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THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION AND ITS INTERRELATIONSHIP WITH SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. This paper examines the theoretical foundations of social protection and assesses the extent to which social protection systems contribute to sustainable economic development, using Uzbekistan as a case study. Social protection is generally divided into three main components: social insurance, social assistance, and social services. Each component addresses specific social and economic risks and, together, contributes to household income security. The paper reviews the economic role of these instruments through welfare state theory and the capability approach and analyses developments in Uzbekistan since the reform programme began in 2017. Official statistics indicate that the national poverty rate declined from 17.0 percent in 2021 to 8.9 percent in 2024, while real GDP grew by approximately 6 percent annually over the same period. World Bank estimates suggest that, without social benefits, the poverty rate in 2024 would have been 9.5 percent rather than 8.9 percent, indicating that social transfers reduced poverty by approximately 0.6 percentage points. At the same time, a significant share of household income growth coincided with a substantial increase in remittance inflows, which rose from about 13 percent of GDP in 2021 to approximately 21 percent in 2022. Income inequality also increased during 2022–2023, limiting the poverty-reducing effect of economic growth. The paper concludes that social protection in Uzbekistan has primarily performed a stabilising and protective function, while its importance increases in the context of volatile external income sources and unequal distribution of economic gains.

Keywords: social protection, sustainable development, welfare state, poverty reduction, human capital, Uzbekistan.

Annotatsiya. Mazkur tezisda ijtimoiy himoyaning nazariy asoslari o‘rganilib, ijtimoiy himoya tizimlarining barqaror iqtisodiy rivojlanishga qay darajada hissa qo‘shishi O‘zbekiston misolida baholanadi. Ijtimoiy himoya odatda uchta asosiy tarkibiy qismga ajratiladi: ijtimoiy sug‘urta, ijtimoiy yordam va ijtimoiy xizmatlar. Har bir tarkibiy qism muayyan ijtimoiy-iqtisodiy xatarlarni kamaytirishga qaratilgan bo‘lib, ular birgalikda uy xo‘jaliklari daromadlari barqarorligini ta’minlashga xizmat qiladi. Tezisda ushbu vositalarning iqtisodiy roli farovonlik davlati nazariyasi va imkoniyatlar yondashuvi asosida ko‘rib chiqilib, 2017-yildan buyon O‘zbekistonda amalga oshirilgan islohotlar tahlil qilinadi. Rasmiy statistik ma’lumotlarga ko‘ra, milliy kambag‘allik darajasi 2021-yildagi 17,0 foizdan 2024-yilda 8,9 foizgacha pasaygan, real YAIM esa shu davrda yiliga o‘rtacha qariyb 6 foizga o‘sgan. Jahon banki hisob-kitoblariga ko‘ra, ijtimoiy nafaqalar mavjud bo‘lmaganida, 2024-yilda kambag‘allik darajasi 8,9 foiz o‘rniga 9,5 foizni tashkil etgan bo‘lardi, bu esa ijtimoiy transfertlar kambag‘allik darajasini taxminan 0,6 foiz punktga kamaytirganini ko‘rsatadi. Shu bilan birga, uy xo‘jaliklari daromadlari o‘sishining muhim qismi pul o‘tkazmalari hajmining sezilarli oshishi bilan bir davrga to‘g‘ri kelgan bo‘lib, ularning YAIMdagi ulushi 2021-yildagi qariyb 13 foizdan 2022-yilda taxminan 21 foizgacha oshgan. 2022–2023-yillarda daromadlar tengsizligining ortishi ham iqtisodiy o‘sishning kambag‘allikni qisqartirishga ta’sirini cheklagan. Tadqiqot natijalariga ko‘ra, O‘zbekistonda ijtimoiy himoya, avvalo, barqarorlashtiruvchi va himoya qiluvchi funksiyani bajargan bo‘lib, tashqi daromad manbalarining o‘zgaruvchanligi hamda iqtisodiy o‘sish natijalarining notekis taqsimlanishi sharoitida uning ahamiyati yanada ortadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: ijtimoiy himoya, barqaror rivojlanish, farovonlik davlati, kambag‘allikni qisqartirish, inson kapitali, O‘zbekiston.

INTRODUCTION

Social protection covers the public measures that protect people against loss of income from unemployment, illness, old age, disability, or poverty. Its purpose is partly ethical and partly economic. On one side, it rests on ideas of solidarity and basic rights, set out in instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the other side, it changes how households consume, save, and invest in education and health, which is why economists treat it as more than welfare spending [2].

Uzbekistan is a useful case for studying this relationship. The Constitution adopted in 2023 defines the country as a social state and assigns the government responsibility for a decent standard of living. Since 2017, the government has run a series of reforms covering pensions, targeted allowances for low-income families, and the mahalla-based social work system. Over the same years, poverty fell sharply and growth stayed close to 6 percent [6].

Two things are less clear. First, how much of the poverty decline can actually be attributed to social protection rather than to wages, remittances, or employment growth. Second, whether these transfers have kept the growth inclusive. Existing work on Uzbekistan tends to describe the reforms without separating these channels, and the international literature on social protection and growth rarely covers Central Asian transition economies [4], [5]. This paper addresses that gap. It sets out the theoretical case for social protection as an economic instrument, then tests it against Uzbek data for 2021 to 2024, distinguishing what the transfers contributed from what other income sources contributed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Welfare state theory and the economic function of protection

The modern understanding of social protection grew out of welfare state theory. Wilensky linked the expansion of social spending to industrialisation and rising national income, while Esping-Andersen [1] classified welfare systems by the degree to which they free individuals from dependence on the market. In both accounts, the state is not simply redistributing income. It is changing the terms on which people participate in the economy.

Sen approached the same question differently, arguing that development should be measured by the capabilities people actually have. From this angle, transfers that keep children in school or households out of medical debt expand economic capacity rather than consume it. The two traditions reach a similar practical conclusion: social protection can be productive, not only protective.

Social protection as investment

Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler [2] proposed a widely used framework distinguishing protective, preventive, promotive, and transformative functions. The promotive and transformative categories matter most here, since they cover measures that raise incomes and change the structures that keep people poor. Barrientos reviewed evidence from middle-income countries and found that regular, predictable transfers allow households to take on more productive risk, for example, by investing in livestock or small business inputs.

Cash transfer programmes provide the clearest evidence. Brazil's Bolsa Família is the most studied case. Evaluations attribute to it a substantial share of the country's poverty decline in the 2000s, along with better school attendance and child health outcomes. Similar results appear in Mexico and South Africa, though effects on aggregate growth are generally modest and depend on how the programmes are financed.

The International Labour Organization has pushed this thinking into policy through the Social Protection Floors Recommendation No. 202 [3], which frames basic income security as both a right and a condition for inclusive development. The 2030 Agenda takes the same position, with Target 1.3 calling for nationally appropriate social protection systems for all [3].

Human capital and the growth channel

The link between social protection and growth is often traced through human capital. Health and education spending raise labour productivity, and the effect compounds over time. The World Bank [5] argues that protection systems support this process by preventing households from cutting food, schooling, or medical care during shocks. Where such coping strategies are common, a shock in one year can lower earnings for a generation.

The evidence is not uniformly positive. Alderman and Yemtsov note that poorly targeted programmes can weaken work incentives or crowd out more productive public spending, and that financing matters as much as design. This qualification is relevant for Uzbekistan, where social spending competes with substantial infrastructure and subsidy commitments.

Social protection in Uzbekistan

Research on Uzbekistan is still limited. The system inherited from the Soviet period was broad in coverage but weakly targeted, with benefits spread across categories rather than concentrated on the poor. It was also shrinking in relative terms: total social protection expenditure fell from 11.6 percent of GDP in 2012 to about 5.9 percent in 2018, and social insurance alone accounted for 83 percent of that spending, leaving social assistance comparatively small [5]. Reforms after 2017 moved toward targeting, most visibly through the development of a single registry of beneficiaries [4]. A joint assessment by the ILO, UNICEF, and the World Bank [4] reached a similar conclusion, noting that the system remains weighted toward contributory schemes and that coverage of households outside formal employment is the principal gap.

What this literature does not do is quantify how much the transfers contributed relative to other income sources. That is the question the present paper takes up.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative case study supported by descriptive secondary data. The approach suits a research question about mechanisms in a single country over a short period, where the number of observations is too small for econometric estimation.

Two kinds of material are used. The first is documentary: the 2023 Constitution, the Development Strategy for 2017 to 2021, the National Development Strategy 2030, and ILO Recommendation No. 202 [3]. These establish the legal and policy framework. The second is statistical. Indicators on poverty, inequality, growth, unemployment, and public spending were taken from the World Bank Poverty and Equity data, World Development Indicators, and reporting by the Center for Economic Research and Reforms based on the national Household Budget Survey.

The analysis covers 2021 to 2024. This period was chosen because the national poverty series is methodologically consistent from 2021 onward, following the revision of poverty measurement carried out jointly with the World Bank. Earlier figures are not directly comparable. Indicators were assembled into a single table, read against the timing of the reforms, and then compared with the decomposition of poverty change by income source published by the World Bank, which makes it possible to separate the contribution of social benefits from wage, business, and remittance income.

The method has clear limits. Descriptive data cannot establish causality, and four years is a short window for effects that work through education and health. The published decomposition does not separate remittance income from domestic wages, which restricts what can be said about the source of the income growth. There is also simultaneity because poverty reduction itself changes benefit caseloads and the tax base. The findings should therefore be read as evidence consistent with a mechanism rather than as an estimate of its size.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The structure of social protection

Social protection systems are conventionally built from three components. Social insurance is contributory and covers pensions, unemployment benefits, and sickness coverage, spreading risk across a working life. Social assistance is tax-financed and directed at households below a defined income threshold. Social services, mainly health and education, are provided to the population as a whole. Uzbekistan operates all three, though the balance among them has shifted since 2017 toward targeted assistance [5].

The distinction matters for the economic argument. Insurance smooths income over time for people already in formal employment. Assistance raises the income floor for those outside it. Services build capacity that neither of the other two can substitute for. A system weak in one component will produce different results from one that is balanced, which is part of why cross-country evidence on growth effects is mixed.

Evidence from Uzbekistan, 2021 to 2024

Table 1 brings together the main indicators for the period under review.

Table 1

Selected social and economic indicators, Uzbekistan, 2021 to 2024[1]

Indicator	2021	2022	2023	2024
Poverty rate, national line (%)	17.0	14.1	11.0	8.9
Poverty rate, $3.65/day 2017 PPP (%)	n/a	5.0	4.5	n/a
Gini index	n/a	31.2	34.5	n/a
Real GDP growth (%)	7.4	5.7	6.0	6.7
Remittance inflows (% of GDP)	13.0	20.6	17.7	13.7
Unemployment rate (%)	n/a	8.9	8.1	n/a
Public education spending (% of GDP)	n/a	n/a	5.5	n/a

The poverty series is the clearest result. The national rate fell by 8.1 percentage points in three years, from 17.0 percent to 8.9 percent, which means roughly 2.9 million people moved above the poverty line [7]. Growth held near 6 percent throughout, and unemployment declined. On the surface, this looks like a straightforward case of social protection and growth reinforcing each other.

Two qualifications need to be made before this reading is accepted. The first concerns the poverty line. The national

1 Sources: World Bank (2024a, 2025); Center for Economic Research and Reforms (2025). n/a indicates the figure is not published for that year on a comparable basis.

threshold is relatively low, at roughly 669,000 soum a month, or about 51 US dollars, so relatively small income gains move large numbers of people across it. Measured instead at the international lower-middle-income line of 3.65 dollars a day in 2017 PPP, the same years show a much flatter path, from 5.0 percent in 2022 to 4.5 percent in 2023 [6]. Both series are valid, but they answer different questions, and the size of the improvement depends on which one is used.

The second concerns attribution. World Bank analysis of the household survey attributes most of the decline to labour income. Between 2022 and 2023, wage growth alone accounted for about 1.6 percentage points of the fall, and from 2023 to 2024, growth in business, wage, and agricultural income together explained more than 90 percent of the reduction [7]. Social benefits also cushioned incomes: the same source estimates that without them, the 2024 poverty rate would have been 9.5 percent rather than 8.9 percent. This is a static comparison for a single year and should not be read as the contribution of benefits to the multi-year decline, since benefits were also being paid in 2021. What it does show is that in 2024, the transfer system was holding roughly 0.6 percent of the population above the line.

Keeping 0.6 percent of the population above the poverty line represents a meaningful result, and it reaches the households least able to absorb a shock. But it does suggest that social protection has worked alongside the labour market rather than ahead of it.

The remittance channel

Attributing the decline to labour income raises a further question because, for Uzbekistan, a large part of household labour income is earned abroad. Remittance inflows rose from about 13 percent of GDP in 2021 to roughly 21 percent in 2022, with transfers from Russia accounting for the bulk of the increase, before easing to about 18 percent in 2023 and 14 percent in 2024 as the initial surge unwound (Figure 1). This is one of the largest remittance movements recorded in the region over so short a period, and its peak falls within the years when poverty was declining fastest.

The timing matters for interpretation. If a substantial share of the income growth behind the poverty decline arrived from abroad, then the observed improvement may reflect factors beyond developments in the domestic labour market and social policy alone. This may indicate that external transfers temporarily made a substantial contribution to household income growth. Inflows eased in 2023 as the initial surge unwound, which is consistent with this reading.

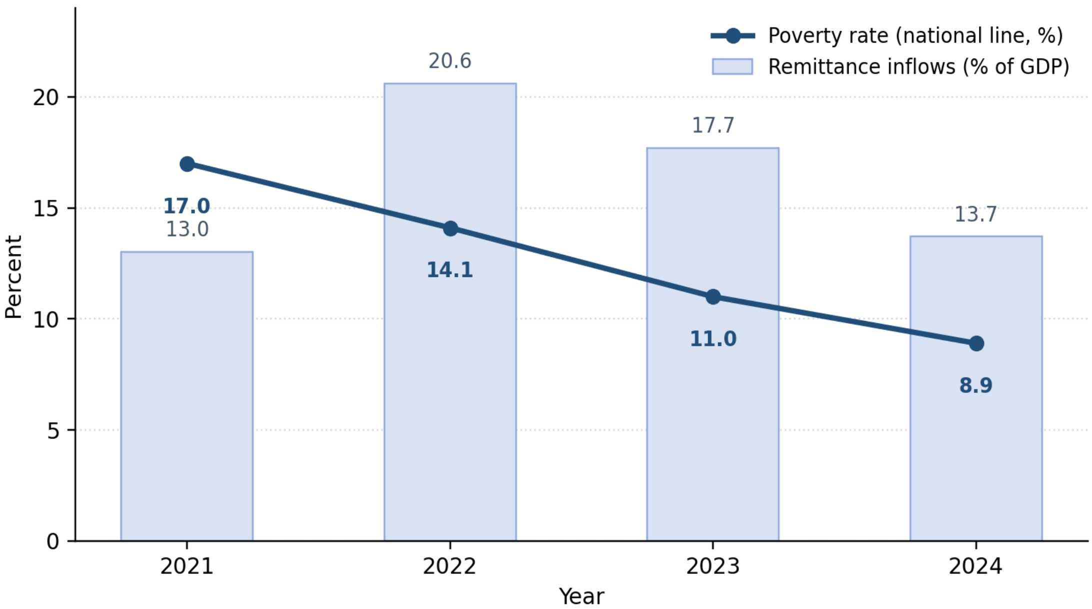

Figure 1. Poverty rate and remittance inflows, Uzbekistan, 2021 to 2024. [2]

The published decomposition does not separate domestic wage growth from remittance income, so the relative weight of the two cannot be measured here. What can be observed is the scale of the flows themselves. At their peak, remittances were equivalent to about a fifth of GDP, an order of magnitude larger than the social protection budget, suggesting that the external income channel may have made a comparatively larger contribution to household income growth during this period than the social transfer system. It does, however, change the policy reading. Gains that rest on an external and volatile source are less secure than gains produced by domestic employment, which strengthens rather than weakens the argument for a functioning domestic safety net. Remittances are also unevenly distributed across households, since migration is concentrated in particular regions and income groups, so their poverty-reducing effect will not reach everyone

2 **Source: compiled by the authors based on [6] and [7].**

the labour market misses.

Social protection expenditure, coverage, and outcomes

A further piece of evidence sits on the expenditure side. Total social protection spending fell from 11.6 percent of GDP in 2012 to about 5.9 percent in 2018, with social insurance absorbing 83 percent of the remainder [5]. Spending therefore contracted sharply as a share of the economy during years when poverty was falling. Two readings are possible. The earlier system may have been broad but poorly targeted, so that a smaller and better-directed budget achieved similar or better outcomes. Alternatively, the observed poverty decline may have been driven predominantly by factors other than changes in social protection expenditure.

The composition figure is the more useful one for policy. If social insurance takes 83 percent of expenditure, then the part of the system that reaches households outside formal employment is small. The joint ILO, UNICEF, and World Bank assessment [4] points to the same imbalance: the system is weighted toward contributory schemes, and pensions do reduce poverty but reach a population defined by contribution history rather than by current need.

Inequality and the distribution of growth

Absolute poverty fell while the Gini index rose, from 31.2 in 2022 to 34.5 in 2023 [6]. The two are not in contradiction, since one measures the share of people below a fixed threshold and the other measures dispersion across the whole distribution, and they commonly diverge during a growth episode. What matters here is the pattern behind the Gini. Over that year, the richest fifth of the population saw incomes rise by about 33 percent, while the poorest fifth gained 11 percent, largely because skills shortages pushed up wages in services and technology faster than elsewhere.

The consequence is measurable. World Bank estimates suggest poverty would have fallen by a further 2.4 percentage points over 2022 to 2023 had inequality remained stable [7]. In other words, rising inequality cancelled out a portion of the gains that growth would otherwise have delivered. This finding provides additional evidence in favour of maintaining and further improving the effectiveness of social protection mechanisms, and it supports the transformative function identified by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler [2]. Transfers that reach the bottom of the distribution do not only relieve hardship. They determine how much of aggregate growth converts into poverty reduction.

The pattern shifted in 2024, when income growth slowed but spread more evenly, with the poorest fifth gaining more than other groups, particularly in rural areas [7]. Whether this reflects the maturing of targeted programmes or a change in labour market conditions cannot be settled with the available data.

Interpretation

Taken together, the Uzbek evidence supports a qualified version of the theoretical claim. Social protection is associated with poverty reduction, and it operates alongside growth rather than against it, which is consistent with the welfare state literature and with ILO Recommendation No. 202 [3]. What the evidence does not support is the stronger claim that social protection was the main proximate driver of the decline over these years. In accounting terms, most of the movement came from labour and business income, part of it earned abroad, while transfers cushioned households that benefited less directly from labour-market income growth.

This should not be read as a causal ranking. A decomposition by income source records which component moved, not what caused it to move, and it cannot capture the indirect effects that the theoretical literature emphasises. Transfers that keep a child in school or prevent a household from selling productive assets show up years later as labour income, not as benefit income. Four years is too short a window to observe that. There is also a simultaneity problem running in the other direction, since falling poverty reduces caseloads and raises the tax base, which changes both the level and the composition of social protection spending.

This reading also explains why the international evidence is mixed. Where labour markets are absorbing workers, transfers play a supporting role, and measured growth effects are small. Where they are not, transfers carry more of the burden, and their measured effect is larger. The design question for Uzbekistan is therefore about coverage of those outside formal employment, particularly informal-sector households, which remains one of the key remaining coverage challenges [4].

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper set out to establish how far social protection contributes to sustainable economic development, using Uzbekistan between 2021 and 2024 as its case. Four findings emerge. Poverty measured at the national line fell from 17.0 percent to 8.9 percent alongside steady growth, though the improvement looks smaller at the international line. In accounting terms, most of the decline came from labour and business income rather than from transfers, while benefits held roughly 0.6 percent of the population above the line in 2024. A large share of that income growth coincided with a remittance surge that took inflows from about 13 to 21 percent of GDP in a single year, which means the gains rest partly on an external and reversible source. Finally, rising inequality in 2022 and 2023 held back poverty reduction by an estimated 2.4 percentage points.

Two implications follow, and they should be stated as implications rather than as results, since the evidence here is descriptive. First, if the recent gains were driven substantially by wages and remittances, then their durability depends on conditions the government does not control, and the importance of an effective social protection system increases when external income flows weaken. Second, the composition of spending is as relevant as its level. With social insurance absorbing the large majority of expenditure, the part of the system available to households outside formal employment is small, and this is where a significant coverage gap remains. Testing whether closing that gap would in fact yield the returns implied here requires evidence this study does not provide.

The limits should be stated plainly. The study covers four years, relies on descriptive secondary data, and cannot separate the effect of social protection from the remittance shock or from other policy changes occurring at the same time. Nor can it observe the indirect effects that operate through schooling and health over longer horizons. A firmer answer would require household-level panel data covering a period long enough to include both an expansion and a contraction in external inflows, together with a design capable of identifying causal effects. That is the natural next step for research on this question in Central Asia.

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