

Strengthening Systems for Social Protection and Social Health Protection

Building institutions and developing capacities for integrated social protection in Pakistan

The Challenge

The majority of people in Pakistan are at chronic risk of falling into poverty, making a living without protection against life-cycle risks, such as illness, inability to work, poverty in old age and property loss. In this age of polycrisis, well-functioning social protection systems are urgently needed to build the resilience of households to climate-related and other shocks. The floods that devastated parts of the country in 2022 are thought to have propelled more than nine million people into poverty and resulted in an upsurge in malnutrition among children.

Responsibility for social protection in Pakistan is spread across different administrative levels, ministries, and departments, and provided by a range of public and private sector organisations. The government lacks the resources and a coordinated approach required to provide effective, integrated social protection to all its citizens.

Our Objective

On behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Support to Social protection – Social Health Protection project assists the federal government and provincial governments of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab to improve the living conditions of Pakistan’s vulnerable populations. They do this by strengthening social protection systems, including social health protection, and improving Nutrition and Universal Health Coverage (UHC).

Our Approach

SP-SHP provides advice and support on the conceptualisation and implementation of UHC, girl’s nutrition, and on the expansion, access and use of social protection programmes. It aims to improve

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coordination between social protection agencies and promote collaboration among development partners to strengthen capacities of social protection practitioners, and to foster evidence-based decision-making by social protection institutions.

Strengthening Social Protection Institutions

Since its inception in 2016, SP-SHP has worked with federal and provincial partners to strengthen social and social health protection institutions in Pakistan. Key achievements include drafting a legislative framework for the Sehat Sahulat Programme and the Punjab Health Insurance Authority Bill, the endorsement of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s first Social Protection Policy, and the UHC Act in 2022. The province also developed Rules of Business to support the administration of its health initiatives. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s success has contributed to the introduction of the Health Cards Programme in Balochistan, with support from SP-SHP. Federal and provincial leaders have benefited from the Leadership for Universal Health Coverage Programme (L4UHC), supported by German Development Cooperation and other partners.



Left: Initial discussion with adolescent girls during a school visit in Skardu

Right: Focus group discussion with mothers of adolescent girls in Faisalabad



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Left: A grateful father beams with joy as his little angel recovers from a severe brain infection, made possible by the Sehat Sahulat card.

Right: Discussing hospital association with sehat sahulat card.

Developing Social Protection Capacities

SP-SHP has a strong focus on capacity development, organising initiatives such as Pakistan's first hybrid social protection course in 2022 and 2023, where 75 practitioners were trained. The course has now been transferred to the Civil Services Academy, which has since enrolled 38 senior administrators. Other activities include courses on digital health insurance management and training of Lady Health Workers to promote the Sehat Sahulat Programme. SP-SHP also builds capacity in strategic purchasing and other aspects of health financing. These initiatives have supported the rapid roll-out of UHC in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with an evaluation providing recommendations for the future.

Linking Evidence to Social Protection Policy Development and Decision-making

SP-SHP is supporting a Research Hub to connect policymakers with research institutions, promoting evidence-based decision-making for social protection reforms. Six major studies are underway or completed, including a 'willingness to pay' study, which is helping inform discussions on sustainable reform measures for the Sehat Sahulat Programme, amidst fiscal constraints.

Leveraging Social Protection to improve Adolescent Girls' Nutrition

The SP-SHP module supports the Social Protection Support Programme for Adolescent Girls' Nutrition (SOPRAN) initiative, co-financed by the Gates Foundation, which empowers adolescent girls to drive positive change in nutrition knowledge and practices. The initiative utilises educational and community

engagement activities to foster innovation and leadership among adolescent girls, helping them become champions for better nutrition in their communities. Leveraging school- and community-based platforms, the initiative also aims to provide iron and folic acid supplementation to 100,000 adolescent girls across seven districts, as well as to strengthen access to fortified flour for the girls' families. This gender-transformative approach not only enhances the sustainability of food systems, it also positions adolescent girls as agents of change, improving nutrition among their peers, families, and broader communities.

SP-SHP is enhancing policy, governance, and research to strengthen social protection. It will integrate adolescent nutrition, improve Sehat Sahulat's financing and data systems, and foster multisectoral collaboration for better outcomes for all citizens.

Results

SP-SHP has played a key role in extending the reach of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) by transforming the National Socio-Economic Registry (NSER) into a dynamic system, able to adapt to people's changing socio-economic status. Digital registration and payments have enhanced efficiency, and the programme has been expanded to all 650 tehsils, with plans to reach Union Councils. Over one million women have registered. Social health insurance coverage has also significantly expanded, with 1.8 million families in Balochistan and 44 million nationwide now enrolled.

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