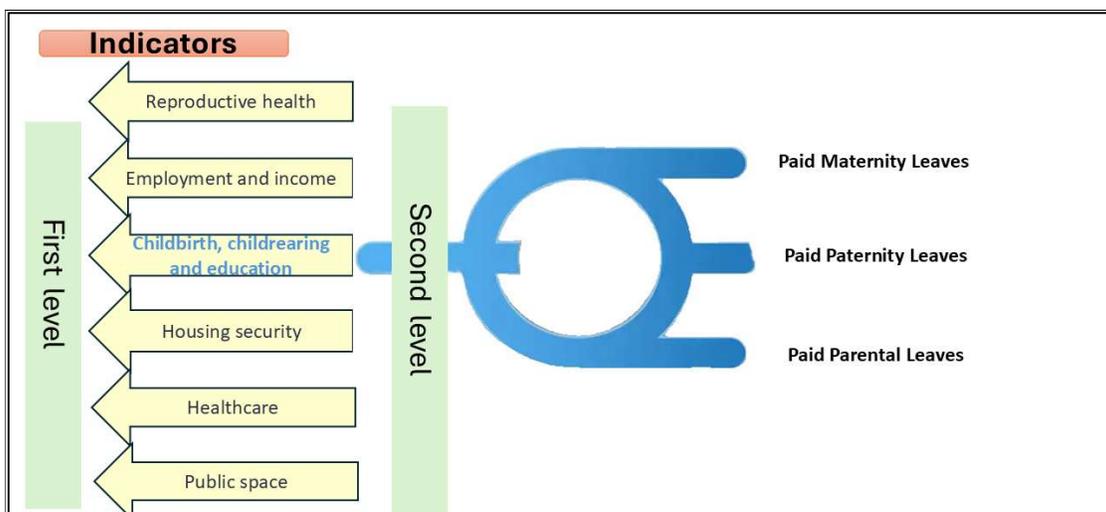
Expert Presentation 2 Highlights: China Family Friendly Index (FFI)

The introduction of paid parental leave policies is highlighted as a significant step towards promoting shared parenting responsibilities. By allowing both mothers and fathers to take extended time off, these policies aim to foster a more equitable distribution of caregiving duties, which is essential for enhancing family well-being and encouraging higher fertility rates.

In addition to parental leave, cash transfer programs were in place to alleviate the financial burdens faced by families. These cash handouts, such as the Child Allowance, are crucial in supporting parents as they navigate the costs associated with raising children, such as childcare, education, and healthcare. By reducing the financial strain on families, these initiatives not only improve the quality of life for parents and children but also contribute to the overall economic stability of the community. The integration of such financial support mechanisms is vital for creating an environment conducive to family growth and development.

By investing in infrastructure that supports families, the government can ensure that parents have the resources they need to provide for their children effectively. This focus on accessibility is particularly important in urban areas, where rapid population growth and migration can strain existing services. Ensuring that families have access to quality healthcare and education is fundamental to fostering a healthy and educated future generation.

Figure 18: China Family Friendly Index (FFI) indicators



A key component of the discussion is the **China Family Friendly Index (FFI)**, which serves as a comprehensive assessment tool for urban environments. The FFI includes critical indicators such as reproductive health, employment and income, childbirth, childbearing and education, housing security, healthcare, and public space (Figure 18). By utilizing these indicators, policymakers can gain valuable insights into the adequacy of city family support systems. This data-driven approach enables the formulation of targeted policies that address the specific needs of families, ultimately enhancing their overall quality of life.

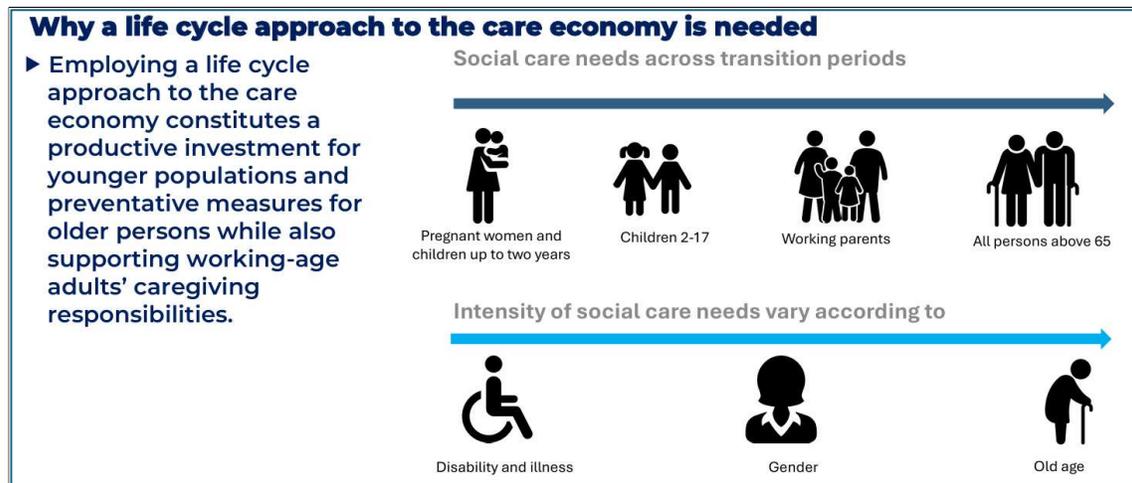
Furthermore, the presentation emphasizes the need for a strategic approach to urban planning that prioritizes family well-being. By aligning urban development with families' needs, policymakers can create environments that support healthy family dynamics and promote sustainable community development. This holistic perspective is essential for addressing the challenges of demographic changes, such as an aging population and declining birth rates. By fostering family-friendly urban spaces, the government can encourage families to thrive and contribute positively to society.

By implementing paid parental leave, providing economic subsidies, investing in infrastructure, and utilizing the Family Friendly Index, the government can create a comprehensive framework that addresses the diverse needs of families. This multifaceted approach not only promotes gender equity in caregiving responsibilities but also contributes to the overall social and economic development of the country. As such, ongoing commitment to these policies is essential for ensuring a prosperous future for families in China.

Key Points from Malaysia

A staggering 98% of the 3.2 million Malaysians engaged in unpaid domestic work are women, highlighting the unsustainable reliance on women for informal care. This situation not only places an overwhelming burden on women but also perpetuates gender inequality, as their contributions to the economy remain largely unrecognized and undervalued. At the same time, relying primarily on women to provide informal care is not sustainable as demographic shifts will increase care needs, leading to an exponential surge in the demand for care. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting gender equity and ensuring that care responsibilities are shared more equitably among all genders to foster an inclusive future for all.

Figure 19. The life cycle approach to the care economy



Source: Cheng and Lee (2024)

A [life cycle approach to the care economy](#) is proposed as a means of supporting a broad spectrum of population groups, including younger individuals and the elderly (Figure 19). This approach aims to alleviate the caregiving burdens on working-age adults while also providing preventative measures for older individuals who may require care.

By integrating social care into the broader social protection framework, the government can create a more inclusive system that recognizes the value of care work and its impact on economic resilience. This shift not only benefits caregivers but also enhances the overall well-being of families and communities.

The key principles for designing an inclusive care economy include [recognizing care as a public good, adopting a life cycle perspective, and ensuring accessible baseline care for all](#). By framing care as a public good, the government can foster a collective responsibility for caregiving, encouraging both public and private sectors to invest in care services. This perspective is essential for creating a supportive environment that values caregiving and promotes gender equity. Additionally, ensuring accessible baseline care for all individuals is vital for addressing disparities in access to care services, particularly for marginalized populations.

The emphasis on the care economy highlights the need for comprehensive policy reforms that prioritize the recognition and support of unpaid care work. By valuing care as an essential component of social and economic development, the government can create a more [equitable society where caregiving responsibilities are shared among all genders](#). This commitment to enhancing the care economy not only addresses the immediate needs of caregivers but also contributes to the long-term sustainability and resilience of the economy as a whole. As such, ongoing advocacy and reform are imperative to ensure that care work is adequately recognized and supported within the social protection framework.

Key Points from Vietnam

[Vietnam's Law on Gender Equality](#) mandates the elimination of gender discrimination and ensures equal development opportunities for both men and women. This legal foundation is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment where [gender considerations are embedded in all aspects of social policy](#).

By prioritizing gender equality in legislation, the government aims to create a more equitable society that empowers women and addresses the unique challenges they face. [The National Targeted Programs for 2021-2030](#) are pivotal initiatives that focus on supporting vulnerable groups, particularly women from disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs include cash support for ethnic minority women during childbirth and livelihood programs that prioritize women's economic empowerment. By targeting assistance to those who need it most, these initiatives aim to reduce poverty and improve the living conditions of marginalized populations. This targeted approach not only addresses immediate needs but also contributes to long-term social and economic development by fostering greater equity.

Social assistance policies in Vietnam are designed to specifically address the needs of poor single parents and women with disabilities. These policies reflect the government's commitment to fostering substantive gender equality in all aspects of social and family life. By recognizing the unique challenges faced by these groups, the government can implement tailored support mechanisms that enhance their well-being and promote their active participation in society. This focus on inclusivity is essential for building a more equitable social protection system that uplifts all individuals, regardless of their circumstances.

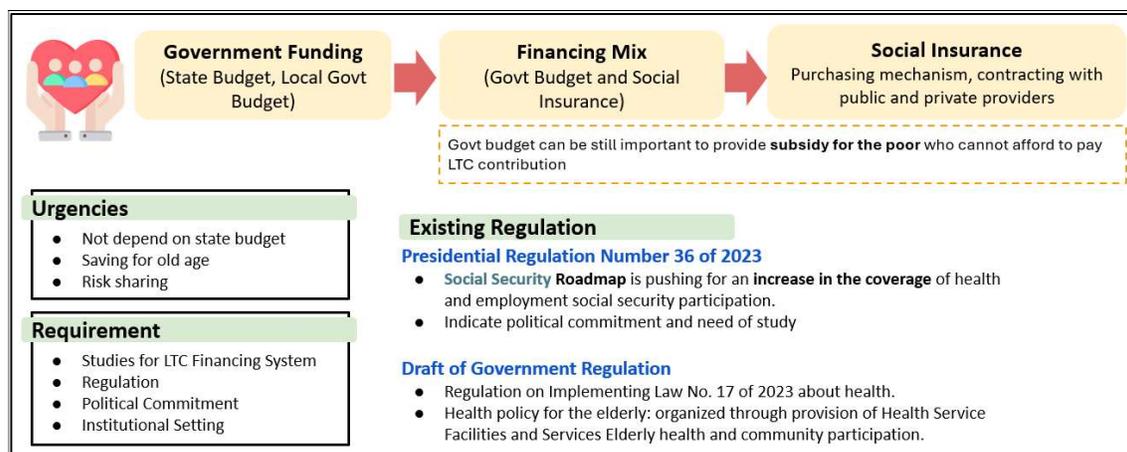
By embedding gender considerations into legal frameworks and implementing targeted programs, the government of Vietnam is taking [significant steps toward achieving gender equality](#). These efforts not only empower women but also contribute to the overall social and economic development of the nation. Continued commitment to these policies is essential for ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed in society.

Key Points from Indonesia

A comprehensive strategy is proposed to enhance the care economy, which includes **improving the accessibility and affordability of caregiving services**, particularly for vulnerable populations and those living in poverty. This approach aims to address the challenges faced by caregivers, who are predominantly women, and to alleviate the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic work that they carry. By prioritizing care work in policy discussions, the government can foster a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities across genders.

The strategy also advocates for the adoption of a care lens across all public policy areas, urging the optimization and strengthening of existing care programs. This holistic approach recognizes that care work is not only a private responsibility but also a public good that requires collective investment and support. By integrating care considerations into various sectors, such as health, education, and social services, the government can create **a more cohesive and supportive environment for caregivers and those receiving care**. This integration is essential for ensuring that care services are not only accessible but also of high quality, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of families and communities.

Figure 20. Long Term Care (LTC) financing system reform framework in Indonesia



Improving long-term care insurance and financing schemes is another key aspect of the proposed strategy. By developing robust financial mechanisms to support caregiving, the government can ensure that caregivers are adequately compensated for their work and that families have the resources they need to provide care. This financial support is crucial for addressing the economic vulnerabilities faced by caregivers, particularly women, who often sacrifice their economic opportunities to fulfil caregiving roles. By recognizing the economic value of care work, the government can promote greater gender equity and empower caregivers to participate more fully in the workforce.

In Indonesia, the long-term care (LTC) financing system reform is carried out holistically with active involvement from various parties including the public and private sectors. The fiscal limitations faced by the government in providing LTC have seen the model transform into a mix of financing between the government and the private actors. Nevertheless, the government will still provide subsidies for the poor who cannot afford to pay LTC contributions (Figure 20).

By adopting a care lens in public policy, improving financial support for caregivers, and enhancing the accessibility of care services, the government can create a more equitable society where caregiving responsibilities are shared among all genders. This commitment to valuing and supporting care work not only addresses the immediate needs of caregivers but also contributes to the long-term sustainability and resilience of the economy, ultimately benefiting all members of society.



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SESSION 4:

**FINANCING CHILD-SENSITIVE AND ADAPTIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION:
PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABILITY**

EXPERT PRESENTERS/DISCUSSANTS

Introduction and Expert Presentation 1: Sustainable and Inclusive Social Protection in Thailand

Ms Apinya Chompumas, Director General of the Department of Children and Youth, Thailand

Expert Presentation 2: Fiscal Space to Finance Social Protection

Dr Amjad Rabi - Visiting Expert, Social Wellbeing Research Centre (SWRC), Universiti Malaya (UM)

Panel Discussion:

MODERATOR:

Dr Amjad Rabi - Visiting Expert, Social Wellbeing Research Centre (SWRC), Universiti Malaya (UM)

DISCUSSANTS:

1. **Dr Suphannada Lowhachai** - Director of Social Data and Indicator Development Division, Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, Thailand
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2. **Dr Nirwan Noh** - Deputy Undersecretary, Economic Research Sector, Ministry of Finance, Malaysia
 3. **Ms Ty Lymey** - Deputy Chief of Secretariat, Ministry of Economy and Finance, Cambodia
 4. **Mr Pan Gao** - Social Assistance Department, Ministry of Civil Affairs, China
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The International Labour Organization's (ILO) World Social Protection Report 2024 highlights the Asia-Pacific region's low social protection investment, with countries allocating only 11.8% of GDP to social protection, far below the global average of 19.3%. This underinvestment underscores the urgent need for a holistic expansion of social protection policies in the region. Expert presentations at the session showcased actionable strategies and successful frameworks to address this challenge. For instance, Thailand's Ministry of Social Development and Human Security presented its "5 by 5" Social Policy Framework, a comprehensive approach aimed at empowering vulnerable populations, including children, youth, older persons, and individuals with disabilities. Key initiatives under this framework include the child support grant program, benefiting over 2.26 million children, and the establishment of 20,000 Early Childhood Development centres to improve children's physical and mental well-being.

Discussions also emphasized the importance of sustainable financing to meet growing demands for old-age and survivor schemes. Governments were encouraged to [reallocate fiscal resources, enhance tax systems, and explore innovative financing mechanisms, such as fiscal reserves, to expand social protection budgets](#). Insights were shared from various countries, including Malaysia's social protection floor strategies, China's financial implications of extending social assistance, and advancements in child-friendly budgeting in Thailand and Cambodia. Through these expert insights and panel discussions, participants gained practical knowledge to advocate for integrated, equitable, and sustainable social protection systems that address the region's pressing demographic and economic challenges.

Expert Presentation 1 Highlights - Sustainable and Inclusive Social Protection in Thailand

The presentation highlighted the critical need for sustainable financing mechanisms to support child-friendly social protection systems. It pointed out that economic growth alone, without intervention through taxation and redistribution, would leave many vulnerable populations behind. The disparity in social protection investments across regions was noted, with Europe and Central Asia enjoying high levels of social protection, while the [Asia-Pacific region's investment remains low at 11.8% of GDP compared to the global average of 19%](#). This situation underscores the urgent need for countries to prioritize social protection initiatives, particularly for children and families.

The concept of fiscal space was introduced, referring to the budgetary room available for governments to allocate resources for social protection without jeopardizing long-term growth. Various strategies to enhance fiscal space were outlined, including [expanding contributory insurance, improving taxation systems, and reprioritizing expenditures](#). The importance of innovative financing options, such as utilizing fiscal reserves and stimulating economic growth, was also discussed to ensure that social protection systems are adequately funded. A well-designed social protection floor is essential for providing a safety net for vulnerable populations, particularly children, who are often the most affected by economic disparities.

The presentation also addressed the need for increased public spending on social protection, particularly for children aged 0 to 15, who currently receive inadequate cash benefits. This highlights a significant coverage gap that requires immediate attention. By advocating for a more accommodating macroeconomic framework that allows for flexibility in fiscal deficits, the discussion aimed to inspire a collective effort to enhance the well-being of children and families, fostering a more equitable and resilient society.

Expert Presentation 2 Highlights - Financing Sustainable and Adequate Child Friendly Social Protection

The presentation delved into the urgent issue of "Financing Sustainable and Adequate Child Friendly Social Protection." It emphasized the imperative need for a robust social protection system that prioritize the well-being of children and families especially in the face of growing economic hardship and social inequalities. A detailed analysis was presented, examining existing social protection frameworks and highlighting the critical gaps in coverage and insufficient financial support for vulnerable populations. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indicator 1.3.1 measures the share of children aged 0 to 15 receiving child and family cash benefits. This indicator underscores the critical role of social protection in alleviating [poverty and promoting social equity](#). However, achieving sustainable and effective programs requires increased investment in the social protection for children. This ensures programs are not only financially viable in the long term, but also adequately resourced to meet the growing demands of the population. [To ensure the long-term viability of social protection system, expanding the contributory insurance is essential. This would broaden the support base, providing a more robust safety net for families in need.](#) Progressive taxation policies can also generate necessary revenue while ensuring that the tax burden. Additionally, reprioritizing government expenditure is crucial. By allocating resources more strategically, government can channel funds towards social protection initiatives that directly benefit children and families.

Innovative financing mechanisms such as [adopting a more accommodating macroeconomic framework that tolerates inflation and fiscal deficits can create a more flexible environment for social programs funding](#). Additionally, leveraging fiscal resources, central bank foreign exchange reserves international aid and transfers can bolster social protection financing. Borrowing or restructuring existing debt could also free up resources for national development initiatives, may also including social protection.

A 'multi-stakeholder approach', involving governments, civil society, and the private sector, can foster a collaborative strategy to address the diverse needs of children. There is a need for Policymakers and practitioners must reimagine social protection approaches, to ensure all children have access to essential services, support, and opportunities. Urgent action is needed to establish resilient social protection systems that safeguard the rights and well-being of children in the region.

Key Points from Thailand

The presentation focused on the critical need for sustainable financing of child-friendly social protection systems in Thailand. It highlighted the projected increase in social budget expenditures, which are expected to rise 1.6 times over the next two decades. This increase is primarily driven by demographic changes and the growing demand for old age and survivors' schemes, as well as non-contributory programs. The discussion emphasized the importance of integrating social protection systems to reduce fragmentation and inefficiencies, advocating for the use of a single national ID to enhance data integration across various social services.

A significant aspect of the presentation was the discussion on redesigning the contributory system to adapt to the evolving nature of work. As the labor market changes, it is essential to ensure that social protection benefits remain relevant and accessible to all segments of the population, including informal workers and those in non-traditional employment. The promotion of a co-payment system was suggested as a means to [ensure the sustainability and adequacy of social protection benefits for children and families](#) (Figure 21). This approach aims to balance the financial responsibilities between the government and beneficiaries, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of social protection initiatives.

Figure 21: The promotion strategy of co-payment system in Thailand



The presentation also addressed the alarming statistic that approximately 20% of children in Thailand live in poverty, with those from the **poorest households being five times more likely to experience stunting compared to their wealthier counterparts**. This stark reality underscores the urgency of implementing comprehensive social policies that not only provide immediate financial assistance but also promote long-term well-being for children and families. By focusing on empowering families and ensuring access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing, the aim is to create a robust safety net that addresses the disparities in social service access and promotes the rights of children, particularly in the context of migration and poverty.

Key Points from Malaysia

The presentation emphasized the rationale behind increasing social protection measures, such as cash assistance programs, in Malaysia's 2025 budget. It highlighted the government's commitment to balancing economic growth with enhancing the well-being of its citizens. The focus was on how these social protection initiatives can effectively address the impact of poverty, particularly considering the ongoing economic challenges faced by many households.

By prioritizing social assistance, the government aims to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations, ensuring that basic needs are met and that families can maintain a minimum standard of living. A key point discussed was the importance of targeted cash assistance programs, such as the Social Assistance Program (STR) and the Social Welfare Department (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, JKM) assistance, which are designed to support low-income families. The presentation outlined how these programs are structured to provide immediate relief to those in need, helping to alleviate the financial burden on households struggling with rising living cost. The effectiveness of these programs was underscored by evidence showing that the **majority of recipients use cash assistance primarily for essential needs**, such as food and necessities, highlighting the critical role of social cash programs in combating poverty.

Additionally, the presentation addressed the broader implications of social protection on economic stability and growth. It argued that investing in social safety nets not only supports individual families but also contributes to overall economic resilience. By ensuring that citizens have access to necessary resources, the government can **foster a more inclusive economy where all individuals can participate and thrive**. This approach aligns with the long-term vision of building a sustainable and equitable society, where social protection is viewed as a fundamental component of national development strategies.

Key Points from Cambodia

The integration of social protection systems in Cambodia was recognized as essential for enhancing the well-being of vulnerable populations, particularly children and families. A comprehensive approach was deemed necessary to address the multifaceted nature of poverty and social exclusion. Financial assistance was provided alongside access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing.

By focusing on the unique challenges faced by different demographic groups, tailored support was developed to meet the specific needs of those most at risk, ultimately improving their quality of life.

Community engagement and local government involvement were identified as critical for the effective planning and implementation of social protection measures. Local stakeholders were actively involved to ensure that programs were aligned with the needs and priorities of the communities they served. This [participatory approach fostered a sense of ownership and accountability among community members, making social protection initiatives more effective and sustainable](#). Strong partnerships were built between government agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities, creating a cohesive and responsive social protection system that could adapt to changing circumstances.

To address the challenges of financing social protection initiatives, innovative funding mechanisms were explored, and existing resources were reallocated to prioritize these efforts. While economic growth was acknowledged as important, it was emphasized that it needed to be accompanied by targeted investments in social safety nets to ensure equitable distribution of benefits. Fiscal space was enhanced, and diverse funding sources were identified to strengthen the government's commitment to social protection. By prioritizing these solutions, improved outcomes for children and families were anticipated, fostering a more inclusive society that supported the most vulnerable populations.

Key Points from China

A comprehensive overview of the social assistance system in China was provided, highlighting its vital role as a safety net for vulnerable populations. The system was recognized as a crucial component of the national social protection framework, designed to safeguard the basic livelihoods of those in need. In 2024, a significant allocation of approximately 154.6 billion Chinese Yuan (around USD 22 billion) was designated by the central government to support various social assistance initiatives. This funding was aimed at ensuring that essential services and support were accessible to low-income groups, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

The transition from a purely material-based support model to an integrated "cash plus service" approach was emphasized as a key development in the social assistance framework. This new model included not only direct financial aid, but also targeted care, daily living assistance, and support services tailored to the needs of low-income individuals and families. The "Dibao" program, which provides a minimum living standard guarantee for urban and rural residents, was highlighted as a significant aspect of this approach. By ensuring that the most vulnerable populations receive adequate financial support, the Dibao program plays a crucial role in alleviating poverty and promoting social stability.

Furthermore, the importance of continuous improvement and adaptation of the social assistance system was underscored. Challenges such as identifying the right recipients for targeted assistance were acknowledged, and strategies were discussed to enhance the effectiveness of the programs. The "Tekun" program, which offers temporary assistance to individuals facing urgent difficulties, was mentioned as an example of how targeted support can be provided in times of crisis (Figure 22). By focusing on data-driven decision-making and refining the targeting mechanisms, the government aimed to ensure that support reached those who needed it most.

Figure 22: Multi-tiered structure for classifying low-income households in China



The shift towards a more holistic approach was seen as a response to the evolving needs of the population, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of comprehensive social support services in improving the quality of life for those in need. Positive feedback from local communities indicated that this integrated approach was effective in addressing the diverse challenges faced by vulnerable groups. The combination of cash assistance and supportive services was viewed as essential for fostering resilience among low-income families.

Overall, the commitment to evolving the social assistance framework was seen as essential for fostering a more inclusive society, where the basic needs of all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable, were adequately met. By integrating programs like Dibao and Tekun into a cohesive social protection strategy, the government aimed to enhance the effectiveness of its support systems and ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of social equity and well-being.



SESSION 5:

BUILDING RESILIENCE: CLIMATE CHANGE AND ADAPTIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

EXPERT PRESENTERS/DISCUSSANTS

Expert Presentation 1: Strengthening Climate Resilience in East Asia and Pacific: The Role of Climate Smart Social Protection

Mr. Selim Barkan - Climate Smart and Social Protection Consultant, UNICEF EAPRO
Expert Presentation 2: Climate Smart and Shock Responsive Social Protection: Policy and Operational Considerations

Ms. Asha Williams - Social Protection Specialist, World Bank
Panel Discussion

MODERATOR:

Datu Lester Matthew - Director of Economic Planning Unit (EPU), Sarawak, Malaysia

DISCUSSANTS:

1. **Ms. Enkhnasan Lutaa** - Chair of Social Standing Committee, Member of Parliament.

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2. **Ms. Luísa Manuofetoa** - Deputy CEO, Department of Social Protection, Disability & Vulnerable, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Tonga.
 3. **Ms. Fisca Miswari Aulia** - Policy Planner, Directorate of Poverty Alleviation and Community Empowerment, Ministry of National Development Planning (BAPPENAS), Republic of Indonesia.
 4. **Mr. Jun Fan** - Chief Social Policy, UNICEF Pacific Islands.
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Climate change poses unprecedented challenges to human well-being, particularly for vulnerable populations. The escalating frequency and intensity of climate shocks—including extreme weather events and rising temperatures—threaten the progress made in poverty alleviation, human capital development, and social cohesion. Globally, approximately 3.3 to 3.6 billion people reside in areas highly vulnerable to climate change, with the greatest burden falling on low-income countries where fragile social infrastructure is ill-equipped to withstand these pressures (IPCC, 2023).

For children, the impacts are especially acute. As one of the most vulnerable demographics, children face immediate risks such as hunger, displacement, and disruption of essential services during climate shocks. Moreover, climate change threatens to exacerbate poverty cycles and widen inequalities, undermining children's rights, and future opportunities. The urgency of addressing these issues cannot be overstated.

Expert Presentation 1 Highlights - The Climate Challenge: Impacts on Social Outcomes

The presentation emphasized the [escalating climate crisis as a significant child rights issue](#), highlighting that [children today are six times more at risk from climate-related weather events than previous generations](#). It articulated the urgent need for robust social protection systems to mitigate these impacts, underscoring that climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, particularly children.

The intersection of climate change and social inequality exacerbates the challenges faced by these groups, necessitating a comprehensive approach to social protection that addresses both immediate needs and long-term resilience. Core components of Climate Smart Social Protection were outlined, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing resilience to climate shocks, and cushioning the economic impacts of the transition to a low-carbon economy on vulnerable households. The importance of integrating social protection measures into national climate policies was stressed, advocating for investments in financing models and early warning systems that can better prepare communities for climate-related disasters. This integration is crucial for ensuring that social protection systems are not only reactive but also proactive in addressing the risks posed by climate change.

Additionally, the necessity for countries to conduct thorough analyses of their specific risks and vulnerabilities through a climate lens was highlighted. This approach ensures that [adaptation strategies are tailored to local contexts and priorities](#), making them more effective in addressing the unique challenges faced by different communities. The conclusion called for continuous knowledge generation and program testing to enhance the effectiveness of Climate Smart Social Protection strategies over time, emphasizing that collaborative efforts among governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders are essential for building resilient systems that protect the most vulnerable populations from the impacts of climate change.

Expert Presentation 2 Highlights - Towards Adaptive and Climate-smart Social Protection

The presentation focused on the urgent need to adapt social protection systems to address the dual challenges due to climate change and its impacts on vulnerable populations. It highlighted that the last decade has recorded the warmest temperatures, which have significant implications for public health, human capital accumulation, and overall well-being.

The effects of climate change are particularly pronounced in low-income countries, where fragile social infrastructure struggles to cope with the compounded vulnerabilities faced by the poor. These vulnerabilities manifest in negative coping strategies during crises and weak recovery capacities afterward, underscoring the necessity for adaptable social protection mechanisms.

Adaptable social protection was defined as the capacity to prepare for, cope with, and adapt to climate-related shocks. Preparation involves ensuring that households are informed and equipped to handle potential crises, which includes increasing safety nets and providing timely support. Coping strategies focus on minimizing immediate impacts, allowing communities to adjust quickly and protect their human capital. [Adaptation efforts aim to reduce long-term exposure and vulnerability by promoting livelihood diversification and access to productive opportunities](#), thereby accelerating human capital development. This comprehensive approach is essential for building resilience among the most affected populations.

The presentation also emphasized the importance of closing coverage gaps in social protection systems, particularly in low-income countries where implementation capacity is often limited. Ensuring the adequacy of existing benefits and support during post-shock recovery is crucial for maintaining the well-being of vulnerable groups. Strengthening the delivery systems of social protection is necessary to ensure that assistance reaches those in need promptly and effectively. This includes developing operational procedures for post-disaster responses and enhancing coordination among various stakeholders to facilitate timely support.

Finally, the use of [adaptive social protection stress tests in various countries was discussed as a valuable tool for assessing vulnerability to climate shocks](#). These tests help identify at-risk populations and tailor interventions accordingly.

Additionally, the presentation highlighted the Dominican Republic's Climate Shock Vulnerability Index, which evaluates household vulnerability based on various factors, enabling effective vulnerability mapping and targeted support. The integration of environmental considerations into social protection policies was advocated to promote sustainable practices and enhance community resilience, ultimately ensuring that social protection systems can effectively respond to the challenges posed by climate change.

Key Points from Mongolia

To achieve true resilience, social protection systems must be both inclusive and responsive. Expanding coverage, ensuring benefit adequacy, and strengthening delivery mechanisms are critical. Mongolia's Child Money Program (CMP) serves as a prime example of how social protection initiatives can close coverage gaps and enhance inclusivity, particularly in periods of climate-induced socioeconomic distress, by providing universal support.

Launched in 2005, the program provides universal monthly cash allowances to all children under 18, aiming to reduce poverty, improve child welfare, and promote equitable development. Under this initiative, a monthly child allowance of 100,000 MNT (\$29.5) is being provided to every child in Mongolia (Figure 23). The program has seen tremendous improvements, in terms of its coverage and benefits adequacy. The coverage rate has achieved full universality currently, with the benefit amount increased from \$1 to \$29.5 from the program's inception in 2005 until now.

Figure 23. Timeline of Mongolia's Child Money Programme

EXPERIENCE OF MONGOLIA IN CMP				
Time period	Coverage rate for children	Number of children covered (thousands)	Criteria	Amount of child allowance
June 1, 2005 - July 1, 2006	34	650.0	Children aged 0-18 from households with income below the poverty line	1\$
July 1, 2006 - January 1, 2010	100	932.0	-	1\$
January to June, 2012-2016	100	1,053.7	-	5.9\$
July to December, 2016	60	639.1	IBCM /research/	5.9\$
January to December, 2017	100	1,084.0	-	5.9\$
January to March, 2018	60	684.0	IBCM /research/	5.9\$
April to December, 2018	80	912.0	IBCM /research/	5.9\$
January to March, 2019	80	912.0	IBCM /research/	5.9\$
April to December, 2019, and January to March, 2020	85	1,000.0	IBCM /research/	5.9\$
May to December, 2020 – January to December, 2022	100	1,186.3 – 1,259.5	-	29.5\$
January to June, 2023	91	1,157.0	IBCM /administration/	29.5\$
Year 2024	100	1,1304.0	Each child	29.5\$

Direct cash transfers had reduced child poverty by enabling families to cover necessities like food, clothing, education, and healthcare. Despite its successes, the CMP faces several challenges including fiscal sustainability and adaptability in the face of climate change. As a universal program, the CMP requires significant funding, which may strain the national budget, particularly during economic downturns or times of fiscal constraint. The proportion of child allowances in the Mongolia's social welfare fund expenditures is high. Sustainable financing mechanisms, including progressive taxation or climate-related funding sources, may be needed to maintain the program's reach and effectiveness over time.

In addition, as the impacts of climate change continue to disrupt livelihoods, particularly in rural areas, the CMP must remain flexible and responsive to emerging challenges. Ongoing monitoring of its impact on vulnerable populations will be essential for adjusting the program to meet the evolving challenges posed by climate change.

Key Points from Tonga

Tonga, an island nation in the Pacific, was recognized for its proactive approach to managing the frequent natural disasters it encountered, including tropical cyclones, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, which were further exacerbated by climate change. The critical role of social protection systems was demonstrated in [providing immediate relief to vulnerable populations while simultaneously fostering long-term resilience](#). This solution-oriented framework emphasized the importance of integrating social protection mechanisms into disaster management and climate adaptation strategies.

A robust social protection system was established in Tonga, characterized by readily available and verified data, timely responses, and strong collaboration among relevant ministries and stakeholders. During crises, all available social protection schemes were utilized to quickly implement top-ups and additional support for affected households. Cash assistance was identified as one of the most immediate forms of relief, enabling families to address urgent needs such as food security and basic livelihoods. Following disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, the amounts of cash transfers were increased to assist families in managing the additional costs associated with survival and recovery.

The experience of the 2022 eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai highlighted the necessity of closely coordinated social protection efforts (Figure 24). [Effective disaster response was facilitated through seamless collaboration between ministries](#), including the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), ensuring that the immediate needs of affected communities were met and that recovery efforts were executed swiftly and effectively. This coordinated approach allowed for the [efficient mobilization of resources and the timely delivery of assistance to those in need](#).

Figure 24: List of cyclones that hit Tonga since 1982

Tonga as the third country with the highest disaster risk worldwide	
Cyclones that hit Tonga since 1982	
1.	03 March 1982. Cyclone Issac
2.	1990 – Cyclone Ofa
3.	1992 – Cyclone Kina
4.	2001 – Cyclone Waka
5.	2012 – Cyclone Jasmine
6.	2014 – Cyclone Ian
7.	2018 – Cyclone Gita
8.	2020 – Cyclone Harold, Tino and Yasa
9.	2022 – Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha’apai volcano eruptions. - this displaces 2 islands and 1 village totaling to approximately 2,100 people. (Mango , ‘Ata’ataa and Kanokupolu).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Total number of PWD on Govt. Cash assistance =2, 651,• Total no. of elderlies on SWS cash assistance = 5000• Total students that have finance by Poverty Cash Transfer to date – 5315. (HH 2,405) by dec. 2023

Central to Tonga's rapid disaster response was a comprehensive and frequently updated database of vulnerable populations. This real-time information enabled the swift identification of at-risk groups, including low-income households, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. By maintaining accurate data, effective targeting of assistance was ensured, [minimizing delays and errors in aid distribution](#). Furthermore, social protection in Tonga extended beyond cash transfers; it encompassed broader strategies for disaster response and climate adaptation, ensuring that livelihoods were restored, health services were sustained, and food security was prioritized in the aftermath of disasters. This holistic approach not only addressed immediate needs but also strengthened the resilience of communities against future shocks.

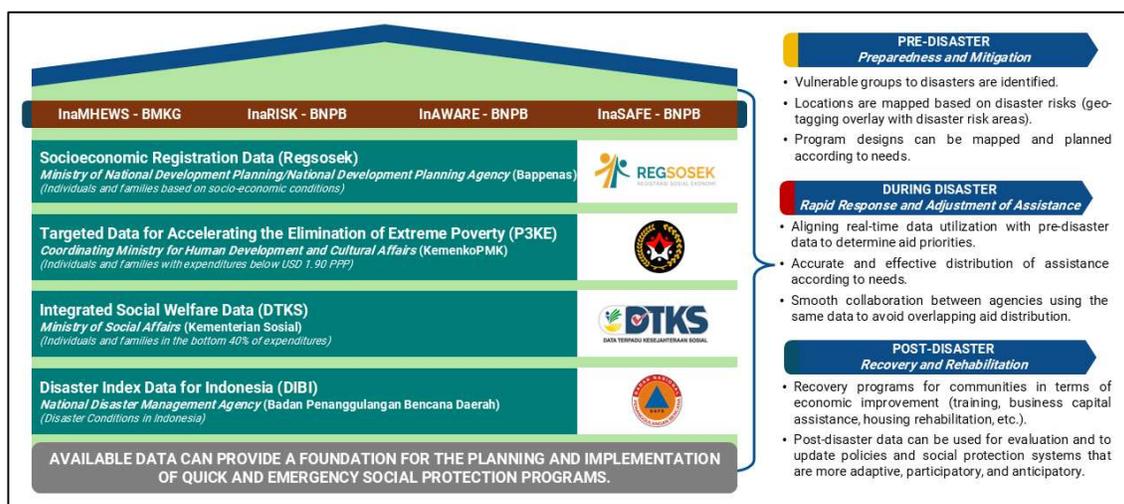
Key Points from Indonesia

According to the 2023 INFORM Risk Index, Indonesia was ranked the third country most at risk to climate hazards, including flooding, droughts, and heatwaves (European Commission, 2023). Proactive ex-ante measures, enabled by robust early warning systems and adequate safety nets, are vital to minimizing the impacts of climate shocks. Anticipatory action involves triggering support mechanisms before disasters strike, reducing the need for reactive and often insufficient emergency responses.

Recognizing the urgent need to address the impacts of climate change, Indonesia has adopted a proactive approach to building an adaptive social protection system aimed at enhancing preparedness for future crises. Through its Adaptive Social Protection (PSA) framework, Indonesia focuses on strengthening community resilience by equipping individuals and households with the capacity to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to covariate shocks triggered by disasters. This framework also emphasizes transformative measures to ensure the long-term recovery and sustainability of communities in the aftermath of such events.

[Social resilience is a key focus of Indonesia's Climate Resilience Development Policy](#), which seeks to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change, particularly in areas with high poverty rates. By prioritizing interventions in these vulnerable regions, the policy integrates Adaptive Social Protection to strengthen community capacity to withstand and recover from climate shocks. This targeted approach not only addresses social and economic vulnerabilities but also has a significant impact on reducing potential economic losses. Between 2020 and 2024, this strategy has the potential to lower projected economic losses from IDR 544 trillion to IDR 283 trillion—a remarkable reduction of 51.7%. These efforts exemplify the transformative role of climate-focused policies in safeguarding livelihoods, reducing poverty, and ensuring long-term resilience.

Figure 25. Data-driven Adaptive Social Protection Framework in Indonesia



Comprehensive, real-time data systems are crucial for the success of adaptive social protection, as they enable precise targeting of vulnerable populations and ensure the timely delivery of critical support. In Indonesia, the Adaptive Social Protection agenda is driven by a robust data-driven approach that integrates various unified socioeconomic registration systems. Key among these is the Socioeconomic Registration Data (Regsosek), which consolidates household data for comprehensive social planning, the Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS), which targets welfare and social assistance programs, and the Disaster Index Data for Indonesia (DIBI), which maps disaster risks and vulnerabilities. These databases are essential for effective crisis and disaster management planning, spanning all phases of a disaster: pre-disaster (Preparedness and Mitigation), during a disaster (Rapid Response and Adjustment of Assistance) and post-disaster (Recovery and Rehabilitation) (Figure 25).

Indonesia's commitment to realizing Adaptive Social Protection to address climate change aligns closely with the goals of Indonesia Emas 2045 (Golden Indonesia 2045) that emphasize resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability as cornerstones for national progress. Indonesia Emas 2045 (Golden Indonesia 2045) is a vision for Indonesia to achieve significant socio-economic and political milestones by its 100th year of independence in 2045.

It outlines the country's aspirations to become a globally influential and prosperous nation, characterized by strong human capital, economic resilience, equitable development, and environmental sustainability.

Key Points from Pacific Islands

The presentation emphasized the critical need for proactive measures in social policy to address the increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters in the Pacific region. A framework for anticipatory action was introduced, which aims to implement cash transfer mechanisms that are triggered by early warning systems. This approach enables timely support to vulnerable communities before disasters occur, therefore enhancing their resilience and capacity to cope with the impacts of climate change. The focus on anticipatory action reflects [a shift from reactive to proactive strategies in social protection, ensuring that communities are better prepared for potential shocks.](#)

The integration of climate-smart strategies into social services was highlighted as essential for enhancing resilience. By embedding climate considerations into the design and delivery of social protection programs, the potential for mitigating the adverse effects of climate change on vulnerable populations is significantly increased. This integration involves financial assistance and the development of comprehensive support systems that address the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change, including food security, health, and livelihood sustainability.

Figure 24: Climate-smart social services in Solomon Islands

Climate-Smart Social Services: social services whose design and delivery promotes climate change mitigation or adaptation or both

A whole spectrum of social services affecting children and their caregivers: WASH, Health, Nutrition, Education, Social Protection and Child Protection.

Climate-Smart Social Protection: improving the climate responsiveness of social protection systems to better adapt to the rapidly changing nature of the climate shocks through:

- Building/strengthening climate adaptive and shock-responsive social protection systems.
- Exploring synergies between climate finance and social budgets for children.
- Integrating climate, disaster, and environmental dimensions into child poverty analysis.

Pilot in Solomon Islands funded by KOICA

Successful case studies were showcased to illustrate the effectiveness of anticipatory action in practice (Figure 24). These examples demonstrated how timely cash transfers, informed by early warning systems, could provide immediate relief to communities facing imminent threats from climate-related disasters. The presentation underscored the importance of data-driven approaches in identifying at-risk populations and tailoring interventions to meet their needs. By utilizing real-time data and predictive analytics, social protection systems can enhance their responsiveness and effectiveness in disaster scenarios.

Finally, the potential for these interventions to mitigate the impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable populations was emphasized. By adopting anticipatory action frameworks and integrating climate-smart strategies into social services, communities can build greater resilience against future shocks. This proactive approach not only addresses immediate needs but also contributes to long-term sustainability and empowerment, ensuring that vulnerable populations are equipped to navigate the challenges posed by an increasingly unpredictable climate.



COORDINATION OF SUPPORT NETWORKS AND EXPERT CLUSTERS

The networking session, moderated by **Dr Juanita Vasquez Escallon, Chief of Social Policy, UNICEF Malaysia**, successfully brought together participants from a diverse group of professionals committed to advancing social protection initiatives. The networking slot kicked off with a friendly icebreaking activity, encouraging participants to connect by exchanging name cards. Each participant was asked to engage in a brief conversation with their card exchange partner, using the opportunity to learn more about each other's work. To keep track, participants were instructed to jot down two key details on the back of each name card, including their partner's area of expertise or project focus and identify any overlapping interests or areas where they could benefit from mutual support or knowledge exchange. As an added incentive, a small prize was awarded to three participants who collected the most name cards, acknowledging their commitment for their enthusiastic networking and dedication to building valuable professional relationships with fellow attendees.

Moving on to the next expert cluster activity, participants were divided into 10 groups, each with a specific focus and facilitated by one UNICEF staff member. These groups delved into targeted topics, including shock-responsive and adaptive social protection, gender-responsive social protection, disability-inclusive social protection, management information systems (MIS) for social protection programs, social protection for non-nationals, strengthening social protection legislation, financing solutions for program expansion, scaling up from pilot programs to national coverage, transitioning from poverty/means-tested to (quasi) universal programs, and monitoring and evaluating social protection programs. Participants began at one designated station and, after each round, moved clockwise to the next station within the allocated time for discussion. This dynamic process allowed each group to engage with all 10 topics, fostering a broad exchange of ideas and insights across all areas of social protection. This activity before the closing session strengthened professional connections and laid the groundwork for ongoing partnerships and knowledge exchange, enhancing the overall mission to improve social protection systems worldwide.

Key takeaways from the expert cluster session

Promoting Gender Equality through Social Protection

Promoting **gender equality** in social protection can be achieved through strategies such as ensuring universal access to social protection, expanding paid family and parental leave, and providing support for **caregiving work**, which is predominantly carried out by women. Gender-sensitive health coverage and addressing the **gender pay gap** within social protection programs can further support women's financial security and health needs. Additionally, designing inclusive and gender-responsive policies that address the unique challenges women face, especially in marginalized communities, is crucial. Raising public awareness and advocating for women's rights to social protection benefits also helps promote gender equality, fostering economic independence and reducing disparities.

One key suggestion from the discussion is the exploration of [maternity insurance](#) to provide financial and healthcare support during pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care. This insurance can [protect women](#) and families from the economic challenges of medical expenses, lost income during maternity leave, and additional costs related to childbirth. By alleviating these financial burdens, maternity insurance can help reduce economic disparities, particularly for women in low-income households, and ensure women have the support needed during this important life stage.

[Shared Responsibility in Maternity Insurance Contributions](#)

[Contributions](#) to maternity insurance are typically shared between the employer and employee, with each party contributing a portion of the employee's salary to fund the benefits. Contribution is based on the total number of employees, regardless of the number of female/male employees, preventing discrimination in recruiting female employees. The employer usually covers a larger share, reflecting their role in supporting employee health and well-being. This shared funding structure makes maternity insurance [more accessible](#) and ensures financial security during maternity leave, covering medical expenses and lost income. By promoting gender equality, this model helps support women's participation in the workforce, reducing economic disparities and encouraging a more balanced division of family and work responsibilities.

[Ensuring Job Security and Legal Protections for Family Leave](#)

A key suggestion for promoting long-term workforce participation is to ensure that employees can return to their previous position, or an equivalent one, after maternity or parental leave. Providing [legal protections](#) against discrimination due to pregnancy or parental leave is essential to support the cause.

These measures would give employees confidence that taking time off for family responsibilities will not negatively affect their career progression or job security. By safeguarding against discrimination, such policies promote gender equality, encourage a more inclusive workforce, and ensure that both men and women have equal opportunities for career success without fear of unfair treatment due to family commitments.

Promoting Communication and Inclusion for People with Disabilities

For people with disabilities (PWD), particularly those with hearing impairments, providing family support [to learn sign language](#) is crucial in fostering better communication and inclusion. When family members learn sign language, they create a more accessible and supportive environment for their loved ones, enabling smoother interactions and a stronger sense of belonging. This support not only enhances day-to-day communication but also [strengthens emotional bonds](#) and helps PWDs participate more actively in family, social, and community activities. Moreover, it empowers PWDs to express themselves fully, ensuring that they are not isolated or marginalized due to communication barriers. Encouraging families to learn sign language is an important step toward [reducing societal stigma](#), promoting empathy, and ensuring that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to engage in all aspects of life. By fostering communication and inclusion, this support also encourages a more inclusive society where PWDs are respected and valued.

Enhancing Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities

A valuable suggestion to improve [employment access](#) for people with disabilities (PWD) is to implement matching programs that help them acquire the necessary skills for job placements. These programs could focus on providing targeted training in both technical and soft skills, tailored to the needs of PWDs, ensuring they are well-prepared to meet the demands of the job market.

Partnering with employers to create accessible and accommodating job opportunities would further enhance the likelihood of successful employment outcomes for PWDs. Additionally, offering ongoing support, such as mentorship and workplace adjustments, would help ensure long-term success. Another suggestion for promoting inclusive employment policies could be for governments to implement measures such as reserving a specific percentage of public sector jobs for persons with disabilities (Figure 25). By adopting such initiatives, a more inclusive and diverse workforce can be offered, where individuals of all abilities have equal opportunities to thrive.

Figure 25: Excerpt of discussions on fostering an inclusive labour market for the disabled from ConnexMe app



Expanding Social Protection to Include Migrant Workers and Their Families

A potential suggestion is to **extend social protection** systems to include all residents, regardless of nationality, by establishing bilateral agreements (BAs) between countries. These agreements can help ensure that migrant workers and their families are covered by essential benefits such as healthcare, pensions, and unemployment support, even if they move between countries for work. By coordinating social protection systems through BAs, countries can fill gaps in coverage and provide a more inclusive safety net for all residents. This approach would not only improve the well-being of migrant workers and their families but also reduce inequality and promote social cohesion, recognizing the vital economic contributions of non-nationals.

Introducing Care Allowances for Elderly Support

Proposing **care allowances** for the elderly as short-term monetary compensation is an effective way to provide immediate financial support to families and caregivers responsible for elderly individuals. These allowances can help cover caregiving costs, such as purchasing medical supplies, paying for in-home care services, or compensating family members who reduce their working hours to care for elderly relatives. By offering financial assistance, care allowances can **alleviate some of the financial burdens** that come with caregiving, ensuring that elderly individuals receive the attention and care they need while promoting the financial well-being of their caregivers. Additionally, such allowances can help ensure that elderly individuals **are not left** without proper care due to financial constraints, fostering a more supportive environment for aging populations.

Building Resilient and Flexible Social Protection Systems for Crises

Developing flexible social protection systems that can quickly scale up or adjust in response to emerging crises, such as natural disasters or economic shocks, is crucial for protecting vulnerable populations. This can be achieved by establishing **pre-approved emergency funds** and rapid-response mechanisms that allow for fast and efficient delivery of benefits, such as cash transfers, food aid, or healthcare services. These systems should be **adaptable**, enabling them to quickly expand coverage to affected individuals, including those who are typically outside regular social protection programs, such as informal sector workers. By incorporating such mechanisms, social protection can provide timely support, mitigate the immediate effects of crises, and aid in quicker recovery for communities.

Management Information Systems (MIS) for Social Protection Programs

Robust Management Information Systems (MIS) can significantly enhance the effectiveness of social protection programs, as demonstrated by Indonesia's Regsosek system and Indonesia's Disaster Information Database (DIBI).

Regsosek, a national socioeconomic registry, collects detailed data on millions of households, helping to better target social assistance and improve service delivery. Integrated with Indonesia's SEPAKAT system (*Sistem Perencanaan dan Analisis Kemiskinan Terpadu*), Regsosek provides **real-time data access** for regional governments, enabling more effective data-driven decision-making and efficient planning for poverty reduction and social welfare programs. By consolidating socioeconomic data from various government agencies, SEPAKAT supports the implementation of targeted interventions, helping policymakers improve the allocation of resources and tailor social protection measures to meet the specific needs of communities.

The integration **streamlines the use of data**, enhancing the effectiveness of Indonesia's social protection initiatives and ensuring better service delivery. This integrated MIS ensures transparency, reduces duplication, and improves the overall effectiveness of social protection, making it a model example of how real-time tracking and data integration can support efficient management and service delivery.

Innovative Financing for Expanding Social Protection Programs

Figure 26: Excerpt of discussions on social protection programs' financing alternatives from ConnexMe app



Innovative financing for social protection programs involves [utilizing revenues](#) from natural resources, such as taxes on mining or oil, to fund key initiatives like universal child benefits or cash transfers for the elderly. For example, Indonesia and Mongolia tap into resource-based revenues to expand coverage and ensure the financial sustainability of their social protection systems. Other methods, such as [issuing green and social bonds](#), have also been explored to align social protection with broader sustainable development goals. In Thailand, the government [incentivizes companies](#) to pursue Social Enterprise (SE) status through the Social Enterprise Act (2019). To qualify as an SE, companies must allocate a percentage of their profits to support marginalized communities, further integrating social impact into business practices. These financing strategies help strengthen social protection systems, ensuring they are resilient to economic and environmental shocks while securing long-term funding for vulnerable populations.

[Monitoring and Evaluating Social Protection Programs](#)

Monitoring and evaluating social protection programs are crucial for improving their effectiveness. For example, UNICEF's initiative in Vietnam helped gather valuable research that guides policy improvements, particularly in making programs more inclusive for children and people with disabilities. Studies like these help towards informed [adjustments](#) in social protection programs, ensuring they better meet the needs of vulnerable groups. Additionally, successful evidence-based approaches in countries like Thailand through the Social Protection Diagnostic Review (SPDR) have shown how pilot programs can be scaled to national policies, leading to better outcomes.

[Strengthening Social Protection in a Polycrisis Era](#)

To effectively address social protection in the context of a polycrisis, it is crucial for governments, international organizations, the private sector, and other development partners to work together towards a shared vision.

The collaboration should focus on [innovative financing strategies](#), particularly in countries facing debt challenges, and aim to expand social protection in least-developed countries. Additionally, it is important to create [flexible](#) social protection systems that support transitions to greener and blue economies, while also considering the needs of informal workers, small businesses, and the economic empowerment of women. These efforts require [creative thinking and partnerships](#) to build systems that can adapt to multiple crises and provide support to the most vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

The 2nd Regional Social Policy Conference for East Asia and the Pacific, held in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, on October 22-23, 2024, provided a critical platform for dialogue and collaboration among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners focused on the pressing social issues facing the region. The conference's theme, "Prioritizing Investments in Children in a Changing Region," underscored the urgent need to address the multifaceted challenges that children and families encounter in the context of rapid demographic changes, economic shifts, and environmental crises.

Throughout the conference, participants engaged in rich discussions that highlighted the interconnectedness of various social issues, including aging populations, gender dynamics, climate change, and the necessity for inclusive social protection systems. The insights gained from expert presentations and panel discussions have significant implications for the formulation of effective social policies that prioritize the well-being of children and families.

1. Addressing Aging Trends and Intergenerational Equity

One of the most pressing challenges discussed at the conference was the rapid aging of populations in the East Asia and Pacific region. By 2050, the number of individuals aged 60 and above is expected to nearly double, leading to increased demands on social protection systems and healthcare services. The presentations emphasized the importance of adapting social policies to ensure that they are age-sensitive and inclusive, addressing the needs of both older adults and younger generations. The discussions highlighted the need for intergenerational equity in social policy design. As resources become strained due to the growing elderly population, it is crucial to ensure that investments in children and youth are not compromised. Policymakers must adopt a holistic approach that recognizes the value of nurturing future generations while also providing adequate support for older citizens such as integrated social protection systems that facilitate the sharing of resources and responsibilities across generations.

2. Building Inclusive and Adaptive Social Protection Systems

The conference underscored the necessity of building inclusive and adaptive social protection systems that can respond to the evolving nature of work and the diverse needs of the population. As labor markets change, particularly with the rise of informal employment and gig economies, traditional social protection models may no longer suffice. The promotion of a co-payment system was suggested as a viable strategy to enhance the sustainability and adequacy of social protection benefits, particularly for children and families.

Integrating a single national ID system was also proposed to improve data sharing and coordination among various social services. This integration is essential for reducing fragmentation and inefficiencies in social protection systems, ensuring that benefits reach those who need them most. By leveraging technology and data, governments can create more responsive and effective social policies that adapt to the changing landscape of work and family dynamics.

3. Gender and Family Life in Social Policies

Gender dynamics play a crucial role in shaping social policies, particularly in the context of family life and caregiving responsibilities. The conference highlighted the need for gender-sensitive policies that recognize and address the unequal distribution of caregiving roles, which often disproportionately fall on women. By promoting policies that support work-life balance, such as parental leave and flexible work arrangements, governments can empower families and enhance the well-being of children. Furthermore, the discussions emphasized the importance of engaging men in caregiving roles and promoting shared responsibilities within families. This shift not only benefits children but also contributes to greater gender equality in the workforce. Policymakers must prioritize gender-responsive approaches that consider the diverse experiences of families and the unique challenges they face.

4. Climate Change and Vulnerable Populations

The impacts of climate change were a significant focus of the conference, particularly concerning vulnerable populations, including children. As climate-related disasters become more frequent and severe, it is imperative to develop adaptive social protection strategies that can mitigate the effects of these crises. The conference discussions highlighted the need for resilience-building measures that empower communities to withstand and recover from climate shocks. Investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and ensuring access to essential services such as healthcare and education are critical components of a comprehensive response to climate change. Policymakers must prioritize the voices of vulnerable populations in decision-making processes to ensure that their needs and perspectives are adequately addressed.

5. The Role of Data and Evidence in Policy Formulation

A recurring theme throughout the conference was the importance of data and evidence in informing social policy formulation. The need for robust data collection and analysis was emphasized to understand social issues complexities and to design effective interventions. Policymakers must invest in research and data systems that provide insights into the lived experiences of children and families, enabling informed decisions.

6. Collaborative Approaches and Regional Cooperation

The conference highlighted the importance of collaboration and regional cooperation in addressing social challenges. Issues interconnectedness such as aging, gender, and climate change necessitates a coordinated response that transcends national boundaries. Regional partnerships can facilitate knowledge sharing, resource mobilization, and the development of joint initiatives that benefit children and families across the region.

By fostering a spirit of collaboration, countries can learn from each other's successes and challenges, ultimately leading to more effective social policies. The establishment of regional networks and platforms for dialogue can enhance cooperation and promote a shared commitment to prioritizing investments in children.

7. Conclusion and Call to Action

In conclusion, the 2nd Regional Social Policy Conference for East Asia and the Pacific served as a vital forum for addressing the pressing social issues facing the region. The discussions underscored the need for comprehensive, inclusive, and adaptive social policies that prioritize the well-being of children and families in the context of rapid demographic changes, economic shifts, and environmental challenges. Moving forward, it is imperative that policymakers, researchers, and practitioners work collaboratively to implement the insights gained from the conference. By prioritizing investments in children, fostering intergenerational equity, building inclusive social protection systems, promoting gender equality, addressing climate change, and leveraging data and evidence, a brighter future for all can be created. The call to action is clear: a commitment to prioritizing the needs of children and families in social policies is essential, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of a sustainable and equitable future. Through concerted efforts, resilient communities can be built that empower future generations to thrive in an ever-changing world.

Photo Gallery

Figure 27: Officiation



Figure 28: Session 1



Figure 29: Session 2



Figure 30: Session 3



Figure 31: Session 4



Figure 32: Session 5

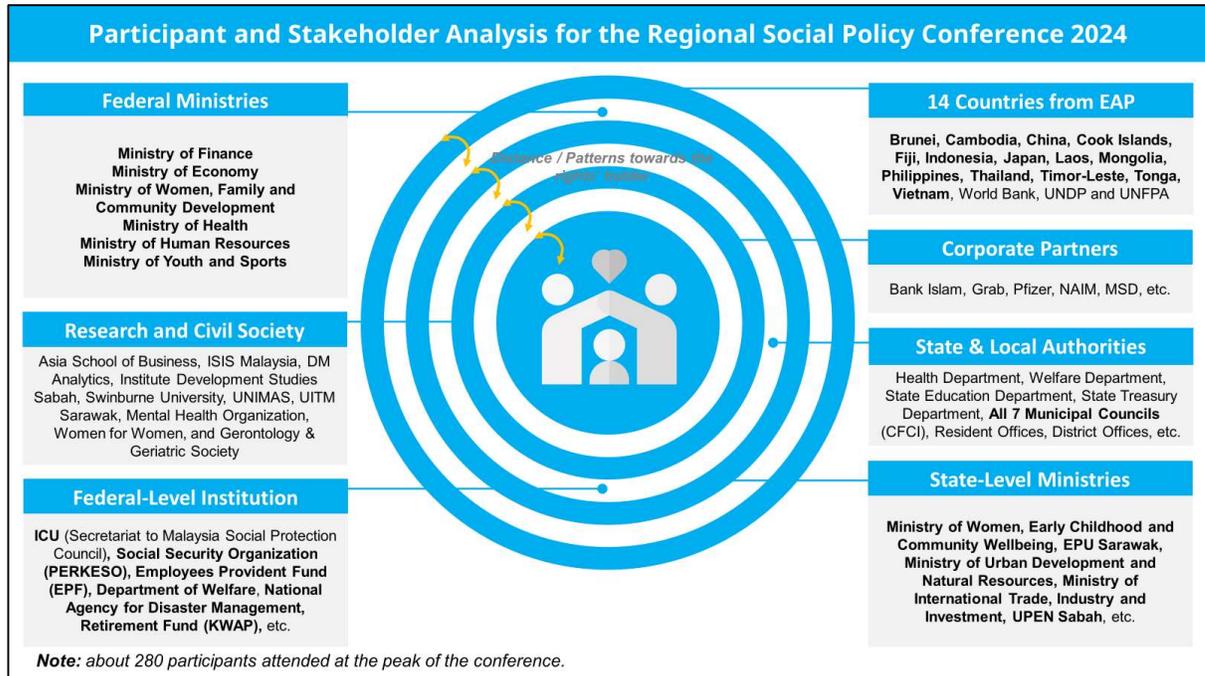


Figure 33: The networking session



Annex 1: List of Key Stakeholders

Figure 34: Mapping of Participants of the RSPC-EAP 2024



Annex 2: Sample Questions from ConnexMe Platform

22 October 2024

1. Adibah Rahman (14.49)

Thank you for sharing Ms. Grace. The mapping shown in the slide is really my wish list! Can you share how Cook Islands can achieve almost universal by offering a combination of contributory and tax financed schemes. How does the government pay the recipients?

2. Herlianna Naning (17.04)

Thank you for sharing some interventions to address care economy. Any best practices or examples around the region on incentivizing pooling resources for community-based care for SMEs?

23 October 2024

1. Khalid Latiff (10.11)

Cash handouts can be quite effective as a social protection measure – however it's not sustainable in the longer term to resolve the root causes of social issues and at times manifest complacency. Therefore “additions” or plus to cash handouts are very important.

2. Khalid Latiff (10.14)

In relation to the previous comment: Question - what are the most impactful additions or pluses (regionally) to cash handouts that have resulted in upliftment of communities on a sustainable basis from a wholesome ecosystem perspective? Look forward to some sharing on this pls.

3. Herlianna Naning (10.19)

Thank you, Mr Pan Goa, for sharing China's experience on targeted assistance based on the three level of difficulty. Can you share how the ministry identify the "right" people based on the three level of difficulty? What are the challenges and way to overcome?

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