

Integrating Social Protection Policies at Community Levels for Children, Youth, and Families: Lessons from South Africa

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Introduction

Despite long-standing calls by international organizations for greater integration of social protection policies, implementation in many countries remains fragmented, poorly coordinated, and unable to meet people's needs across the life course. In much of the Global South, social protection is weakly linked to labor market support and social services (Patel, 2024). To help people navigate vulnerability, manage risks, and move out of poverty, greater policy and delivery integration is essential.

The *World Bank's 2025 State of Social Protection Report* underscores the need to harmonize the three pillars of social protection—social assistance, social insurance, and labor market programs—to help households escape poverty and seize opportunity. Similarly, the *G20 Development Working Group*, convened under South Africa's 2025 presidency, emphasized connecting social protection systems to decent work. The *International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD)*, in its 2025 Doha Declaration statement, also called for “integrated, inclusive, and gender-sensitive systems,” improved linkages with employment and social services, and stronger intersectoral collaboration.

This paper draws on lessons from South Africa's experience in implementing integrated social protection at community level for children, youth, and families—an approach vital for accelerating progress toward the SDGs.

Levels of Integration

Devereux (2023) identifies three levels of integration:

1. **Policy level** – legislative alignment across sectors and ministries. Many policies remain at this level, with large gaps between intention and practice.
2. **Program level** – collaboration in program design, budgeting, staffing, and interdepartmental coordination.
3. **Administrative level** – integration in service delivery, including shared data, digital tools, and coordination protocols that reduce silos.

True integration requires coherence across all three levels so that individuals experience seamless access to services.

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Solutions from South Africa

Two demonstration projects—the *Basic Package of Support (BPS)* for youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), and *Communities of Practice (CoP)* for child wellbeing—illustrate how local integration can be achieved.

1. Basic Package of Support for NEET Youth

An estimated one-third to two-fifths of South African youth are NEET—disconnected from education, training, or employment and often trapped in cycles of discouragement and poor mental health. The *BPS* aims to reconnect these youth to systems of opportunity through two components:

- **Outreach and coaching:** Youth workers assess individual needs, help set goals, and connect youth to appropriate services and opportunities.
- **Community of Practice:** A platform bringing together government and civil society partners to coordinate youth services and ensure no young person is turned away without referral.

Key lessons:

- Skilled frontline workers—social service professionals and paraprofessionals—are essential for helping people navigate fragmented systems and rebuild confidence.
- Collaboration depends on sustained relationship-building between actors, an often-overlooked investment.
- Lasting coordination requires formal systems—data sharing, interdepartmental protocols, and clear accountability—beyond personal relationships.

The BPS shows that integration requires both human engagement and administrative alignment to restore agency among excluded youth.

2. Communities of Practice for Child Wellbeing

This project strengthened integrated service delivery for children in early grades. While many children benefit from grants, schooling, and healthcare, these services are often poorly coordinated, and caregivers or teachers lack information about available support.

A **social worker convened teachers and nurses** to assess children’s wellbeing across six domains using a digital *Child Wellbeing Tracking Tool*, identify those at risk, and plan interventions or referrals.

Key lessons:

- Over 18 months, wellbeing indicators improved significantly. Collaboration and shared data empowered schools to plan better interventions.

- Policy frameworks exist to support integrated services, but weak implementation and human resource shortages—especially the lack of school-based social workers—undermine results.
- Success relied heavily on leadership within schools and the ability of social workers to coordinate local actors.
- Digital tools improved planning but could not replace human connection and cooperation, particularly in communities affected by the digital divide.

Conclusion

South Africa’s experience shows that effective integration of social protection begins from the bottom up. The *Community of Practice* model provides a mechanism for multi-sectoral collaboration, evidence generation, and shared accountability. Scaling such initiatives requires embedding local innovations into national systems—supported by adequate budgets, staffing, and digital infrastructure.

When policy, program, and delivery systems align, social protection moves beyond safety nets to become a catalyst for human development and social inclusion. The lessons from the *BPS* and *CoP* initiatives demonstrate that integrated, community-driven approaches can strengthen wellbeing, empower youth and families, and accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.