Universal Social Protection in a Changing World: Advancing Social Development and Decent Work

Geneva, 4 November 2026, 9.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. CET, Room VII, ILO HQ and online, Interpretation in French and Spanish available

Social protection had moved from the margins of the development agenda to a position of much greater prominence. Once considered as something governments could afford only when they had reached a certain level of development, social protection has increasingly come to be recognized as a precondition for economic and social development, one of the four pillars of decent work, and a critical stabilizer in times of crisis. At a time of persistent and, in many contexts, rising inequalities, it is also fundamental to advancing social justice and ensuring that the benefits and costs of economic and social transformations are shared more equitably.

Today, in an era of multiple and overlapping crises, the importance of social protection is more widely recognized than ever. It is seen as essential in enabling societies to navigate profound transformations — whether driven by climate change, demographic shifts, digitalization and AI, food price volatility or conflict. In the context of rapidly changing labour markets, and persistent and widening inequalities, strengthening social protection systems is key to promoting decent work, reinforcing social cohesion and reinvigorating social contracts. At the same time, growing geopolitical tensions, the erosion of multilateral cooperation and reduced fiscal space due to competing claims on public budgets, growing debt distress and declining ODA constitute a significant threat to the social dimension of development and the sustainability of social protection systems.

Yet, this is not a story of retreat. A broad and diverse coalition of actors is committed to universal social protection and a human-centred approach to development. This commitment was not only reaffirmed by the International Labour Conference in 2021, but also at the 2nd World Summit for Social Development in Doha, where governments adopted a political declaration placing social protection at the heart of efforts to combat poverty and inequality and promote social inclusion. Compared to the period following the financial and economic crisis of 2008–09 and the Covid crisis of 2020-22, the social protection community is now in a much stronger position: there is greater political recognition, stronger normative frameworks and clearer evidence of impact.

The evidence on the importance of building universal and sustainable social protection systems in line with international standards, that provide adequate protection across the lifecycle against both idiosyncratic and covariate shocks, has also translated into concrete commitments: The *Compromiso de Sevilla* adopted at the Financing for Development Conference in 2025 set a clear target for countries and the international community to progressively achieve universal social protection by extending effective coverage by at least 2 percentage points per annum to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 1.3. In view of shrinking ODA, this requires stepped-up support to strengthen countries' domestic resource mobilization capacities and create a more enabling global financial architecture that does not undermine their efforts, to enable sustainable investment in social protection.

Against this backdrop, the conference seeks to confront the tension between the ambitious vision of universal social protection and a context of growing needs, persistent and rising inequalities, multiple crises and transformations, constrained financing and shifting geopolitical realities. It aims to take stock of this evolving landscape and contribute to rebuilding a compelling, forward-looking narrative for social protection — one that is adapted to current global transformations, demonstrates the critical contribution of social protection to reducing inequalities and advancing social justice, and capable of mobilizing renewed political commitment.

Agenda

Time	Subject
08.30–09.30	**Registration**
09.30–09.45	**Opening** **Ms Valérie Schmitt,** Chief of the Universal Social Protection Branch, ILO **Mr Christopher Forst,** Director Geneva Office, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung **Ms Adea Kryeziu**, Lead External Partnerships, Social Policy Global Practice, World Bank
09.45–10.15	**Keynote conversation: Advancing social justice: Universal social protection in a changing geopolitical landscape** Social issues are taking a back-seat again in development and political narratives as national interest and defence spending are moved to the fore. How can "the social" be put back in the centre while also ensuring the necessary economic growth? How can the investment case for social protection be made in a more forceful way? What space is there to advance the objective of universal social protection in the current political landscape? **Mr Lucas Chancel**, Co-Director, World Inequality Lab, Paris School of Economics (online) **Ms Jayati Ghosh**, Professor of Economics, University of Massachusetts Amherst and Co-chair of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation (online)
10.15–10.45	**Panel discussion** Moderator: **Ms Shahra Razavi**, Director, Labour and Social Protection Department, ILO **Mr Peter Ombasa,** Assistant Director, National Social Protection Secretariat (NSPS), Kenya **Mr Eric Mwezi Manzi,** Deputy General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) **Mr Antoine Fontaine**, Senior Advisor for the Cambodian Federation of Employers and Business Associations (CAMFEBA) **Ms Wanga Zembe-Mkabile,** Chief Scientist, South African Medical School (online)
10.45–11.15	**Coffee break**
11.15–12.30	**Building social protection systems: fostering sustainability, solidarity, resilience, social inclusion and supporting decent work** Persistent informality, environmental crises, digitalization and new forms of work have spurred new debates about the role of social protection, ranging from proposals for a universal basic income to a reinvigorated role for social insurance, or those advocating for eco-social solutions. Some think that new technologies and big data offer unique opportunities for the formalization of enterprises and employment, allowing greater reliance on those with contributory capacity to pay for social insurance. Others point to the need to offer sustainable and equitable solutions that facilitate pathways into decent work with adequate social protection. The panel will discuss extending social protection to those not yet adequately covered and building bridges between social assistance and social insurance with a view to reaching universal social protection. Moderator: **Ms Shea McClanahan**, Senior Officer in Social Security and Social Policies, ISSA **Mr Abdur Rahim Khan**, Additional Secretary and Head of Social Security Unit in Ministry of Labour & Employment (MoLE), Bangladesh (online) **Ms Ghislaine Saizonou**, Programme Coordinator, African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) (online) **Mr Leopold Bodo,** Permanent Secretary of the Employment and Labour Relations Commission of the General Confederation of Businesses of Côte d'Ivoire (CGECI) (online) **Ms Renata Nowak-Garmer**, Social Protection Programme Director, WIEGO

Time	Subject
12.30–12.40	**Group Photo**
12.40–14.00	**Lunch**
14.00–15.30	**Formulating and implementing national social protection policies in a changing world** Policy space for social (protection) issues is shrinking not only at the global, but also at the national level, with a renewed race to the bottom regarding social protection and environmental standards and stronger constraints on fiscal space, and the erosion of democratic values and human rights. At the same time, national social protection systems are more important than ever as a precondition for sustainable economic and social development, and a cornerstone for social inclusion and resilience in a rapidly evolving global context. How can countries formulate and implement their national social protection policies as a foundation for social inclusion (and economic prosperity, decent work and social justice through social dialogue and democratic deliberation in this context? Moderator: **Mr Charles Knox Vydmanov**, Social Policy Specialist (Inclusive Social Protection – Disability), UNICEF **Ms Veronika Wodsak**, Social Protection Policy Specialist, ILO **Ms Sarah Coll-Black**, Adaptive Social Protection Lead, World Bank (online) **Mr Chea Vanara**, Head of the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit at the UHC Secretariat, Cambodia **Ms Smritee Lama**, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, Nepal **Mr Guido Ricci**, Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras (CACIF), Guatemala (online) **Ms Priscilla Gavi**, Executive Director, HelpAge, Zimbabwe
15.30–15.50	**Coffee break**
15.50–16.55	**Closing panel – Who can do what when and how?** What are concrete next steps for the USP2030 partnerships, for the UN, for donors, for governments, for social partners, for civil society to support a reinvigoration of the goal of reaching universal social protection? Moderator: **Mr Jonas Becker**, Policy Adviser Decent Work, Just Economy and Just Transition, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung **Mr Peter Ombasa,** Assistant Director, National Social Protection Secretariat (NSPS), Kenya **Ms Beatrice di Padua**, Economic and Social Policy Advisor, ITUC **Mr Pierre Vincensini**, Special Advisor, IOE **Mr Jamele Rigolini,** Senior Advisor, Social Protection and Labour, World Bank (online) **Mr Tim Conway**, Senior Social Protection Advisor, FCDO (online) **Ms Renata Nowak-Garmer**, Social Protection Programme Director, WIEGO
16:55–17:00	**Closing Remarks** – **Ms Valérie Schmitt,** Chief of the Universal Social Protection Branch, ILO
17:15–18:30	**Cocktail**