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MODERN TRENDS IN IMPROVING THE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. The article analyses institutional, digital and financial changes in the social protection system of Uzbekistan in 2019–2025. Drawing on legal acts and data from the Statistics Agency and the Center for Economic Research and Reforms, it traces the shift from passive benefit payments to an activating, service-oriented model. Poverty fell from 17.0% in 2021 to 5.8% in 2025, while the share of social transfers in household income declined from 18.9% to 18.2% as the shares of wages and entrepreneurial income grew. The article discusses targeting errors that may accompany stricter eligibility rules and proposes ways to reduce them.

Keywords: social protection, social state, targeted social assistance, Social Protection Single Registry, Inson social service centres, poverty, social worker, digitalisation.

Annotatsiya. Maqolada O‘zbekistonda 2019–2025-yillarda ijtimoiy himoya tizimida yuz bergan institutsional, raqamli va moliyaviy o‘zgarishlar tahlil qilingan. Me’yoriy-huquqiy hujjatlar hamda Statistika agentligi va Iqtisodiy tadqiqotlar va islohotlar markazi ma’lumotlari asosida tizimning passiv nafaqa berishdan faollashtiruvchi, xizmatlarga yo‘naltirilgan modelga o‘tishi ko‘rsatib berilgan. Kambag‘allik darajasi 2021-yildagi 17,0 foizdan 2025-yilda 5,8 foizgacha qisqargani, aholi daromadlari tarkibida ijtimoiy transfertlar ulushi 18,9 foizdan 18,2 foizga tushgani holda ish haqi va tadbirkorlik daromadi ulushi o‘sgani aniqlangan. Manzillilikni kuchaytirish bilan bog‘liq xatolik xavflari va ularni kamaytirish yo‘llari asoslangan.

Kalit so‘zlar: ijtimoiy himoya, ijtimoiy davlat, manzilli ijtimoiy yordam, Ijtimoiy himoya yagona reyestri, “Inson” ijtimoiy xizmatlar markazi, kambag‘allik, ijtimoiy xodim, raqamlashtirish.

Аннотация. В статье анализируются институциональные, цифровые и финансовые изменения системы социальной защиты Узбекистана в 2019–2025 годах. На основе нормативно-правовых актов, данных Агентства статистики и Центра экономических исследований и реформ показан переход от пассивной выплаты пособий к активизирующей модели, ориентированной на социальные услуги. Установлено, что уровень бедности снизился с 17,0% в 2021 году до 5,8% в 2025 году, а в структуре доходов населения доля социальных трансфертов уменьшилась с 18,9% до 18,2% при росте доли заработной платы и предпринимательского дохода. Обоснованы риски ошибок при усилении адресности и пути их снижения.

Ключевые слова: социальная защита, социальное государство, адресная социальная помощь, Единый реестр социальной защиты, центр социальных услуг «Инсон», бедность, социальный работник, цифровизация.

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INTRODUCTION

Social protection is one of the most sensitive obligations of any state to society: it ensures that individuals are not left without support when they face life risks such as illness, disability, old age, unemployment or the loss of a breadwinner. Today, this field is no longer limited to benefit payments. It has become a complex system interconnected with employment policy, education, healthcare and local governance. According to the latest report of the International Labour Organization, for the first time in history more than half of the world's population—52.4%—is covered by at least one social protection benefit, while approximately 3.8 billion people remain unprotected [13].

This issue is particularly important for Uzbekistan. Article 1 of the Constitution adopted in its revised form in 2023 defines the country as a sovereign, democratic, law-governed, social and secular state [1]. Once the principle of a social state was elevated to constitutional status, new requirements were placed on the social protection system: assistance should be provided according to specific needs, citizens should not have to visit multiple government offices, and the state should offer not only financial support but also services and opportunities. The Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy also sets a goal of halving poverty by 2026, underscoring the priority of this policy direction [5].

Over the past five to six years, several interconnected changes have taken place: the Unified Social Protection Registry was launched; the National Agency for Social Protection under the President and Inson social service centres in districts were established; social worker positions were introduced in mahallas (local communities); and financing arrangements were revised [2; 3; 4]. However, these reforms are often presented separately as individual events or legal instruments; insufficient attention has been paid to analysing them as a coherent process, that is, as a system of contemporary trends.

The purpose of this study is to identify current trends in improving Uzbekistan's social protection system, assess their outcomes using statistical data, and develop proposals for further development of the system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study drew on three groups of sources. The first comprised legal and regulatory documents: the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan [1]; Presidential Decrees No. PF-82 of 1 June 2023 [2] and No. PF-17 of 30 January 2025 [4]; Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 539 of 14 October 2023 [3]; the Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy [5]; and the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [6]. The second group comprised official statistics: poverty and income indicators published by the Center for Economic Research and Reforms (CERR), based on a household survey conducted by the Statistics Agency in cooperation with the World Bank [14; 15]. The 2024 survey covered more than 16,000 households, considerably more than the approximately 10,000 sampled in 2021, thereby improving the reliability of the results [14]. The third group comprised official information on the activities of the National Agency for Social Protection and analytical materials from international organisations [16–21].

The following methods were applied: comparative legal analysis of regulatory documents; a historical and chronological approach to identifying stages of reform; time-series analysis (absolute change in percentage points, relative change and average annual rate of decline); structural analysis of income composition; and comparison with international experience. The average annual rate of decline was calculated using the following formula:

$$r = [1 - (Y_n / Y_0)^{(1/n)}] \times 100\%$$

where Y_0 and Y_n represent the indicator at the beginning and end of the period, respectively, and n is the number of years in the period. The theoretical foundations were G. Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes [7], A. Sen's capability approach [8], and World Bank methodological guides on social registries and social protection delivery chains [11; 12].

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RESULTS

1. Stages of institutional and digital change. Analysis of the documents made it possible to distinguish four stages of reform (Table 1). During the first stage, the emphasis was on integrating data: while 595,000 families received benefits and financial assistance through the Unified Social Protection Registry in 2019, by the end of 2022 this number had increased almost fourfold to 2.2 million families [19]. The registry began exchanging information in real time with nearly 50 databases of ministries and agencies, laying the groundwork for automatic benefit allocation without waiting for an application [21].

Table 1. Stages of social protection system reform in Uzbekistan (2019–2025)

Stage	Main document or measure	Content and outcome
I. Data integration (2019–2022)	Introduction of the Unified Social Protection Registry	Applications, verification and payments were transferred to a unified electronic system; beneficiary families increased from 0.6 million to 2.2 million [19; 21]
II. Institutional consolidation (2023)	Presidential Decree No. PF-82 of 1 June 2023	The National Agency for Social Protection and Inson social service centres were established; fragmented programmes were consolidated into one structure [2]
III. Bringing services closer (2023–2024)	Cabinet Resolution No. 539 of 14 October 2023; unified questionnaire (from 1 June 2024)	Social workers were authorised to accept applications and psychological assistance was introduced; household expenditure began to be assessed alongside income [3; 18]
IV. Financial decentralisation (2025)	Presidential Decree No. PF-17 of 30 January 2025	30% of the funds of the Social Registers funds were allocated to Infrastructure and Social Stability funds in proportion to regional population and the number of low-income families [4; 17]

Source: Compiled by the author based on [2; 3; 4; 17; 18; 19; 21].

During the second stage, the organisational structure of the system changed fundamentally. Under Decree No. PF-82, regional departments and district-level Inson centres were established under the Agency, and institutions such as children's homes, specialised boarding schools, rehabilitation centres and prosthetics centres were transferred to their administration [2]. In 2023, Inson centres were initially launched on a pilot basis in 28 districts and cities [19]. During the third stage, assistance was brought physically closer to citizens: social workers in mahallas began accepting on-site applications for child benefits and financial assistance for low-income families, while older people living alone and persons with disabilities requiring care from others became eligible for comprehensive medical examinations at least once a year [3].

At this stage, the criteria for assessing a family's social circumstances also changed. Previously, assessment had focused mainly on income; from 2024, household expenditure was also assessed through a unified questionnaire to develop a "social profile", and all social payments were designated to be made through a "social card" [18]. Consequently, families with an established stable income were removed from the low-income category. This change was also reflected in coverage indicators (Figure 1): while 2.3 million families received assistance through the Agency and Inson centres in 2023 [20], the Low-Income Families Registry launched in 2024 under the new criteria identified 621,000 households as living below the poverty line [16].

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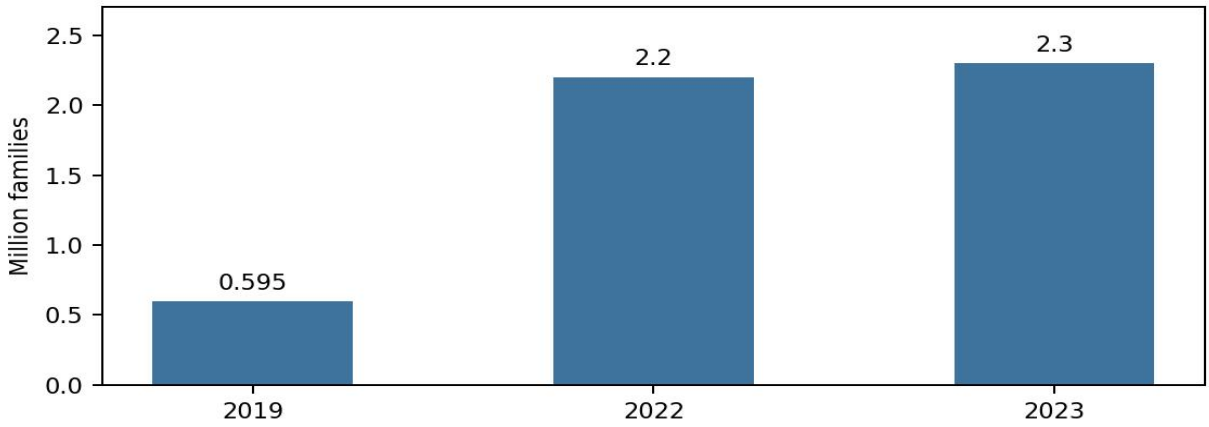


Figure 1. Number of families receiving benefits and financial assistance through the Unified Social Protection Registry, millions

Source: Compiled by the author based on [19; 20].

2. Poverty trends. The poverty rate is the broadest aggregate indicator of the effectiveness of social policy. Calculated using a methodology consistent with international standards, it declined from 17.0% in 2021 to 5.8% in 2025 (Figure 2). Over four years, the absolute decline amounted to 11.2 percentage points, the relative decline to 65.9%, and the average annual rate of decline to 23.6%. In 2024 alone, 719,000 people escaped poverty [14]; in 2025, 302,000 families were lifted out of poverty, bringing the number of people living below the poverty line down to 2.2 million [15]. In urban areas, poverty decreased from 8.6% to 5.2% [15].

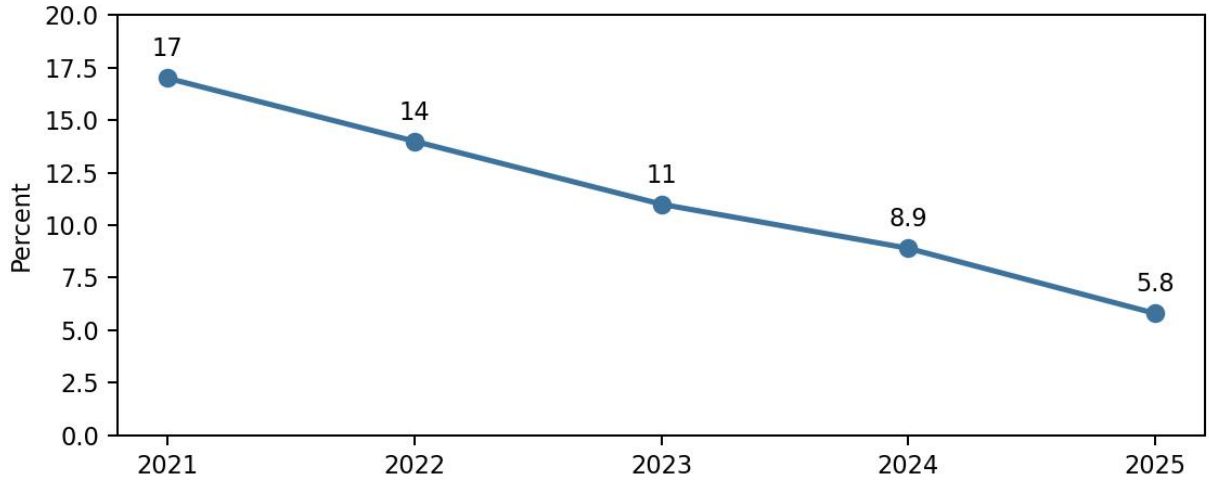


Figure 2. Poverty rate in Uzbekistan at year-end, %

Source: Data published by CERR based on the Statistics Agency and World Bank household survey [14; 15; 20].

Positive changes were also observed across regions, although progress was uneven. In 2024, the lowest poverty rate was recorded in Navoi Region (5.7%) and the highest in Khorezm Region (11.9%) [14]. The fastest reductions were observed in Bukhara, Samarkand and Namangan regions (Table 2).

Table 2. Regions with the largest reductions in poverty (2023–2024)

Region	2023, %	2024, %	Change, pp	Relative change, %
Bukhara	11.8	8.7	−3.1	−26.3

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Region				
Samarkand Region	10.5	7.5	−3.0	−28.6
Namangan Region	10.4	7.6	−2.8	−26.9
Republic of Karakalpakstan	13.6	10.8	−2.8	−20.6
Republic of Uzbekistan (total)	11.0	8.9	−2.1	−19.1

Source: Based on [14]; changes calculated by the author.

As the table shows, poverty fell faster in the regions with the largest reductions than the national average—by 20–29% in relative terms. Nevertheless, despite its rapid improvement, the Republic of Karakalpakstan remained 1.9 percentage points above the national average, demonstrating the need for a regionally differentiated approach.

3. Changes in income composition. The composition of household income provides a clearer picture of the substance of the reforms (Figure 3). In 2024, real per capita income increased by 10.7%, reaching an average of 2.1 million soums per month [14]. The share of wages in total income rose from 41.9% to 42.6%; entrepreneurial income from 21.4% to 22.9%; and agricultural and household-plot income from 9.8% to 10.7%. Conversely, the share of pensions, social assistance and subsidies fell from 18.9% to 18.2%, while the share of remittances from abroad decreased from 3.1% to 2.0% [14].

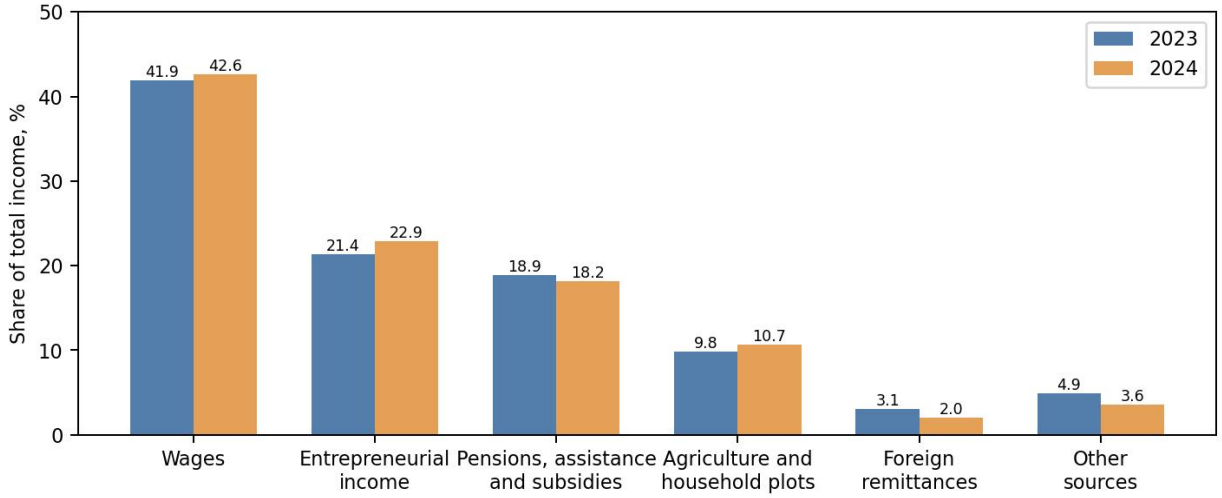


Figure 3. Composition of household income as a percentage of total income

Source: Compiled by the author based on [14].

The combined share of income earned from employment and entrepreneurship rose from 63.3% to 65.5% in one year, an increase of 2.2 percentage points. A decline in the share of transfers does not mean that their absolute value decreased, because total income grew in real terms; rather, it suggests that more families gained the ability to support themselves through their own work. According to the Agency, more than 600,000 families received 1.3 million services aimed at improving employment and income, and 73,000 family members who previously had no income began receiving formal wages [20]. In 2025, 1,435 mahallas were designated “poverty-free” areas for the first time [17].

4. System of contemporary trends. The above findings can be synthesised into seven main trends in improving the system (Table 3).

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Table 3. Contemporary trends in improving the social protection system in Uzbekistan

No.	Trend	Previous situation	Practical implementation in Uzbekistan
1	Institutional consolidation	Programmes were dispersed across ministries and agencies	National Agency for Social Protection; Inson centre in every district [2]
2	Digitalisation	Paper applications and collection of certificates	Unified Registry, Unified National Social Protection information system, mobile application, social card [16; 18; 21]
3	Stronger targeting	Assessment mainly based on income	Unified questionnaire, joint assessment of income and expenditure, categorisation of families [17; 18]
4	Shift from benefits to services and activation	Cash payments were the principal instrument	Employment, vocational training and entrepreneurship support; 1.3 million services [20]
5	Case management and social work	Citizens were expected to apply for assistance	Social worker in the mahalla, family monitoring, psychological support [3]
6	Decentralisation of financing	Funds allocated uniformly from the centre	Part of the funds distributed in proportion to the number of low-income families [4]
7	Inclusion and family environment	Reliance on institutional care	Social model of disability, specialised foster families, inclusive kindergartens [6; 17; 18]

Source: Developed by the author.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Uzbekistan's social protection system is moving towards what international practice calls an "activation-oriented" model. From the perspective of G. Esping-Andersen's typology, the country has chosen neither a purely liberal model (minimal support only for those most in need) nor a purely universal model: targeted social assistance is being combined with extensive services and employment programmes [7]. As A. Sen argues, poverty is not merely a lack of income but also a restriction of capabilities [8]; in this sense, incorporating vocational training, entrepreneurial support and psychological assistance into social protection is theoretically justified.

International experience with digital registries also supports the findings. World Bank specialists describe a social registry as a common "entry point" for different programmes: it connects application intake, needs assessment, enrolment and payment into a single delivery chain [11; 12]. Uzbekistan's integration of the registry with nearly 50 administrative databases and the introduction of automatic benefit assignment are consistent with this approach [21].

At the same time, several issues remain open to debate. First, the reduction in coverage from 2.3 million families to a registry containing approximately 600,000–740,000 families [16; 17; 20] may, on the one hand, reflect better targeting of assistance to those genuinely in need, but, on the other, increase the risk of "exclusion errors". M. Grosh and co-authors show that any targeting method can produce two types of error—incorrectly including those who are not in need and excluding those who are—and that stricter criteria may reduce the former while increasing the latter [10]. Therefore,

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expenditure-based assessment criteria should be accompanied by a simple and prompt complaints and review mechanism.

Second, the poverty threshold itself is debated: some international analysts note that the national poverty line has been set at a low level [20]. Thus, when evaluating the sharp decline in the indicator, it would be advisable to compare it with international poverty thresholds and multidimensional poverty indices. Third, the system's "human factor"—the qualifications of social workers—is crucial. The procedure introduced by Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 539 for admitting the most active social workers to higher education programmes in Social Work [3] indicates greater attention to professional training; however, professional standards and a continuous supervision system are also needed for case management at the mahalla level.

Finally, regional disparities persist: poverty rates in Khorezm Region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan are higher than the national average [14]. Although the mechanism introduced by Decree No. PF-17 for allocating funds in proportion to the number of low-income families [4] is intended to address this issue, more time is needed to assess its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

The study led to the following conclusions:

1. Between 2019 and 2025, Uzbekistan's social protection system was reformed in four stages: data integration, institutional consolidation, bringing services closer to citizens, and decentralisation of financing. As a result, previously fragmented programmes were consolidated under a single Agency and a network of Inson centres.

2. The main contemporary trends in improving the system are institutional consolidation, digitalisation, stronger targeting, a shift from benefits to services and activation, case management, decentralised financing and inclusion.

3. As a result of the reforms, the poverty rate fell from 17.0% to 5.8% in 2021–2025 (an average annual decline of 23.6%), while the shares of employment and entrepreneurial income increased and the share of transfers decreased.

4. To further improve the system, the following measures are proposed: introduce an independent complaints and review mechanism for targeted assistance criteria; supplement poverty assessment with a multidimensional index; establish professional standards and a supervision system for social workers; develop dedicated targeted programmes for regions with high poverty rates; and gradually extend social insurance coverage to people in informal employment.

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