

NPC Advisory on Establishing a Social Protection Floor for South Africa

Integrating a Social Protection Floor into South Africa's National Development Framework

The National Development Plan (NDP) has prioritised social protection as a critical intervention that can be used to improve the quality of life of South Africans through eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, and addressing high unemployment rates. As such, establishing a social protection floor (SPF) for the country is a policy and planning focus area for the National Planning Commission (NPC). The concept is rooted in the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Recommendation No. 202, which is a nationally defined set of basic social security guarantees intended to ensure that people have access to essential health care and to basic income security, which will collectively secure effective access to goods and services over the life cycle (ILO, 2012). In addition, social protection is a constitutional right (Republic of South Africa, 1996) and, as a concept employed in the NDP, has preventive and protective functions. It benefits and services people at socio-economic risk and in poverty throughout their life cycles. Such benefits can then provide a stabiliser in times of economic and social crises and thus prevent people from falling into deeper poverty. A third function of social protection is the potential it has to promote and enable people to participate in community and wider activities. This resonates with the Enhancing Quality of Life workstream's human capability approach, a framework for human development that defines well-being in terms of individuals' real freedoms to live lives they have reason to value. (Sen, 1985).

Approach

In March 2025, the Black Sash, working alongside the NPC and the ILO, convened a national dialogue to construct a working definition for an SPF in South Africa. This advisory note, which aims to embed an SPF into national policy and legislative frameworks, is informed by the report from that strategic engagement, as well as the roundtable discussions that were held with the Human Sciences Research Council and the ILO in 2024.

Framing Deprivation in South Africa

Food insecurity

The nature and depth of deprivation in South Africa demand a coordinated and systemic response. More than 11.9 million citizens remain unemployed or are discouraged work seekers (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2025), and over 62.7% of the population lives below the poverty line (World Bank, 2024). Evidence from the General Household Survey (GHS) demonstrates that food insecurity has become chronic, with 3,7 million households experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity (GHS, 2024). Households led by women, in particular black African women, are more susceptible to experiencing both moderate and severe food insecurity.

Housing

Shelter provides for the basic human need for physical security. The features of the dwellings provide an indication of the quality of life and well-being of their household members. Although 84% of South African households live in formal structures (GHS, 2024), 12% live in informal dwellings, with 4% in traditional dwellings. Households that live in formal dwellings are most common in Limpopo (95,3%) and Mpumalanga (90,6%). The Western Cape, a province with the highest inequality rate in the country, has the highest percentage of households that live in informal dwellings at almost 19% and North West at 17%. Traditional dwellings were most common in the Eastern Cape (17,7%) and KwaZulu-Natal (10,3%). Such informal dwellings rarely have running water or sanitation.

There has been an improvement in the percentage of households that received some form of government housing subsidy from 5,6% in 2002 to 12,9% in 2024 (Stats SA, 2024). A notably higher percentage of female-headed households (15,3%) than male-headed households (11,0%) received subsidies (Statistics South Africa, 2025). This resonates with government policies that give preference to households headed by individuals from vulnerable groups, including females and individuals with disabilities. However, as a result of the concerns raised by community groups about the quality of state-provided housing, an analysis on the extent and nature of the construction inadequacy experienced by households was conducted. Findings were that 7,6% of households that lived in subsidised dwellings reported weak or very weak roofs, while 7,1% reported weak or very weak walls. Responses varied across provinces (GHS, 2024). Households in the Northern Cape were generally least satisfied with the quality of walls and roofs (11,0% and 12,0%, respectively), while those in Gauteng complained least about the state of their dwellings' walls (3,8%) and roofs (4,3%).

Water and Sanitation

According to the 2024 GHS, 55,2% of households in South Africa experienced water interruptions in 2024. Weekly water interruptions, 13,9% national average, were most common in Mpumalanga (39,4%), KwaZulu-Natal (28,5%) and Limpopo (26,0%) and least common in the Western Cape (0,8%). Water interruptions were most common in Nelson Mandela Bay (40,3%), which is almost six times more common than in Cape Town (6,9%). About 84,4% of households believed that their water was safe to drink, while 85,0% of

households stated that their drinking water was free from any smell. These were most common in the Western Cape (90,2%) and Gauteng (89,7%), and least common in the Northern Cape (70,4%).

Environmental hygiene plays an essential role in the prevention of many diseases. It also impacts on the natural environment and the preservation of important natural assets, such as water resources. Proper sanitation is one of the key elements in improving environmental hygiene. Nationally, the percentage of households with access to improved sanitation increased from 61,7% in 2002 to 83,1% in 2024 (GHS, 2024). Even with such improvement, a considerable number of people remain without proper sanitation. This inadequacy disproportionately affects the health, safety, and opportunities of women and girls. Sanitation for women and girls is crucial, as inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities can lead to health issues like reproductive infections and force them to walk long distances for water, which increases their risk of violence and reduces time for education and work (GHS, 2024). Providing safe and gender-sensitive sanitation and hygiene services is essential for women's overall well-being and empowerment.

The Importance of Basic Income

The NPC and UNICEF cost of living research collaboration findings for the 2011-2023 period paint a nuanced picture of progress amid enduring socio-economic challenges (UNICEF, 2024). While poverty rates in 2023 were broadly similar to those in 2011 across demographic groupings, this similarity concealed the initial reduction in the early 2010s and subsequent (poverty rate) increase, with marginal improvements observed since. This instability demonstrates the hardship to which low-income households, particularly those with children, are exposed. The report illustrates that employment is key in poverty alleviation, and that the wages of the employed are often enough to ensure that households are not poor, albeit real wages declined over the period, contracting by an average of 0.3% per annum (UNICEF, 2024). It reiterates the value of skill and specialised education for articulation into the labour market, with the value of secondary education in the labour market diminishing.

In terms of household income, the composition has remained largely unchanged over the period. Wages and salaries account for nine-tenths, confirming the importance of labour market income for escaping poverty. Poor households continue to rely heavily on grants (UNICEF, 2024) while wealthier households depend on earnings from labour. This reliance on labour income means that poor households cannot accumulate pension savings, thus depending on grants during retirement. While grant values are regularly adjusted to account for inflation over time, they have largely decreased in real value. Education and healthcare accessibility face mounting challenges due to rising costs and resource constraints, even in the context of non-school fee-paying schools and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. The education gap has widened, and public health facilities are increasingly overburdened.

Food affordability has deteriorated, with poorer households more susceptible to food insecurity. Housing trends reflect ongoing socioeconomic divisions, with a shift towards urban living and formal dwellings. While access to basic services expanded, quality declined,

particularly impacting low-income communities. Urban sprawl and inadequate public transport exacerbate living expenses for low-income groups. Cost of living, driven by an average inflation rate of 5.2%, saw price increases for essentials like education, food, and transport far exceeding the national average, straining household budgets. Although the provision of free basic services reduces pressure on poor households, there has been a scaling back of services over the 2011-2023 period.

Necessity of the SPF

The proposed social protection floor for South Africa is built around three core elements:

- Basic income security,
- Universal access to healthcare, and
- Guaranteed access to basic services.

Each responds directly to a dimension of deprivation that continues to undermine social and economic development. Basic income security ensures that no person falls below a nationally defined standard of living. It seeks to guarantee an adequate level of income support for children, for adults who are unable to secure employment, and for older persons. This measure is intended not only to reduce poverty but also to enable active participation in society and the economy.

Access to essential healthcare represents the second pillar. It aims to provide all South Africans with equitable access to quality health services, protecting individuals and families from catastrophic health costs and ensuring that healthcare does not remain a privilege.

The third element, universal access to basic services, encompasses access to clean water, sanitation, education, energy, and social care. This component recognises that income alone cannot overcome structural deprivation, and that the provision of quality services is foundational to human dignity and long-term social mobility.

Given the high levels of poverty in the country, nearly half of South Africans rely on grants; however, both the Child Support Grant and the Social Relief of Distress grant fall below the food poverty threshold. These conditions are exacerbated by long-term economic stagnation, deindustrialisation, and austerity-driven fiscal policies, which, in sum, have eroded the state's developmental capacity. Together, they reveal not only an economic failure but also a moral one: A society unable to ensure a basic standard of dignity for all.

The SPF must be understood as more than a safety net; it is the scaffolding of a just society. By guaranteeing access to healthcare, nutrition, education, and income security, the SPF would enable every person to participate meaningfully in the economy and social community life. Through ensuring universal access to goods and services necessary for the protection of human dignity, social participation, and economic inclusion, implementation of the SPF will

redefine social protection from a discretionary welfare measure into a universal social right that supports human capabilities and economic inclusion.

The NDP provides evidence and an analysis that highlights how the distortions of colonialism, together with race and gender exploitations under apartheid, trapped the majority of black African people in poverty. The provision of essential basic services and benefits to black people was either non-existent or inequitable, with people in rural areas, the former homelands, and informal and peri-urban areas particularly deprived. The denial of essential services such as water, electricity, transport, waged income, food, quality education and healthcare trapped people in intergenerational poverty. In order to address these structural roots of poverty and inequality, the NPC focused its policy and planning attention on clarifying the essential elements that together provide the initial conditions that give the poorest people in the country the building blocks to build their capabilities to use opportunities to integrate into the economic and social system.

Call to Action

South Africa stands at a critical juncture in redefining its approach to poverty, inequality, and social inclusion. Despite a social assistance system that reaches millions, deep structural challenges persist. The Gini coefficient remains elevated at 0.63 as of 2023 (Stats SA, 2025), reflecting enduring inequality. Although nearly half of the population receives non-contributory social grants, unemployed, able-bodied adults remain largely excluded from meaningful support. Current policy frameworks treat poverty as a series of temporary contingencies rather than as a systemic crisis requiring coordinated structural reform.

At the heart of this challenge lies the question of equity, particularly gender equity. Women's unpaid care work sustains households and the economy, yet it remains undervalued and unsupported. Recognising and redistributing this care responsibility through gender-responsive budgeting and equitable fiscal policy is essential not only for advancing social justice but also for strengthening economic resilience. Investment in care infrastructure, such as childcare, eldercare, and community health services, is both a moral and economic imperative, forming the invisible backbone of national productivity and growth.

South Africa must move from diagnosing deprivation to articulating an actionable, rights-based social protection framework. The SPF offers such a framework: A set of guarantees that ensure access to basic income, healthcare, and essential services. The time has come for political commitment, institutional coordination, and fiscal reprioritisation to turn this framework into a lived reality for all South Africans.

Recommendations

Achieving an effective and inclusive SPF requires deliberate and coordinated action across policy, governance, and fiscal domains. To do this, the SPF must be clearly defined and institutionalised. A shared national understanding of what the SPF entails is absent, with limited coherence across government and social partners. A national SPF alliance should, therefore, be formalised, bringing together government, civil society, organised labour, and research institutions to define the framework and its thresholds. This alliance should commission targeted research on key thematic areas (basic income, nutrition, healthcare, education, and basic services) and prepare consolidated inputs for the Presidency's 2026 National Dialogue on Social Protection to inform implementation in the long term. In the medium term (2026-2029), efforts ought to focus on capacity-building and legislative reform. This is envisaged to include developing a knowledgeable and active cohort of community advocates, forging media partnerships to drive public engagement, and pursuing strategic action that amends the Social Assistance Act and National Health Act. These efforts should culminate in the drafting of model SPF legislation, co-created through collaborative and inclusive national convenings.

Over the long term, institutional mechanisms must be established to sustain delivery and accountability. The creation of a National Social Registry and a Social Protection Card will enable transparent, integrated, and efficient access to benefits and work activation programmes. The Digital Innovation in the Public Sector (DIPS) programme, spearheaded by the Presidency, ought to play a critical role in this respect. Ultimately, the SPF should be enshrined as a legal and constitutional obligation, guaranteeing a minimum standard of living and universal access to essential services.

For the SPF to succeed, South Africa must align social and economic policy within a single developmental framework. Fiscal policy should be reprioritised toward social investment and gender equity, ensuring that budgetary decisions actively reduce inequality rather than entrench it. A unified, integrated benefits delivery system must be developed to enhance efficiency and reduce exclusion. Gender-responsive budgeting must be institutionalised to guarantee that public resources promote fairness and sustainability. The effects of climate change on vulnerable groups must be considered. Above all, this process must be anchored in continuous social dialogue and participatory engagement between government, civil society, and social partners. Only through such collective commitment can the SPF move from policy aspiration to social transformation.

Conclusion

The SPF represents a transformative opportunity to reimagine South Africa's social contract. It is not merely a policy proposal, but a constitutional imperative rooted in the principles of dignity, equality, and justice. Embedding the SPF within the national development framework will shift social protection from a discretionary privilege to a guaranteed right. By investing in people, redistributing care responsibilities, and aligning fiscal and social policy toward inclusion, the SPF can lay the foundation for a more equitable and resilient democracy. In

addition to these functions, social protection measures have transformative potential because, as individuals and households improve their conditions, they are better able to influence the change of oppressive power relations and make choices that generate social and economic developmental impacts.

References

Black Sash, 2025. *Social Protection Floor: Convening in South Africa*, Cape Town: The Black Sash Trust.

International Organisation of Employers, 2012. *IOE guide for employers on ILO recommendation 202 (2012) on social protection floors*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/ilo/2012/en/122544> [Accessed 28 October 2025].

National Planning Commission and UNICEF South Africa, 2025. *Trends in the cost of living in South Africa between 2011 and 2023*, s.l.: UNICEF.

National Planning Commission, 2024. *Trends in the Cost of Living in South Africa*, Cape Town : Development Policy Research Unit, School of economics, Univeristy of Cape Town.

Republic of South Africa, 1996. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Sen, A., 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press.

Statistics South Africa, 2025. *General Household Survey (2024)*, Pretoria: Republic of South Africa.

World Bank, 2024. *Macro Poverty Outlook for South Africa : April 2024 (English)*. [Online] Available at: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099613104052410927> [Accessed 28 October 2025].