Rapid economic growth has led to a significant decrease in extreme poverty in China and many other parts of East Asia and the Pacific in recent decades. However, many children – especially in urban slums and underserved rural communities – remain deprived of early childhood investment, meaningful education, other basic services, and decent work opportunities. In 2012, 4.5 million children in the region aged 0 to 17 lived in households earning under US$1.90 a day.\(^1\) While 7 per cent of the total population experienced extreme poverty, nearly half (44 per cent) were living on less than US$5 a day. A World Bank analysis found that about a quarter of the population (those living on US$3.10 to US$5.50 a day) is vulnerable to falling back into poverty, and that this figure remained constant between 2002 and 2015. This confirms findings that the region remains vulnerable to poverty, economic shocks and natural disasters that threaten lives, livelihoods and assets. While Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and the Philippines remain the most exposed, the overlapping risks of low household income and exposure to disaster are prevalent right across the region.

Access to medical insurance, pensions, maternity and family allowances used to be the privilege of formal sector workers and civil servants in the region. However, the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis triggered a shift underlining the importance of social protection as a major public policy tool for stability and continued progress. Health insurance has become universal in Thailand and close to universal in China and some other countries, but coverage remains low in many others. The pension system absorbs the largest part of social protection expenditure outside health; social assistance is still of marginal importance. While family-oriented measures are becoming more widespread, they still absorb less than 0.5 per cent of GDP in most countries. Mongolia’s Child Money programme and the Philippines’ Pantawid conditional cash transfer programme stand out as having the largest coverage ratios. Indonesia also runs several child- and maternity-oriented programmes but its social protection system is fragmented, with large coverage gaps. A new trend is that unconditional or means-tested but universal child grants focusing on the early years are gaining popularity: they have been introduced or placed in the mid-term plans of Thailand, Myanmar, Viet Nam and several other countries. This reflects that fact that the life-cycle approach to social protection has been cemented in progressive national policies and regional strategic frameworks, including the 2013 ASEAN Declaration on Social Protection.

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1 World Bank, 2017: Poverty and Equity Data Portal.

[*] Children covered by social protection is from LSIS II (MICS 2017)
Driving results for children

Reducing poverty in all its dimensions will require re-thinking the decades-old development model in Asia, which centres unilaterally on private sector and/or infrastructural investment over redistributive policies targeting human capital development. Investing in the cognitive capital of young generations is central to achieving all aspects of sustainable development in the context of challenges such as the ‘middle-income trap’, demographic transition and climate change, which increasingly threaten to slow progress. UNICEF’s integrated, child-sensitive and resilience-oriented approach to social protection systems focuses on securing a context-specific, enabling policy environment, with social assistance and services that prioritize two crucial periods for optimal child development: the first 1,000 days, and adolescence. Evidence based on results, and the impact of programmes and financial investment will play a crucial advocacy and operational role in building and refining this system.

UNICEF’s work focuses on building social protection systems that are able to reach the most vulnerable children, promoting national aspirations as well as legislative and public financial management practices, with the primary objectives of strengthening equity and reducing child poverty and disparity, to enable all children to develop to their full potential. UNICEF prioritizes support to: (1) improving national policies and legal frameworks on child poverty and equity; (2) expanding and improving lifecycle- and resilience-oriented social protection programmes and systems; and (3) strengthening social protection financing.

Key programme strategies

**Systems and capacity**
- Strengthen social protection programmes and systems to: (1) ensure they support equitable access to a comprehensive set of essential social services; and (2) make them more flexible, risk-informed, adaptive and responsive to risks in order to enable families and communities to better cope with shocks.
- Prioritize the elimination of systematic exclusion of the poorest and most vulnerable among the target population of social protection programmes (‘exclusion error’).
- Strengthen capacity to effectively and efficiently manage public expenditure on social protection programmes.
- Invest in ensuring sustained and smooth income and consumption (resilience to shocks) over the life of each person, particularly during the first years of life.

**Data, evidence and knowledge**
- Generate evidence demonstrating efficiency gains from better investment in equity, human capital and cognitive and socio-emotional development.
- Produce and disseminate evidence on the impact of social protection programmes on income and multidimensional child poverty, and an equitable chance in life for all children.

**Governance, policy and budget**
- Advocate and support governments and employers to make maternity, parental and sick leave programmes and child grants an essential part of nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees, as well as strategies for human development and poverty eradication.
- Ensure that the reduction of child poverty is an explicit priority in national plans and policies as a key result indicator.
- Promote the inclusion of vulnerable households (including low income, ethnic minority and migrant status households), and address gender- and disability-related discrimination.
- Contribute to policy and budget debates on social protection and social budgeting that influence macro-level decisions affecting the lives of disadvantaged children and their families.

**Partnerships and alliances**
- Partner with other UN agencies, international financial institutions and non-governmental organizations in providing technical assistance and generating evidence.
- Jointly lead national working groups on social protection.
- Establish partnerships in the area of data collection, particularly Demographic and Health Surveys and other national surveys.